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The ecosystem of low-fee private schools and shadow education: an ethnography of India's local education market

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the local education ecosystem in a semi-urban India. Drawing on ethnographic evidence, it analyses the symbiotic relationship between the shadow education and mainstream low-fee private (LFP) schools. Theoretically, the paper positions these institutions within a neoliberal policy landscape that enables the coexistence of diverse, stratified educational forms that are locally assembled and legitimated. It highlights commonalities in shared resources and pedagogic practices, while also unpacking the distinct institutional logics that enable their coexistence. The analysis reveals how pedagogy and curriculum are both socio-culturally embedded and shaped by market-oriented competitiveness. By foregrounding their mutuality, the paper contributes to understanding how shadow education and LFP schools co-produce local education ecosystems in ways that blur the boundaries between formal and supplementary education.

KEYWORDS

Private tuition; low-fee private schools; shadow education; ethnography; India

1. Introduction

Bray (2009) termed the phenomenon of private supplementary paid tuition outside the school as 'Shadow Education'. He argued that private tuition *exists because mainstream education exists, changes with the changes in the mainstream and much more attention is paid to the mainstream than its shadow, and its features are less distinct than the mainstream* (2009, 13). The phenomenon is now shifting from being a supplement to becoming a substitute, an observation quite rightly noted by Bhorkar and Bray (2018) and others (Majumdar 2014). It actively shapes mainstream schooling (Silova, Būdienė, and Bray 2006), and it has begun to overshadow the mainstream. Its role has moved from being supplementary to being complementary or even competitive with mainstream schooling (Zhan et al. 2013). We need to move beyond the term shadow education system as it downplays the interconnectedness and the potential influence it has on the mainstream school system. This article argues that shadow education can be better understood and explained when seen in conjunction with mainstream schooling, thereby focusing on the ecosystem in which it exists.

The phenomenon is constantly evolving and differs greatly from context to context; hence, it needs to be constantly re-conceptualised. This phenomenon is multifaceted

and complex and waiting to be conceptualised more rigorously. It has gained far little attention in the primary and middle school segment. Also, little is known about the diversity within this industry in relation to the differentiated clientele it caters to and the nature of pedagogy it appoints. There is a dire need for this phenomenon to be understood both in terms of its size and expansion but also in terms of its everyday manifestations in the rapidly changing education contexts in different settings.

Through the analysis of ethnographic evidence from a town in semi-urban Delhi, this article illuminates the ecosystem of shadow education and Low-Fee-Private (LFP henceforth) schools. It shows that shadow education is seeping down to primary education as well. Most researches so far discuss it exclusively in connection with secondary education, and the primary education segment remains underresearched. Reportedly, 80.8% of rural and 45.1% of urban students take up tuition in Delhi. This includes 33.9% of primary, 41.2% of upper primary and 46.2% of secondary school students (RMSA 2016).

The immersive nature¹ of ethnographic engagement enabled a profound understanding of everyday practices at the tuition centres, fostering the development of a thick description (Geertz 1973) of the relationships and power dynamics embedded within this ecosystem. Extended fieldwork allowed the triangulation of data across different times and settings, thereby obtaining a deeper interpretation of the social discourse of this ecosystem.

Yes, shadow education in the primary school segment exists because of the mainstream and not only changes with the mainstream but is increasingly gaining an entity of itself. It actively interacts with and moulds the education system. Moreover, its features are no longer less distinct than the mainstream. This article details the symbiotic relationship this industry shared with the LFP schools with more details on the texture of understanding between these two spaces. In this paper, 'tuition' refers to after-school, privately provided academic support services paid for by families, while *low-fee private (LFP) schools* denote privately owned and managed schools that operate without direct government support. First, it explains the range of tuition delivery options available within the small geography. Next, it elaborates on aspects of interdependence emerging from the commonalities between the LFP, including pedagogy. Having shown the aspects of interdependence, key aspects where these educational entities stood independently are illustrated. Based on these, the nexus between private tuitions and LFP schools is analysed, illuminating the complementarity of their roles and how they cater to specific economic niches.

1.1. Low-fee private schooling and shadow education in India

Neoliberal forces are shaping education reforms worldwide. The discourse of neoliberalism asserts the value of a competitive market and the freedom of individual choice (Duggan 2003; Kumashiro 2010). In India, the advent of neoliberal doctrine is rooted in the 1990s when the state undertook macroeconomic reforms to liberalise trade barriers and deregulate markets (Kamat 2011). Privatisation of school education in the form of LFP schools and shadow education centres has become omnipresent in India. These changes are witnessed at the same time when the national system gears itself to the provisioning of basic education to all children under the Right to Education 2009 (Government of India 2009).

LFP schools have emerged in response to the increasing preference for English medium education and the perception of the non-functionality of government schools (Sarangapani 2018; Srivastava 2013). Many LFP schools in India are rooted in successful coaching centres (Sarangapani 2018; Sharma 2018), indicating an important linkage between private tuition and the LFP schools. LFP schools are independently funded through low tuition fees, financially sustained by the payment from disadvantaged households (not necessarily the poorest and the most disadvantaged Härmä 2011), and independently managed and owned by single owners or groups usually comprising family members (Sarangapani 2018). LFP schools can also be part of internationally funded chain schools, an output of Transnational Advocacy Networks (Nambissan 2012) focusing on advocacy of parental choice, school vouchers, deregulation of private schools and creating room for private solutions for school education (Nambissan and Ball 2010). These schools proactively capture and maintain a clientele by building themselves as brands (Nambissan 2012; Sarangapani 2018; Sharma 2018) and by developing intense communications (and not necessarily equitable relationships) with the communities.

The tuition industry has a long-standing history in the Indian education sector. But has speedily grown in the last three decades. In urban areas, 32.5% of primary students take tuition classes, and in rural areas, 18.2% of primary students take tuition classes (Majumdar 2018). A recent ASER survey reports an increase in the number of children taking tuition regardless of grade, school type and sex. It accounts for nearly 40% of school-going students taking tuition across India. However, there are state-wise variations. It highlights a more prominent increase among the children of the most disadvantaged households. Compared to the children of high-education category parents taking tuition, which amounts to 7.2%, 12.6% of children of low-education category parents are reported to be taking tuition (Pratham 2021). Though enrolment rates are high, it has been noted that many students end up enrolling in cheaper forms of tuition that do not meet their needs effectively (Bhorkar and Bray 2018). The need for tuition is considered so high that parents who cannot afford it withdraw their children from school. Such a powerful evolution of tuition is an extension of the rapid privatisation and marketisation of education.

The rise of private tuitions and the LFP schools can both be read as part of 'exogenous' privatisations (Ball 2007, 14), which refers to the increasing involvement of private entities in education directly through services and programmes. It provides a useful lens for understanding how shadow education operates not simply outside the formal system, but within its logic of competition, credentialing, and performativity. The supplementary sector does not resist the formal; it extends and amplifies it.

Drawing on Ong's (2006) notion of neoliberalism as a situated rationality, this paper understands the coexistence of LFP schools and tuition centres not as anomalies but as context-specific assemblages that emerge in response to the graduated withdrawal of the state. This approach helps to theorise the coexistence of formal and informal educational sectors as a locally assembled solution to structurally embedded inequalities. At the heart of this inquiry lies the question of strategic coexistence, how and why two seemingly distinct sectors (shadow education and LFP schools) not only survive but mutually reinforce one another in the everyday schooling practices of urban, lower-middle-class families. This coexistence is not accidental or transitional; it is actively produced through a situated rationality, whereby the local education ecosystem assembles educational

arrangements that reflect both economic constraint and aspirational hope. The strategic coexistence is normalised through policy silence and perceived notions of parental choice. The concept of strategic coexistence, as used here, refers to the locally embedded, socially contingent logic by which tutors define their work and nudge parents to engage with both sectors simultaneously. This co-existence constitutes an ecosystem wherein the informal supplements the formal, and both are guided by a shared logic of performativity and credentialism. Theoretically, this points to the necessity of locating their relationship within the broader restructuring of the state-market-family triad in education.

Research across the globe has focused on nature and role of shadow education in the secondary school segment (Bhorkar and Bray 2018), and its demand, supply, and effects on student performance and social inequality (Azam 2016; RMSA 2016; Sujatha 2014; Sujatha and Rani 2011), and its income elastic nature (MHRD 2016). Looking at the reasons, these studies have discussed issues of educational opportunities, their links with social mobility and their emergence mainly due to poor quality of mainstream education. There is a notable dearth of scholarship (except Bhorkar and Bray 2018) that explores the relationship and co-existence between shadow education and mainstream schooling, particularly in the context of their everyday pedagogic practices. While existing literature often treats these sectors as parallel or competitive, far less is known about the ways in which they intersect, overlap, and inform one another in practice. This paper addresses this gap by offering a nuanced, ethnographically grounded understanding of how these sectors interact, coexist, and are jointly implicated in coproducing the local education market.

2. Context and methods

The data used for this article draws from a yearlong ethnographic work in a town at the fringes of semi-urban Delhi. The ethnographic fieldwork involved residing in the town and engaging with four families, 3 schools and 8 tuition centres for in-depth ethnographic work. The families graciously facilitated the author's access to various town tuition centres and the schools their children attended. Data collected for the ethnography was spread over twelve months of fieldwork. As part of data collection, I conducted participant observations at three sites: the family, school, and tuition centres where children spent their time and engaged in all aspects of children's learning experiences. Taking an ethnographic approach allowed unanticipated aspects of children's schooling to emerge inductively over the course of fieldwork. A subset of the large data is used to write this paper, consisting of 45 visits to eight different private tuition settings involving participant observations of teaching practice firsthand, along with semi-structured interviews with eight parents, eight tutors and three staff members of the tuition centres. Children from these coaching centres belonged to 2 LFP schools and one government school in the town. Following Mason's (1996) continuum of participant observation,² my role fluctuated throughout the process, never assuming a purely participant or observer stance. Additionally, several informal interactions took place with school principals, tutors and other informants from the town. Detailed field notes were documented during the visits and interviews, and informal interactions were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Regular review of field notes guided the everyday planning for the next course of action on the field. Furthermore, the

curricular material used in the tuition classes was examined to gain a deeper understanding³ of the pedagogic aspects. The prolonged immersion in the field allowed access to the intricacies of the everyday aspects of tuition and their nuanced exploration. The data was organised, and thematic codes and sub-codes were created using the MAXQDA software.⁴ The data pertaining to different codes was collated, and patterns and relationships between various themes were identified. The interviews and interactions were conducted in Hindi. The thematic analysis focused specifically on pedagogy, connections, and distinctions between tuition and LFP, which are used in the writing of this article.

Kasimpur,⁵ the town under this ethnography, was located at the Delhi-Haryana border. Delhi is one of India's most educationally and economically developed cities. It is a hub of educational institutions at the school and university levels, as well as private coaching centres.

Earlier sociological studies (Mann 1979; Sarangapani 2003) of this area have noted the segregation of the village population on the lines of caste and class and the patriarchal nature of society, with the dependence of women and children on the male head of the family. Mann (1979) noted people involved in traditional occupational work such as carpentry, barber, shoemaker, pot maker and goldsmith. In 2003, Sarangapani deliberated on the need that the village people felt to move out of their traditional occupation in the village to secure white-collar jobs in the city. Using the metaphor of *Bada Adami*⁶ (2003), she elaborated on their aspirations for school education as a means to socio-economic mobility. Since then, this need to move out from traditional occupation and move towards the city has only intensified, as observed by Sharma (2018). Her study examined the anxiety and desperation with which parents sought English-medium schooling. Parents across the social spectrum strategised to gain an educational advantage for their children. A sense of competitiveness stemmed from limited public-sector jobs, pushing people to seek employment in the private sector. This competitiveness percolated among students and was reinforced by parental efforts to secure the cultural capital by organising additional after-school private tuition support for their children. Children's after-school time was highly structured to suit and support learning in school. They were not allowed to wither away their advantages by playing with the locals and the cultural capital was to be safeguarded by engaging in school-like activities.

Kasimpur's location at the border of the city allowed educational and occupational opportunities to the town's youth. Their success stories kept the parental aspirations from school at an all-time high. The focus of this ethnographic study was a social group that has traditionally been considered backwards (by the town people in terms of caste groups, Mann 1979) and has now gained momentum for social mobility, given the economic and occupational changes in the town (Sharma 2018). This group shared a history of being disadvantaged and belonged to the lower socio-economic groups, yet not the lowest of the lower and the poorest of the poor. School success was crucial for the social mobility prospects of this group, and it aggressively strategised and made concerted efforts to gain a competitive edge over others.

3. The education ecosystem of the town

Kasimpur had five government schools, 17 LFP schools, four popular coaching centres and an uncountable number of neighbourhood tuition providers. They taught grades

including nursery, Kindergarten and classes 1–8. The coaching centres were independent entities and not part of big chains. The LFP schools discussed in this particular paper were not part of chain schools (Nambissan 2012) but those established and managed by the elites,⁷ landowners or the politically renowned of the town. Härmä (2021) named such schools organic schools. The coaching centres, too, were started by elites in the town. In this article, the phrase mainstream education is used to represent schools. Most of the LFP schools in the town had roots in successful coaching centres (a phenomenon also noted by Sarangapani (2018) in the case of Hyderabad city). The LFP schools of the town worked competitively to sustain the market, gain prestige and secure their clientele. In the aspirational and competitive educational context of the town, parents who had a little more than their monthly survival aspired and managed to send their children to LFP schools.⁸ These LFP schools were closely connected with the town's tuition landscape. (Figure 1) Four kinds of tuition arrangements were available, as shown in the figure below.

Figure 1 depicts the symbiotic relationship between the LFP and the four tuition categories discussed below. Based on their ability to pay, parents could arrange tuition for their child, starting with coaching centres serving the town's elites and ending with the

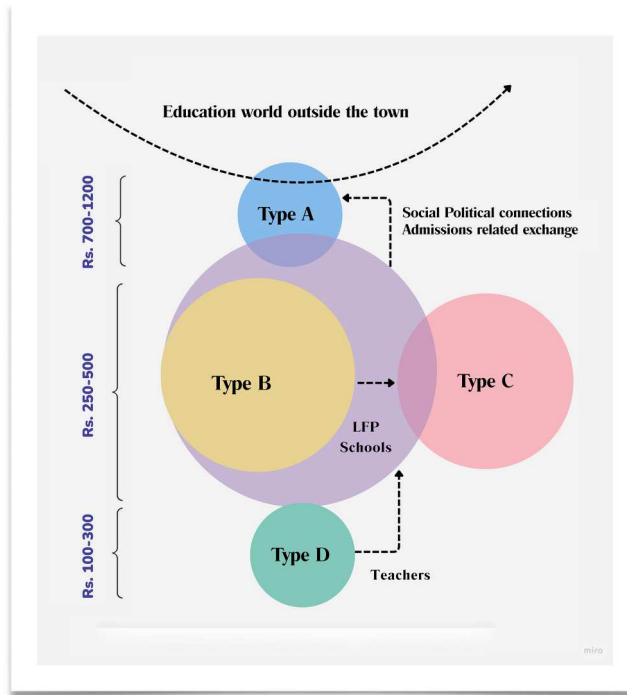


Figure 1. Ecosystem of LFP and Shadow Education. Source: Author's original work.

Key to Figure 1

Type A: Coaching centres

Type B: Tuition at the LFP school

Type C: Tuition at the LFP school teacher's home

Type D: Tuition at the neighbourhood home.

neighbourhood tuitions serving the poorest. This figure is representative of the primary education sector of the town.

Coaching centres (Type A) were the most expensive, costing from Rupees 700–1200 (\$8–14) per month.⁹ These were set up by individual entrepreneur tutors who were simultaneously preparing for the civil servant exams. Type B and C were middle range, costing parents Rupees 250–500 (\$3–5) per month. These were run by LFP schools (Type B) and LFP school teachers (Type C). The cheapest tuitions, ranging between Rupees 100–300 (\$1–2) per month, were offered in a neighbourhood by a college student or a senior school student. Together, these four kinds of tuition centres represented diversity within the shadow education industry and catered to the heterogeneous population of the town, including natives and migrants, different castes, and religious and occupational groups. They focused on the primary school and middle school segments.

4. Findings

4.1. Linkages and mutuality

The LFP and the town's tuition industry shared a symbiotic relationship, and both worked independently yet interdependently. Aspects of commonalities led to how these different actors interdependent. Common grounds were formed on shared resources and pedagogic practices. An exploration of these aspects illuminates ways in which the ecosystem of LFP schools and the tuition industry created self-reinforcing economic niches and networks.

4.1.1 Shared resources

The most important link between different actors was that of the shared teaching resources. The ecosystem resourced upon the under-qualified women from the town by appointing them as teachers. To survive the competitive education market of the town and considering the cost-effectiveness, LFP schools appointed undereducated and under-qualified women as teachers. These young women were either high school graduates or pursuing their bachelor's degrees via distance education mode.¹⁰ They would often work for much lower salaries and with no employment contracts. After school, the school teachers reincarnated as tutors, tutoring at school (Type B) or at home (Type C). Despite being prohibited under the 2009 Right to Education Act, tutoring by schoolteachers for their own students remains widespread (as also noted by Majumdar 2014). As explained by the school principal below, the selection of these underqualified women was justified and sufficient.

We do not get any financial support from the government. We have to manage all the school expenses, including teachers' salaries. In what we can offer as a salary, only these young girls can join as teachers. We are aware that this may not be their lifetime career, but this experience works best for them, and for us, it is also a win-win for both. We are able to train them as per our requirements, and you don't need big degrees to teach young children. (Balvinder, School principal)

We lack qualitative or quantitative data that showcases the educational qualifications of these teachers at the tuition centres. Few studies have noted the doubtful qualifications of

the tutors (Agarwal 2015; Maheshwari 2016). This observation resonates with Bray's analysis of the blurring of professional boundaries and overlapping aspects of teaching and tutoring (Bray 2021). Majumdar (2018) also notices that anyone can become a tuition teacher by simply advertising themselves.

The owner of the LFP and coaching centre shared strong socio-political acquaintances and, in many cases, family networks. The LFP school owners were amongst the most affluent of the town population. The coaching centres and the LFP schools shared class-based relations and socio-political connections. LFP schools and tuitions collaborated in order to keep the client intact. It operated with the same school management, shared infrastructure and human resources and worked towards preserving the school clientele.

There were effective give-and-take arrangements between different actors in the eco-system. Schools actively asked parents to enrol their children for tuition. This demand was justified on account of 'using the after-school time of the child', as shared by Mr. Balvinder.

The family background of these children is not conducive for school learning. The parents are busy. They cannot support the child and cannot promote English, and some of them are illiterate and have rural backgrounds. It is not their fault, though; in fact, they are keen to educate their child. Since homework has to be done, we generally advise them to enrol for tuition at school or at home. Otherwise, it is difficult for the child to cope with the ongoing of school, and then they lag behind. (Jitender, LFP School principal)

A desperate need to pedagogise the after-school time of the child occupied the minds of teachers as well as parents. This need was systematically exaggerated and capitalised on during the parent-teacher meetings at the schools and at the tuition.

In today's world of competition, we tell parents that learning in school is not sufficient, there has to be a follow-up, the child needs to use his after-school time in the best possible ways to enhance their skills, and therefore it is important for us to keep track of these children's after school time. (Kavita, Teacher/Tutor, LFP school)

The mutuality between the LFP schools and the tuition is noticeable. Preeti explained to me how the bright students of the schools were advised to enrol with the coaching centre to further boost their learning at school. She shared

For children who are doing well, we recommend them for coaching centres. They can afford to take extra stress, they have family support and intention, and as it is, they don't fit well with the regular class, so they deserve a different follow-up study time. When other children are doing homework, these students can focus on learning new concepts. For children who cannot cope with the pressure of the coaching centre, we have to give them individual attention, so it is better to have them at home (for tuition). (Preeti, Tutor-teacher)

Within the eco-system, learning at the coaching centre was taken with utmost seriousness, to the extent that the school tended to compromise on the demand of school attendance in favour of the child's attendance at the tuition. As evident in Saurabh's explanation

When there is exam time, Balvinder Sir knows that students will be having exam practice (at the coaching centre) here, so he allows the students (to attend the coaching during school hours) to adjust for us (coaching centre). We have a good rapport with them. We also help them when they seek admission of their students in schools outside the town. (Saurabh, Tutor, coaching centre)

The coaching centres benefited from these compromises that the LFP schools made with regard to the ‘exceptional students’. The schools did not oblige the coaching centres unconditionally. In turn, they benefited from the social and political networking of the coaching centre owners for admissions of their students to renowned private schools outside the town that the parents highly sought.

This kind of exchange reinforced collegiality between the school and the coaching centres. By reference, they promoted each other’s business. While a systematic study of school absenteeism is yet to be done, there is anecdotal evidence that students absent themselves from school to attend tuition classes (Bhorkar and Bray 2018; Sedere et al. 2016). This kind of collegiality was a key feature of the town’s education ecosystem. The tighter the communication between the school and the tuition, the better it was expected to be for the students.

4.1.2. Pedagogy & curriculum¹¹

It has been noted that pedagogy at the LFP schools centres around rote memorisation, drill and domestication (Lall 2000; Sarangapani 2018). Research on shadow education has yet to go deeper into the issues of pedagogy and curriculum. A few studies observe the pedagogy to be traditional, primarily based on instruction, study material and teaching to test, leading to listening and cramming of content (Mahmud 2019; Majumdar 2018), just that the pedagogy provides access to a relaxed and more personalised atmosphere for exam preparation rather than focusing on deep learning. The education ecosystem at Kasimpur is also broadly aligned with ‘textbook pedagogy’ (Sarangapani 2018). There was great alignment and resemblance between the pedagogic approach deployed at the tuitions and LFP schools.

Drill, correction and focus on accuracy were the hallmarks of this pedagogy. The classrooms were highly performance-based, where the tutor displayed the art of asking questions and children were expected to answer every unexpected question correctly. Tutorial sessions were defined by the instructions and the authority of the tutor. At the coaching centre, the children sat in the class with stressed faces and rarely dared to express their lack of knowledge. These classes were conducted without any breaks and required children to pay the best of their attention.

These were characterised by much stricter regimes of rewards and punishments, as the beginning and last five minutes of the sessions were used for beating/scolding and rewarding students. Practice sessions were considered far more important than the explanation of concepts and learning itself. After the first two introductory classes of teaching a concept, the next 5–6 classes were spent in such drilling sessions. This was followed up with a test characterising the high pressure of achieving full marks. As shared

Today was only the third day of the introduction of the topic of fractions in mathematics. The tutor started the class with the claim that he had explained the concept several times in all possible manners, and now it was time for him to test whether the students understood the concept or not. He announced that testing is key to learning and that he will not spare anyone while asking questions. The students gazed at him with somewhat thrilled yet fearful eyes. Many times during the session, he articulated his commitment to ensure that each one of them was consuming and memorising the tricks he told them. Provoking the fear of tests was a common feature among the tuition centres. In addition, the other tutors intimidated

children in the name of parental investment in their education. (Fieldnotes, Samrat Coaching Centre)

Coaching centres were the epitome of this competitive pedagogy. They were the talk of the town and implied an extreme monitoring of individual children's written performance. Another teacher of tuition type C shared the importance of practising.

In class, I don't get that much time. When they come home, I check each and every letter they have written. I correct their work and make them write it ten times so they understand it. The more they write and practice, the better it is for their exam preparations. (Deepti, Tutor-teacher)

Deepti, who was an LFP school teacher and a tutor, emphasised the criticality of practice sessions multiple times in her interactions with me. Each day, she ensured that children spent sufficient after-school time with her for practice sessions. Mastering the art of exam-taking was deemed a crucial skill to acquire. This was taken up with utmost seriousness, and mock tests were conducted in the multiple-choice question answer form to indicate preparation for future entrance exams.

As soon as the children settled in their seats, the tutors distributed a multiple-choice question paper to all of them. This was the fourth time this month they were taking a maths test. He instructed that they must do it correctly and quickly. While the students were solving the paper, he explained to me the importance of every single mark, stating the fact that for Delhi University college selection, every single mark makes a difference. He proudly shared the frequency of testing at his tuition centre and how it helps students build an appetite for competitive exams in future. (Fieldnotes, LFP school_Anand)

In the context of secondary education, other studies have also noted that private tutors conduct mock tests regularly. This helps reduce 'exam phobia' among students (Majumdar 2014). In conjunction with a focus on the drill, LFP schools and the coaching centres oriented and prepared the child towards the competitive culture of mainstream education, as was evident from the following conversation between the tutor with his students

Sushil Sir: Okay, you are all scientists. You, *beta* (pointing to one child), I have given you the formula (*abhaydan*¹²). You move yourself to the right time; if you don't, then you will have it from me. (Threatens to beat the child)

Sushil Sir: Did you get to an average of 8 hours today?

Student: 7 hours. (Thinks a little bit)

Sushil Sir: It's nothing. You come to an average of 14-16 hours. *Beta*, it's all about competition. You have to study for maximum hours.

The students looked at him in somewhat exclamation and disgust.

Sushil Sir: If you are studying the maximum hours, 1000 hours, if you can study, then you will become 'intelligent'.

(Field notes, coaching centre)

In the above conversation, the tutees were oriented to attain certain levels and maximise the time spent on studies. Pedagogy was fiercely competitive and isolated students from

each other and teachers as well. The spirit of competition was encouraged both in schools and in tuition. Instead of inspiring children to do their best, this ecosystem rather encouraged children to compare and compete with each other. The coaching centre tutors considered it to be crucial for children to gain a sense and habit of studying for long hours right from the early grades if they were to beat the burden of entrance exam preparations in the future. They aimed to instil in the child the habit of discipline and dedication towards studies. In the words of a tutor, this was the ‘right age’¹³ for inculcating study habits and disciplining them.

This is the right age for them to learn study habits. If they don’t learn now, they will never learn. Schools won’t teach them this habit. We have to teach them by instilling these values every day, by hook or by crook. Discipline is the truth of a student’s life (Tutor Coaching Centre_Samrath)

Jealousy and crude competition were considered essential for attaining school success. This market-oriented attitude purposefully inculcated an environment of cutthroat competition among children. General pep and provocative talk marked the beginning of each class. A motivational and provocative speech was given at the beginning of each class to create a discourse on performance and competition. By doing this, the tutors set the expectations and continuously assessed the children against each other.

You must have seen in movies that the feeling of revenge is very important. That is what keeps you going. One must think that if he can achieve, so can I and I must do better than him to prove my mettle. (Tutor, LFP schools_Vikrant)

Shaming students in front of each other was part of the pedagogic culture of this ecosystem. Looking at the peer group as a competition, not a co-learner, was core to the tuition and school pedagogic approach. Majumdar (2014) also noted that children are told to perceive their counterparts as rivals and tough competitors. Sarangapani (2018) has also noted that LFP schools relied on shaming students.

Yet another and rather crucial aspect of convergence was their love of English. ‘It was the selling point of this ecosystem. While the LFP schools claimed to be teaching in English, much of the teaching was done in Hindi with some English catchphrases. The coaching centres focused more on English learning in terms of students’ speaking abilities. As shared by one of the LFP school teachers

English is one language, whether you know the content or not. If you are able to carry yourself in English and communicate confidently, you can pass job interviews and succeed in life further. It is the language of power, and it helps you be connected with the world. Here, we focus on the child’s spoken English abilities. (Teacher, LFP school_Supriya)

The ecosystem shared common grounds in terms of a shared pool of employees, an obstinate focus on rote learning for exams, and an ethos of competitiveness characterised by the interdependent aspects of this ecosystem. The discourse of privatisation of education (Ball 2007) framework allows us to make sense of this ecosystem’s market-‘ness’, competitive culture, and performance management aspects. However, it needs to be noted that these relations were not simply economic. These were couched with intricate social and political relations of individual actors and institutions within this ecosystem, necessitating deeper engagements.

4.2. Over and above

With so much in common, what was it that made them distinct and desirable in the context of the town? In the competitive context of the town, parents aspired to give educational advantages to their children. Depending on their ability to spend, they accessed these tuitions, which were portrayed as essential, extended arms of the school. The distinctiveness of shadow education with the schools was most evident in the case of the coaching centres. They claimed that over and above schooling, they paid ‘individual attention’ and ‘overall personality development’. This was done through close monitoring of the children’s after-school time and by playing a quasi-parental role justified in the best interests of the child.

‘Individual attention’ was the catchphrase tutors often deployed to validate parents’ trust in them. Schools were considered incapable of providing individual attention due to large class sizes and other school responsibilities.

Schools treat them as sheep and goats (*bhed bakri*), and no one pays attention. Here, we monitor each child, their daily routine, what time they are returning from school and coming for tuition. How much time do they spend on television or playing outside? Moreover, what subject they are good at and which subject they lag behind. We find their loopholes and try to fix them so that they can crack exams without losing their confidence. We remain in constant touch with the parents. (Head, Coaching Centre_Vikas)

Vikas critiqued the general feature of school as teaching in bulk and juxtaposed it with the ‘individual attention’ provided at the tuition. This acute monitoring of the child’s time enabled them to earn their parents’ trust. The tutors quasi-parented the children, managing and dictating what they ought to do and when, thereby taking the role of their academic alloparent. These observations align with the previous studies in the town, illustrating the authoritative adult–child relationship. Sarangapani (2003) observed the dyadic relationships between the adult and the child, including parent – offspring, *guru – sishya* and patron – protégé. These dyadic served to naturalise the teacher’s authority over the student. These representations emphasised the moral and cultural superiority of school teachers, her authority was constructed in terms of established community and popular folklore, attributing benevolent intention to her actions (Sarangapani 2003). These observations can be extended to understand the nature of authority between the tutor and the tutee. In some instances, this authority surpassed the authority commonly seen between parent and child. Particularly in school-related matters, the voice of the tutors prevailed instead of the child’s biological parents. They shared that they have a dual role, as a parent as well as a teacher. As evident in what Kirti told me

We are both the parents as well as the teachers of the child; what they can’t share with their parents, they come and tell us. The child enrolls with us in class 3, and they are with us for seven long years; even after leaving the institute, they come and meet, and we have a full track of their lives. Parents trust us. (Nazma, Kirti Coaching Centre)

Echoing Nazma, Sunita too emphasised the children’s need for a well-informed confidant and shared the following.

Children need someone knowledgeable other than their parents to talk to and discuss things that they cannot discuss with their parents. There is too much pressure on them these days, so we need to keep a check. (Sunita, Tutor-teacher)

After being enrolled in tuition, it was solely the tutor's responsibility to keep track of the child's academic involvement on a daily basis.

Researcher: Those boys who get beaten, don't the parents complain?

Tutor: I have not yet seen a single-parent complaint. Once they have given their children to us, we are 'in charge'. We have to deal with the child in our own ways. If anyone did so, I would say take out your child because I will take care of the child as that of my own; I am not his enemy. (Coaching Centre_Sonu)

The tutor checked if the child was doing the homework, his/her performance in the school exam, even to the extent that they advised the parents on food habits and television watching habits and social etiquette. Their role as a teacher also extended into acting as a parent. Through such claims, they legitimised their right to teach, discipline and guide the child. These claims of parent-like supervision were substantiated through a range of other non-academic offerings geared towards the child's 'overall development'. As claimed by the LFP school teacher in the quote below, these activities were essential for the child's overall development, an aspect that Kasimpur parents paid great attention to.

We organise educational visits and watch movies. We focus on the holistic development of the child. We also organise cultural programs where children have to take responsibility and organise events. They gain confidence and a sense of responsibility through such programmes. (Tutor, coaching centre_Sahil)

These extracurricular aspects were appreciated by the parents as significant elements of gaining an extra edge over their counterparts in the school. Festivals and national occasions were marked by big celebrations requiring children to perform.

The distinction between schools and shadow education also arose regarding teacher qualifications at the coaching centres. The coaching centres considered the educational qualifications of the teachers and appointed youth who prepared for civil service exams/or other public services as tutors. As per them, this was their unique selling point, as shared by one of the coaching centre heads below.

The best minds of the town are here at the coaching centres; at least you should have a post-graduation in the subject that you are claiming to be a Guru (master) of. They work hard and make the students also work hard. It also helps them in preparing for their UPSC.¹⁴ Educated tutors are the key reason why students of these schools (LFP schools in the town) come to us. (Head, Coaching centre_Sushant)

In Kasimpur, the tutors' qualifications were mapped onto the types of tuition. The coaching centres catered to the town's elite and appointed comparatively higher-educated tutors. Married unemployed women were potential home tutors. They offered tuition at the cheapest rate and in the physical proximity of the family. Also, the gender dimension was noticeable, with coaching centres predominantly run by men with higher educational qualifications, while the rest of the three types were run by women teachers with comparatively lower educational qualifications.

5. Conclusion

This paper is based on a small sample, which, at best, is representative of the primary education sector of the town. It presents a local ecosystem of education. However, this

local ecosystem of education reveals dimensions of the relationship between shadow education and private education that go beyond the context of this city and even India. Importantly, this paper contributes to the literature by showing that coexistence is not passive accommodation but an active, situated response to neoliberal education governance (Ong 2006; Verger, Novelli, and Altinyelken 2016). It shows that while LFP schools (commonly known as affordable alternatives to high-fee private schools) still rely on the shadow education industry to supplement students' learning. This symbiotic relationship reflects broader global trends in marketisation and privatisation in education systems. The findings also contribute to the growing body of literature on shadow education by highlighting the interdependence of both sectors and their presence in the primary education sector.

This paper corroborates existing research literature that notes synergy between coaching centres and schools (Sujatha 2006) and increasing private spending on schooling and private tuition in Asian countries (Joshi 2021; Kamat, Spreen, and Jonnalagadda 2016; Silova 2009). It extends prior research on shadow education (e.g. Aurini, Davies, and Dierkes 2013; Bray 2021) by shifting focus from the heavily studied secondary sector to primary education, and by offering ethnographic depth by foregrounding the everyday interactions and pedagogic work that sustain the co-existence between formal and informal institutions. Furthermore, it prompts us to reflect on the socio-cultural embeddedness of educational practices, reinforcing traditional adult-child relationships and class segregation. This analysis must be viewed in the broader context of educational reforms, implying increasing private schooling and private tuition spending. Further, the paper highlights the encroachment of the shadow education industry into the primary school segment (through its linkages with the LFP schools) by illuminating the complementarity of their roles and how they cater to specific economic niches. Shadow education works in conjunction with and survives and thrives on the support of mainstream LFP schools. This system builds on the market demands of English education, excelling in exams and the need for individual attention. In turn, it creates demand for such ethos as key to school success. In this manner, this ecosystem is self-sustaining.

The burgeoning privatisation of education in India has led to the expansion of tuition centres and LFP schools that now play a significant role in shaping educational trajectories, especially for children from low-income bracket families. A critical examination of these private educational spaces is imperative because they are not merely service providers; they are active producers of pedagogical meaning, teaching learning norms, and aspirations around mobility. Without a deeper understanding of their embedded values and operational mechanisms, we risk normalising educational practices that exacerbate inequalities, reproduce narrow meritocratic ideals, and intensify the burden of school success onto families and individuals. At stake, then, is the broader question of what kind of education is being legitimised, for whom, and what are its long-term consequences.

Notes

1. The ethnographic method enabled prolonged engagement in the field, allowing participants to interact with me in non-performative, authentic ways. This facilitated a deeper understanding of everyday pedagogic practices and teacher-student interactions. By immersive,

I refer to sustained, close involvement in daily routines – not mere observation from a distance, but active witnessing of the evolving educational environment over an academic year. This depth of engagement allowed contextual insights to emerge inductively, which would have been inaccessible through short-term methods.

2. There were times when participants expected me to participate in the ongoing activities like interacting with students and assisting them in lessons, and engaging in informal conversations but at the same time I had to maintain a distance to observe and record interactions and their interactions without influencing them. This was an ongoing decision-making process on the field.
3. Examining the curriculum materials gave me insights about what the students were expected to do and learn. Regularly reviewing field notes allowed me to narrow the focus of particular issues that needed further exploration and engagement on the following days of fieldwork. This iterative process helped guide the ongoing fieldwork.
4. Using MAX QDA, the fieldnotes and interview transcripts were carefully read first to do open coding of the data, and then later codebook was used to do axial coding of the data. For example, themes such as examination, aims of education, and competition that emerged during open coding were collated into a larger thematic code of pedagogy and curriculum during axial coding.
5. This is not the real name of the village. The details of the participants used in this article are pseudonyms too.
6. Roughly translated into ‘Big man’ this Hindi metaphor showcases the person representing moral character, good citizenship and knowledge of English gained through schooling.
7. by elites, I mean economically rich, educated families which benefited from schooling and possessed strong social networks outside the town, as noted by Sarangapani (2003). Previous generations of the town’s educated elites had benefited from the opportunities in the city. These people were the role models for the rest of the town’s population.
8. But also, some elite families sent their children to these schools as they could exercise greater control and could then easily tailor make the educational inputs of their children.
9. At the time of data collection, minimum wages ranged from Rs. 6422 (bracket for unskilled workers) to Rs. 8502 (highly skilled workers).
10. They pursued their graduation degrees through distance mode from Delhi university or Indira Gandhi National Open University.
11. Pedagogy broadly refers to set pedagogy in ideas and action (Alexender 2001) and curriculum as a set of procedures and the ethos defined by them (Sarangapani 2018).
12. This is a Hindi word that can loosely be translated as never-ending ability/ warrant to access something.
13. For the primary school segment, the coaching centres admitted students from grade 3 onwards, which is typically 8-9-year-old age children.
14. Union Public Service Commission of India.

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