

2002
CALCUTTA - INDIA



**IN AN
IMPERFECT
WORLD**

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The Left Front government in West Bengal has decided to crack down on the practice of private tuition by teachers in government and government-aided schools. Even if we ignore the thorny problem of implementing such a measure, is it likely to improve the quality of education which is the declared goal of this policy?

There are several aspects of the practice of private tuition by teachers that one should indeed be concerned about. For example, it is quite reasonable to require that a teacher, whether in a government school or in a private school, should not offer private tuition to students from the same school because if he is also going to evaluate the students, a conflict of interest will naturally arise. Also, at a more basic level, to the extent that teachers do not pay tax on the income generated through private tuition, they are already indulging in an illegal activity. These practices are known to exist and are rightly condemned. But rather than addressing these specific problems, what will a blanket ban on private tuition by teachers in government and government-aided schools achieve?

Let us think of a typical teacher who faces such a ban and decides to comply. Suppose Mr X is a conscientious school-teacher who religiously fulfils his duties at school and earns a monthly salary of Rs 10,000. He also earns the same

amount from a tutorial by teaching 20 students, each of whom pays Rs 500. The ban is announced, and Mr X stops offering private tuition. What is he going to do with his spare time? If he was using the evenings to teach in the tutorial, he cannot shift those hours to school. But even if he was able to shift some of his spare time to teaching at school he would not do it as it would not result in any rewards, material or otherwise.

Now think of Mr Y whose situation is identical to Mr X's in all respects except that he does not seriously teach at the school and actively encourages his school students to join his tutorial in the evening. If private tuition is banned, and he agrees to comply with it, there is no reason to expect that he would become a model teacher in the school overnight. If he could not be punished earlier for neglecting his duties, he cannot be punished now. Hence, both teachers will spend their spare time doing something else. Even if one takes the extreme view that private tuition has no value, as a result of this policy teachers will lose and students will be no better off.

The crux of the problem is how to motivate teachers to perform their teaching duties at school well. Private tuition may be a distraction, but without addressing this issue, outlawing it would merely channel the energy and time of teachers released from this activity to some other activity and not to improving their performance at school. They have no incentives to do so. The evaluation and incentive systems in our education system are abysmally poor with no scope for rewarding the good and punishing the bad. In contrast, the private tuition market provides a scope for distinguishing the talented and rewarding them appropriately. If the ban is successful, perhaps no one will have any incentive to establish his reputation as a good schoolteacher since that will not fetch that extra return from the private tuition market.

So far we talked about the effect of this policy on the decision of an individual teacher. What will be

the effect of it on the tuition market as a whole?

Suppose the government is able to enforce the ban perfectly. In the private tuition market, there is going to be a reduction in supply and hence an increase in the price of tuition. This is because a ban on tuition by the teachers employed in government or government-aided institutions, does not shut down the entire tuition market even if the banned teachers fully comply with the government stricture. There will be private schools which are not subject to the ban. It has been argued that if there is a vacuum for teachers in the tuition market, particularly in rural areas where private schools are rare, this can be filled up by the educated unemployed. However, they would at best be imperfect substitutes for experienced school-teachers, which means there will still be a shortage of supply. As a result, tuition will become more expensive after the ban and private school-teachers and possibly others will reap the benefit. Personal encounters with some guardians in Murshidabad suggest that in some places non-teaching staff of government schools are having such windfall gains. The students will lose, and of course the government school-teachers.

Now consider the case where enforcement is imperfect in the sense that it is possible for government school teachers to continue offering private tuition, but they run the risk of getting caught and punished with some probability. Because of this risk, providing private tuition will be more costly for the teachers. The tuition market will now be segmented into the legal and the illegal. In the illegal segment costs for providing tuition will be higher, cutting back the supply, and this will be reflected in the higher tuition fees of teachers. Even if the price of tuition in the legal market stays the same, the average price in both markets taken together, will rise.

It can be argued that supply and demand in the private tuition market differ from those in other markets. The demand for private tuition partly arises from the poor teaching quality in schools. If

the supply of private tuition from teachers at government and government-aided schools falls, the demand for private tuition might fall as well because teachers would spend more time and energy to teach students in the school. This would cause demand to fall as well and so the price of private tuition may not go up. However, the presumption is that the teachers will automatically transfer the time and energy they devote to the private tuition market to their schools after this policy is implemented. As we said earlier, there is no reason to expect that this is going to happen.

The reality is that private tuition is really a symptom of a much deeper problem. It is important not to confuse the symptom with the cause. West Bengal has one of the lowest teacher-student ratios among Indian states. Among the major states, West Bengal spends the lowest amount on education on a per-student basis and Kerala spends the most. Given the nature of the syllabus and the average teaching time per period, even if a teacher puts in all his time and energy in school, the teaching quality will still be grossly inadequate and that would naturally push the students to private tutorials run by good teachers.

Indeed, West Bengal is also the state that reports the highest fraction of students receiving private tuition. This calls for a thorough review of the syllabus as well as stimulating public investment in schools, so that we have more schools and more teachers. These are very serious problems which cannot be tackled just by banning private tuition. Even if one accepts that in an ideal world private tuition would be unnecessary or even undesirable, we do not live in one. Moreover, it is well known from economic theory that in an imperfect world, fixing one problem and ignoring others may in fact make matters worse.

Before concluding, we would like to draw attention to a potentially interesting political angle to the problem. Since it came to power, teachers have become one of the core support groups of the Left Front in West Bengal. They have also become

affluent over time, and in rural areas, politically quite powerful. At the same time, the quality of education in the state has declined both absolutely and relative to other states. Whatever little money the government spends on education is mostly spent on paying the salaries of teachers.

There are many reasons behind these phenomena and teachers are certainly not responsible for all of them. But the general public has no patience with complex explanations. The story that has emerged is simple — a group of delinquent school-teachers who get hired because of political connections and then neglect discharging their regular duties in the schools in order to pursue private tuition or other lucrative activities is responsible for the sorry state of affairs.

It is unwise for any political party to ignore widespread popular resentment against a group that is perceived as a core constituency and no one can accuse the Left Front of being insensitive to electoral arithmetic. The campaign against private tuition, or in a different context, exhorting government employees to “do it now”, possibly indicates such political compulsions.

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