

The Marks Race: India's Dominant Education Regime and New Segmentation¹

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I. Introduction

“An [education] system that is lifeless, devoid of joy and freshness, not even offering an iota of space to move and grow, is doomed to dead, dry rigidity. Can such a system ever nurture the child's mind, expand her horizons, and elevate her soul and character? Will this child, once she grows up, ever be able to figure anything out on her own, overcome hurdles using her own resources, stand on her own two feet with head held high banking on her own natural fire? Will she not be given to mindless copying [from others], cramming [without comprehension] and slavish servitude?”

Shikshar Herpher (Manipulations and Distortions in Education, 1907, p.539), Rabindranath Tagore
(authors' translation)

The angst expressed in the above quote is shared by many contemporary scholars and experts. Indeed, the Indian school education system seems to be under the grip of a 'diploma disease' (Dore, 1976). More specifically, the sceptre of test scores seems to be haunting the entire school system in contemporary India, deforming the educational values of teachers, parents, education bureaucrats and above all hapless students. To put it differently, the prevailing educational ethos is such that value addition through education is measured mostly in economic terms of marks and test scores, rendering irrelevant other worthy goals of learning such as cognitive development, creative thinking, and citizenship abilities. Curiously, almost all schools – from elite to budget, from vernacular to English-medium, from 'communal' to 'secular', from government to private – seem to be chasing the same 'dream' of turning over more students securing more marks. Children are driven to savour first the joy of earning marks and then of earning money, thereby numbing their urge to explore the joy of learning.

Undoubtedly, the education system remains diverse, disparate and segmented; yet at the same time it gets homogenized in its aims, ideas and practices. It often sorts out children into schools that too are socio-economically stratified. Yet at once they all seem to be guided by a sterile vision of education. This is what we describe as the homogenizing, albeit damaging, influence of a dominant education regime spanning across a segregated and exclusionary school system. In this paper we attempt to elaborate on this idea by focusing on 1) the lack of professional autonomy of teachers in core educational activities; 2) the lack of opportunity for parental involvement in schooling matters, and 3) the lack of academic challenge for school going children (who are otherwise under severe pressure). Our analysis is based on empirical research conducted recently in the States of Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal.

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It is well to concede at this point that the role school plays in increasing one's life chances certainly includes its practical advantages such as livelihood opportunities and economic gains. And, academic achievement (correspondingly examination results and test scores), in principle, could serve as a useful guide to not only gauge children's cognitive development but to also foretell the future economic returns to educational investment. Simply put, economic considerations are important. More elaborately, schooling is a critical resource that portends an objective competition which can in principle offer all children an opportunity to make it in life, including a chance to get a job, and achieve occupational mobility. Achieving social mobility through the means of quality education is therefore viewed as a fair competition. To argue further, it is not inconsequential to be mindful of the relationship – strong or tenuous – between schooling and economic success, between educational outcomes and labour market outcomes. If college graduates or post graduates look for work under the NREG scheme (a recently introduced scheme for employment of the poor by the Government of India) as was the case revealed by a village study recently, it is essential to talk about the relevance of educational resources as a determinant of outcomes and life chances later in life. Indeed, creating a more equal distribution of income and employment opportunity through a more 'egalitarian school system' is accepted more and more as a legitimate social aim, as Bowles and Gintis (1976) suggest. Education is thought to be a 'potent force for economic equity', as it may make an important contribution to an individual's economic chances. (ibid). The urge to speak of the relationship- if any- between educational attainment and economic success is therefore understandable.

However, we still insist that it is counterproductive to conceptualize schooling achievement only or primarily in terms of market returns. Prominent thinkers and scholars have talked about several 'intrinsic' as well as 'instrumental' values of education, for the individual as well as for society in general, ranging from economic opportunities, benefits and profitability in the market on one hand to the broader capacity for democratic citizenship, critical reflection and independent moral thinking on the other. In Tagore's vision of education, the 'moral man' is placed above the 'commercial man', though education for economic success is not entirely devalued. But, first and foremost, his educational thinking centres around the child: 'education must begin with the mind of the child and it must have the goal of increasing that mind's freedom...rather than killing it off' (as quoted in Nussbaum 2007).

The immediate and limited purposes of education should ideally have an underpinning of such deeper educational imagination. The quality of schooling, therefore, must crucially hinge on the extent to which schools can keep the child's imagination, critical capacities and independence of mind alive. However, as we aim to demonstrate below, the practice of schooling in recent times appears more and more like a 'marketing exercise'. As Nussbaum astutely observes, the focus is mainly on education for 'success in the global market', for profitability and competitiveness, and hence the tremendous pressure on children to 'perform very well in standard examinations' (2007). The aggressive sales pitch of many so-called premier educational institutions and tutorial homes is a case in point. In the process, students' curiosity, imagination and freedom often get stifled.

Furthermore, educational institutions are also supposed to serve as schools of citizenship and morality, aiding children's moral development and their capacity for the future practice of justice. The role of school as a socializer of just citizens also gets compromised in this process. In the Hindu pantheon, Saraswati – the goddess of learning and Lakshmi – the goddess of wealth happen to be two sisters who do not get along well. This is because the

pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of wealth are two distinct, although not entirely unrelated, enterprises that are not easily reconciled. It appears as though this healthy tension between material gains and mental and moral development is resolved in favour of the idea of education for market as opposed to that of education for freedom. Hence, is the marks mania, dominating over all other presuppositions of what is to be considered as valuable knowledge.

We suggest below that due to the nominal role, in the enterprise of education, of the potentially vital school-level actors, namely, teachers, parents, and children, the school system remains that much deficient, as it fails to benefit from the richness of their experience and their creative ideas. Hence, the present educational distortions to a great extent are the artifact of systemic deficits in autonomy and accountability. Intriguingly, we further argue, the dominant ethos of education as the pursuit of more marks (and eventually more money) generates new segmentation in the system. Budget, English-medium schools spring up to ostensibly satisfy the educational aspirations of the indigent; second-grade, error-ridden, text books and study guides saturate book stores; and a new market for private tuition comes up again to seemingly cater to the growing educational ambitions of the previously marginalized social groups – and all this with quality no bar. In the near-total absence of any regulatory norms to ensure quality schooling for the poor, the dominant educational regime works to further segregate the already differentiated school system. Therefore, we finally claim, in a plural and diverse society like India, just as we rightfully plead against the massive exclusion of the underdogs of society from the school system, we also need to debate about the idea and content of inclusive education. We are hopefully not talking about coercive assimilation into an impoverished notion of education that reduces educational values into mere marks and consequently produces a number of perverse results such as teaching shops, parrot-training, and rote learning.

II. India's Education Regimes: Diversity, Disparity, and Dominance

To be sure, the education discourse, especially in the Third World country setting, often contains many ambiguous, even skeptical, sentiments about the effects of education on the individual as well as on society. Such views and positions express, with a variety of accents, concerns about disparities and inequalities that often beset the school system of the developing South. A strong objection to formal schooling comes from the so-called de-schoolers who talk of saving children and childhood from the grip of schools. Illich (1970), for example, is a particularly strong critique of school-based formal education and the institutionalization of learning. Freire (1972) expresses similar reservation against regimentation and ritualization in formal schools, in which teachers mechanically 'fill' the students – the 'containers' or 'receptacles' – with the contents of their narration, contents that are often detached from reality. 'Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.'

Dewey (1938 edition), on the other hand, sees schools as 'embryonic communities', that foster social solidarity and a 'critical social intelligence'. He of course acknowledges an intimate and necessary relation between the process of actual experience and school-based education. Formal instruction may become, he readily agrees, bookish, dead and remote from life-experience. But for him, all experiences are not genuinely educative; indeed some experiences are 'miseducative', justifying the need to discriminate between experiences and organized learning in a formal educational environment.

Schooling and the school system is also critiqued for its hegemonic potentials (Apple 1979, Bowles and Gintis 1976, Chopra and Jeffery (eds.) 2005, Kumar 1987, Nambissan, Velaskar). Indeed, for some prominent scholars and analysts, the school system is an essentially conservative, inequality-preserving, institution. Others regard it as an agent of positive social change. Even without disregarding the liberating potential of education, one has to however concede that the aims and effects of the school system cannot be taken to be 'straightforwardly positive' or benign. It is indeed well to put in mind that entrenched social inequalities often get mirrored within the school system. We, therefore, need to consider two opposing possibilities while discussing the potential of education: education can be a social equalizer; education can also reproduce social inequalities. Historically, both policies and curriculum of education have been used 'as a means of power and control', as a tool for cultural and political indoctrination (to promote sectarian and parochial purposes). In short, there are contradictory records of the use of education for either social justice or social control. And the history of educational reforms in India is no exception.

It is therefore not surprising that the present Indian school system, like its counterpart in many other countries, is hierarchical, graded and segmented. Several important studies, indeed, talk about differentiated educational regimes that exist in contemporary India, their divergent purposes, and above all their uneven effects on pupils' lives and life chances. Chopra and Jeffery (eds., 2005) for example, present a number of interesting case studies of a variety of Indian schools and regimes, ranging from elite residential schools to resource-poor government schools, from 'Sainik' schools to alternative 'club' schools to Madrasah education. Such differentiation, the contributors to this volume argue, 'further disadvantages the already underprivileged' by reinforcing, instead of reducing, existing social and economic inequalities, as the pupils of these widely disparate institutions are endowed with very uneven qualities and quantities of economic and social wherewithal. Little (1988, p.18) talks about similar class divisions in her revealing words, "The school[s] attended by the children of the rich in many developing countries provide computerized learning environments not dissimilar to those found in the best British schools. But these are not typical. More typical are those which are struggling to provide a minimum quality of learning against a background of diminishing resources, a rural economy and often still a pre-literate population."

Kumar in his recent writings (2008) presents a powerful analysis of a new culture of schooling that is taking shape and a new genre of private schools that are coming up in metropolitan cities and towns of India. Students of these schools travel by luxury, air-conditioned school buses, sit in air-conditioned classrooms, play in lush green lawns, and eat out of lunch packets ordered from expensive hotels. 'The new private schools now advertise facilities which are identical to those offered by five-star hotels, and management practices followed in the two are similar.' The so-called poor man's private schools – the low –cost variants of private entrepreneurial initiatives – try to market a much inferior copy of this elite brand, pitching their 'product differentiation' at a superficial level, offering cosmetic frills such as uniforms, notebooks, study guides, and a smattering of English.

Thus, the so-called elite educational culture has a pervasive and pernicious influence over the entire school system, its inherent inequalities notwithstanding. It is as though a kind of 'cultural and economic uniformity' is established amidst educational disparities. Admittedly, what goes off as the dominant educational ethos is only a 'false universal', a cultural curriculum of particular classes that excludes and marginalizes many other cultural legacies and practices prevalent among subaltern communities in the country. Yet it has a dominant

and homogenizing influence over the graded education system. This is the point, we hope, that supplements and not just duplicates the current discourse on educational inequalities. Although the arena of education is segmented, teaching different values to different school populations and offering uneven life chances to them, these diverging regimes somehow converge to produce a suffocatingly dominant regime of 'passive learning' and 'parrot-training', pithily described by Parry (2005) as the 'education treadmill'. What is more, the hegemonic education drill seems to be corrupting the hegemon itself. That is to say, the so-called 'good students' of 'good schools' seem to be under the grip of what Freire calls the 'pedagogy of silence', as opposed to the pedagogy of academic freedom. A recent study of a number of elite schools in the metropolitan cities of India by the Education Initiative (2006) reveals a dispiriting performance of their pupils, measured in terms of conceptual clarity, analytical abilities, and imagination.

However, recognizing the failings of the school system is by no means to doubt, dismiss, or devalue the importance of an adequate educational foundation for all school-age children, especially for the already disprivileged. To put it differently, this paper holds on to one central idea that education has the potential to 'enhance' and 'transform' every life, to give every individual a chance to compete for social opportunities (Page 2005). School could potentially make a difference to one's life choices; school could potentially be a site to challenge social inequalities; school could be a potent instrument of progressive transformation – the view that the so-called de-schoolers dispute. Here we disagree with this position. We echo Dewey's sentiment when we reiterate that in principle it is possible to use education as an instrument for personal development as well as for social equality. Reflecting on the dominant educational ethos and its perils is motivated by an urge to look for an alternative vision of education – an issue that we briefly address at the end of the paper.

III. The Marks Race: The Pedagogy of Unfreedom

The achievement model that is used by the majority of schools in this continent-like country interprets knowledge, comprehension, and conceptual understanding purely in terms of test scores. The social goal, it seems, is to maximize academic productivity, read as examination results. In the perceptive words, of Parry (2005. p.290), 'It is often as though [the] child's life chances hang by the slenderest thread, if not on tomorrow's test, then at least on the yearly exams.' Such a scenario was anticipated and clearly articulated in the probing analysis by Ronald Dore.

In a seminal work back in the 1970s on the changing aims and motives of education, Dore expressed serious doubts about the increasing tendency to regard schools and schooling not so much 'for educating people, for developing minds and characters', as merely 'for earning diplomas, degrees and certificates' in order to get a job. 'Schooling has become more and more a ritualized process of qualification-earning', which Dore pithily describes as a 'diploma disease' manifest particularly acutely in the modernizing 'late developer' countries of the Third World. This is less of 'learning to do a job' and more of 'learning to get a job', with deleterious effects on assessment systems and by extension on teaching methods, classroom pedagogy, and the quality of education in general. Put simply, Dore's thesis explores the relationship between education, examination, and employment systems. For our purpose of examining the quality aspects of primary education, we dwell particularly on Dore's concern about the intensification of the examination-orientation of schooling and its associated 'backwash' effects, to the relative neglect of the linkage between education and

the subsequent world of work. No doubt, he concedes that examinations have their uses in providing teachers feedback about the effectiveness of their teaching. Also, for the pupil, to do well in an examination, to have a sense of achievement ‘...can supplement the intrinsic pleasures of learning’ and can act as ‘an incentive to stick at the tough slog of continuous practicing and memorization that a lot of learning entails’.(p.7) Hence, it is the form of examination that matters, ‘making quite a big difference to the kind of learning activity [it] encourage[s]’. (p.10)

Dore’s main concern is about the widely pervasive situation in which ‘passing the examination and getting the qualification....become[s] the student’s sole objective’, at the cost of gaining substantive knowledge, skills, and above all the ability to think. The linkage between education and subsequent life chances acknowledged, Dore still urges us to worry about ‘an intense examination rat race’ that turns ‘what ought to be an educational experience into mere qualification-earning, ritualistic, tedious, suffused with anxiety and boredom, destructive of curiosity and imagination; in short, anti-educational’. (p.ix 1976, as quoted in Little 1997) And such a questionable ethos of education is very likely to have detrimental effects on job orientations of future workers.

As Little and Singh (1992) helpfully summarize, Dore’s thesis encapsulates several layers of arguments, pertaining to the patterns of use of diplomas and certificates for job allocation, the type of assessment systems, syllabus and classroom pedagogy, and motivational orientations of the student body and the labour force. To reiterate again, we do not explicitly look at the key concepts of learning and work orientations embedded in his thesis. Our central concern is about the low quality of education that children receive in many rural primary schools in India, on the heavy reliance on memorization and cramming in these schools, on excessive examination orientation and the impact this has on guiding the entire process of teaching and learning, curricula, teacher involvement, parental aspirations and student activity or passivity. As we try to demonstrate below, the primary means that teachers and parents use to motivate pupils to study is to instill in them a fear of losing marks. Even though there is an automatic promotion policy followed in most of the Indian primary schools, tests and test scores are central to the experience of children in these schools. Good grades and marks are often used by teachers as well as parents as the principal measuring rod to judge quality. In one of the several teacher meetings we have conducted in our study areas, a teacher categorically said that he would consider the quality of education in his school satisfactory if any student of his school holds a rank among the first ten in the school leaving examination. This is what Sen (2005) has described as the ‘first boy syndrome’ so typical of the Indian educational ethos. Similarly, a parent respondent expressed his anguish to us thus, ‘Why should my child have to learn so much of Bengali grammar when only 8 marks are allotted to this portion of the lesson in standard examination papers?’ In recent times, the diploma disease- especially symptomatic of the developing South- seems to be spreading in the developed North too. According to a report by the UK Academy of Medical Sciences, 2006, there is a noticeable rise in the number of students taking brain enhancing pills to boost their examination results.

It is true that motivations for learning may have a wide range, as Little and Singh (1992) amply demonstrate. Examination success, good grades, and other tangible and external rewards (alternatively the fear of failure) act, in part at least, as a learning motivation, just as the other intrinsic sources of fulfillment associated with the process of learning do (for example, the capacity to do a job well, to experience the thrill of thinking and understanding etc.). Dore himself is ready to acknowledge that the products of a highly examination-oriented education system may still demonstrate ‘the initiative-taking, problem-solving

capacity' at the workplace. The innovative research by Little and Singh (1992) probes the relationship between motivations for learning and motivations for working, through operationalising the key concepts of learning and work orientations ensconced in Dore's argument and then assessing learning orientations of students (forecasting what their attitudes towards work would be) and work attitudes of adult workers (figuring out retrospectively how they approached their studies at school). Though no strict incompatibility or negative relationship has been found, in their research, between examination-orientated schooling and innovation and creativity at the workplace, Little and Singh find a significant 'positive relationship between learning for interest in school and working for fulfillment and change in work' (p.197). On balance, it is fair to say that there is a complex web of motivations- varied across countries and cultures- that drive us to learn as well as work. Similarly, there are different kinds of examinations. And '...high quality tests and examinations which avoid...negative backwash effects may even help to promote better pedagogy' (Little 1997, p.13). Unfortunately, however, examination and pedagogic reforms receive far less attention in the policy of public discourse on education than they deserve.

Not surprisingly, therefore, surveys and evaluations routinely ask whether students have mastered the material, whether test scores have improved etc., without much analysis of the kinds of questions that have been asked. Neither is much attention paid to what is taught in classrooms and what the concrete experiences of teachers and children are, engaged (or uninvolved) as they are in the processes of teaching and learning. Drawing upon our classroom observations and conversations with both teachers and children in the states of Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, we proceed to argue below that due to the nominal role (in fact very little agency and autonomy) of both teachers and pupils in the process of construction of school knowledge, they are practically compelled to remain passive in their respective tasks. Knowledge is conceptualized as 'external and fixed', teaching as relying heavily on textbooks, learning as memorizing, with testing emphasizing the 'reproduction of textbook information' (Page 2005). The sum total of all this is the practice of unfreedom on the part of the most vital characters of the Dickensian 'Mill of Knowledge' (i.e., the school), namely, the teacher and the taught, producing in turn a mechanical, almost robotic, race for marks.

Whither the Teacher in Core Educational Decisions and Activities?

It is our contention that the school education system in our country recognizes the professional role of teachers by rendering it practically irrelevant. Their wit and wisdom rarely get reflected in the core educational decisions and activities. Consequently, the idea and practice of education remains that much deficient and vane.

To be sure, primary school teachers are known to play multiple roles – as teacher-politicians, teacher-administrators, and even teacher-merchants. Indeed, from one standpoint, teachers in village schools may be thought to be a part of the rural political elite. Especially after the award of the Fifth Pay Commission recommendations and the resultant hike in their salaries, teachers appear to belong to the upper strata of rural hierarchy and generally play a dominant role in the local and district-level power structure (Acharya, 1985).

However, in respect of the local, rural, political climate, of which the primary school system is an intrinsic part, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal are quite dissimilar. For example, the entrenched party structure and the active panchayats are the two defining features of the rural political universe of Bengal. Teacher unionization is much more pronounced in this State,

especially because of the near permanent incumbency of the Left parties in power. Teachers therefore have played a significant role, at least until very recently, in local politics. In Andhra Pradesh, however, many teachers lament about the lack of proper appreciation from higher education authorities. In contrast, in West Bengal unionized teachers maintain that their status vis-à-vis the education bureaucracy has changed for the better; unlike in the past they are not necessarily at the receiving end in their encounters with school inspectors.

Until very recently, teachers used to be one of the most important actors in Panchayat elections and operations in West Bengal. On the whole the so-called teacher-politicians are quite active both as members of teacher unions as well as in the larger political arena.

In AP teachers generally appear demotivated and unenthusiastic; they feel less appreciated by the education authority. The social profile of students in government schools has changed, with the growing enrolment of the new generation of previously excluded children; but this significant development has hardly penetrated the government teacher's discourse about their jobs and their responsibility in this transformatory enterprise. They do not refer to their contribution to the empowerment of hitherto excluded children. There is indeed a striking silence on their part on this significant issue. Poverty and illiteracy are seen as problems, but not as the core challenge of their profession. More specifically, they do not seem to be exercised about the new pedagogic challenge of reaching out to the new generation of pupils. We claim that this is not just due to their growing social distance from these students but also because of their passivity and powerlessness as professionals in the bureaucratic edifice of school education.

Thus, teachers may also be viewed as relatively powerless street-level bureaucrats placed at the lowest rung of the administrative hierarchy. It is as though the teachers who often neglect the interests of the children who come from the desperately underprivileged families are themselves neglected by the higher-ups in the education administration, as professionals capable of taking independent and sound academic decisions critical for the proper running of schools. To put it differently, on the one hand, the teachers in primary schools have been lionized as political activists and union leaders (in West Bengal in particular); at once they have been diminished and overshadowed as a professional cadre by supra-local education officials. In Kumar's perceptible words, 'School teachers are not considered an intellectual workforce in our country. We don't expect school teachers to engage with matters of policy and theory. The image of children's teacher we carry is of someone who keeps children under control and teaches prescribed textbooks.... ..The system lacks faith in teachers, in their capacity to think and take decisions.' (2008, p.92)

To rescue the content and practice of education from its current hollowness, it is absolutely essential that teachers and the school as a whole enjoy much more 'decision space' in the core areas of teaching and learning (e.g., curriculum design, textbook selection, choice of pedagogy and student assessment) than what is currently possible.

Framing of syllabi, textbook selection, paper setting, and evaluation are the areas where school site autonomy and teachers' professional discretion are required; yet these are the areas in which we find, in our study areas, their relatively insignificant presence, thanks to the highly centralized nature of these activities. Their involvement in various non-academic administrative activities both within the school and without however appears to be increasing in volume. While teachers appreciate some of the positive aspects of the new institutional and training innovations, there is a general feeling among them that most of these initiatives are imposed from above, without much care or concern for teachers' opinions or inputs vis-à-vis

these changes. Therefore, the so-called quality improvement measures sometimes lead to excessive institutional proliferation – a kind of a ‘committee disease’ in the words of a teacher- producing in turn mostly changes in form rather than in content. Many new requirements for teachers to fill in numerous forms and to supply same school-related statistics to various higher authorities many times a year have rendered them ‘clerks’.

In the well-considered view of a teacher, in a primary school with 4 or 5 grades, there is a need for at least 5 teachers, such that one teacher can devote full time to take charge of these new administrative responsibilities. The reality however is that a typical village school has only two or three teachers. At times it seems as though primary schools are expected to function as all-purpose centres, having to take charge of many responsibilities that the supra-local bodies have failed to discharge, but receiving little additional staff support.

Some of these pressures on the school and the teachers however do not add to the content or process of education. On the contrary, some of the centrally set guidelines and targets, ostensibly to promote quality education, produce perverse results and wrong incentives among teachers, as the latter are not made active partners in many of the crucial teaching-learning activities. They act as mere ‘pawns of those in authority’, without having any experience of agency in those areas of educational and academic decisions that should be considered as teachers’ natural preserve of privilege. As a result, sometimes the relationship between policy targets and progress toward educational aims is weak at best, and perverse at the worst. For example, often ‘unrealistic enrolment, completion and learning achievement targets’ are mechanically fixed from above, forcing schools and teachers to chase these targets, but not involving teachers to suggest how these targets could possibly be achieved. Consequently and perversely, teachers tend to ‘cook up data’ to generate ‘paper truths’.

Thus, sometimes targets become counter-productive, without necessarily ensuring progress towards larger educational goals. For example, many teachers contend that student evaluation should not be an ‘all or none’ choice between automatic promotion and excessive test orientation. However, the ‘grassroots’ views on alternative effective standards of student evaluation are rarely sought. The current method of ‘external’ evaluation is not strictly effective or objective, as school teachers and external examiners, working under the pressure to achieve the unrealistic goal of say 80 or 90 percent success rate of students, jointly assist students to write their exams. A teacher has candidly labeled such assessment practice as ‘board exam’, as not too infrequently answers are written on the blackboard from which the pupils copy. This is a clear example of the perverse effect of ill-conceived targets that teachers have to achieve.

So far as the school administration is concerned, the supra-local officials within the education bureaucracy- the ‘central party’ in this case- are both hyperactive and under-active in their dealings with local schools and teachers. There is bureaucratic stranglehold of teacher autonomy, effected through numerous centralized directives imposed from above. To mention once more, teachers are required to fill in too many forms and schedules, which they often do mechanically, as part of a ritual. As one teacher has put it, ‘this is education through the bind rather than through the mind’ (*Mawgojer thekey kagojer shiksha*). But on the other hand, too little is accomplished by the higher-ups in terms of monitoring the academic performance of schools and teachers, thus severely compromising the condition of teacher accountability. Almost paradoxically, teachers are both controlled and neglected; alternatively, they neither enjoy academic freedom, nor are they held responsible for their action or inaction.

Also, a majority of the teachers are the product of the same ritualized school system. But now as teachers, schools are their workplaces. So following Dore's assumption that school experience has a bearing on work behaviour later in life, one can argue that teachers' learning motivations in yesteryears shape their present-day work orientations to a considerable extent, though not necessarily completely. And if several of the teachers got 'burnt out' in schools, now they 'rust out' in the place of work, disinterested and apathetic, engaged in repetitive tasks, and hesitant to take on new responsibilities. Moreover, the hierarchical school system with little scope for academic leadership and autonomy further erodes their enthusiasm and involvement in school activities. The dispiriting, lackluster performance of several teachers that we observe through our study thus appears to be the compound effect of both ritualization and hierarchical division of labour within the education system, not allowing much autonomy for teachers to do a good job of teaching. Even teacher unions display a bureaucratic orientation and a penchant for their own career advancement rather than a sense of responsibility for larger social objectives (For an analysis of teachers as civil servants, see Leclercq, 2007). To quote Dore once again, "If a man has got his civil service job by dint of eighteen or twenty years of joyless conformity to the imposed rituals of qualification oriented schooling, who can blame him if he turns into the cautious official, joylessly performing the rituals of office?" (p.11) Of course, by no means do we try to paint a picture of absolute gloom vis-à-vis teacher effort or involvement. Nor do we wish to offer an over-deterministic explanation for teacher behaviour. We have met during the course of our research a number of spirited teachers.

So, our purpose is not to start off another cycle of 'teacher-bashing', because we admit that teachers are no less public-spirited than many of us who criticize them. But we at once acknowledge the need to address the question of teacher motivation or its lack and the underlying reasons, since these have a direct bearing on the quality of teaching and above all on the ethos of education.. In our view, teachers' diminished professional role has something to do with their relative 'silence' or 'even lack of conviction about the possibility for the greater educational participation of less privileged children'. Indeed, in our conversations with them, teachers have, only on a few occasions, clearly articulated whether they value education of the poor, whether they value their own role in educating the poor, and above all whether they consider 'school as a site to challenge social inequality'.

Let us dwell on some of the concrete examples of a number of dubious education practices and their unhealthy effects.

In our meetings with teachers, time and again the major problem that many teachers have identified is the sheer size of the syllabus, which, they claim, automatically reduces their capacity to innovate or intervene in the classroom. Some have voiced a demand to simply reduce the burden of the syllabus. They also feel that teachers must have a greater role in question setting and in textbook writing and selection. Their lack of engagement in these professional tasks at times produces quite perverse outcomes. For example, a kind of a 'publisher-book store-school nexus' allegedly operates that almost compels pupils to buy substandard books from designated bookshops. Huge sums of money apparently exchange hands in the process.

Again, primary teachers often buy question papers available in the market, even for quarterly/half-yearly examinations in the school, instead of setting those themselves. Standardization and an eye for quality are routinely offered as the rationale behind such

clearly commercial practices. Also, this practice seems to be economically viable, some teachers claim, as publishing houses supply sets of question papers at a nominal price. For example, in West Bengal there is an agency called the Teachers' Cooperatiff Board which prepares and prints question papers for all tests in grades 1 to 12 and distributes those to schools across all districts. The paper setters hired by such agencies are not always trained subject teachers; some are unemployed college graduates. The paper on history for grade 8 in a particular school, for example, was recently set by a language expert. Not surprisingly, it contained some ambiguous questions that history teachers found difficult to answer. Apparently young teachers are eager to be involved in paper setting but their senior colleagues endorse the current practice of commercialized exam management.

However, delinking paper setting and examination processes in general from teaching is bound to hamper the quality of teaching/learning and the professional growth of teachers. In the name of maintaining standard and objectivity, this actually robs teachers of one core freedom and responsibility; it is professionally humiliating too. One might as well ask teachers not to teach. Undoubtedly, exams and student evaluation are an integral part of teaching. Such practices perhaps imply that we do not consider our teachers fit to set papers; in that case do we consider them fit to teach?

It is well to point out that examining does not only test past exercises, but also poses new problems to students and eggs them on to explore further on the basis of what is learnt before; in that sense it also encourages future explorations. That is to say, through exams a teacher can teach; can give a problem that makes children think and then relate to an example discussed in the class. So, in principle, in the examination hall the child can learn and not just reproduce what is memorized before, provided the questions are carefully crafted by teachers engaged in pedagogic experiments. While some teachers are obviously involved in such marketing exercises as merchants of education, a large majority of them is relieved of this professional challenge. Unsurprisingly, over time they lose the practice as well as the urge for being engaged in this very important aspect of teaching.

Similarly, even in the task of student evaluation teachers are heavily guided by centrally-conceived guidelines and directives. It is not that such instructions are in the nature of loose and broad suggestions serving as helpful keys to answers and hence aiding rather than straight-jacketing teachers' independent judgements. These are often instructions in minutest details. The directives issued to primary school teachers by the Department of School Education in West Bengal during external evaluations of grade 4 children conducted throughout the State are a case in point. For example, a sample question on a brief essay indicates the exact number of sentences that pupils should be asked to write and then goes on to instruct the teacher to disregard any excess sentences and grade accordingly. Detailed instructions are issued to teachers about the exact distribution of marks, about how to evaluate students, and about how much is to be deducted and why (say for spelling mistakes, or to assess students' grasp of words, grasp of sentences etc.), leaving practically nothing to the teacher's discretion.

It is not surprising that with so much standardization and so little scope for innovation and experimentation on the part of teachers, parrot-training would result.

The Joy of Parroting

In our visit to an elementary school in Andhra Pradesh we happened to be present in a class on science and heard the teacher saying, 'Let us imagine that this room is filled with air'. Admittedly, science teaching does not always invite students to make such virtual experiments. But teaching practices that are divorced from hands-on experience and the immediate environment of the child are not uncommon in schools of our country. Hence this school is not atypical. Acknowledging that some schools and some teachers certainly innovate and experiment with new teaching material and pedagogy, we still harp on the mechanical nature of teaching-learning practices prevalent in many Indian classrooms. More elaborately, we dwell on some common classroom processes drawing upon our own classroom observations and analyse a set of sample questions either prepared by the school education authorities for external evaluation of pupils in government primary schools or those available in the market.

Rampal and Mahajan (2003) look closely at classroom processes. A large number of teachers follow the 'chalk and talk method'. They stand at the board and address students in an authoritative or even in an intimidating tone, quite unmindful of whether the children are able to follow him/her. Teaching aids are rarely used in classrooms except as decorative pieces; teachers ask students to copy lessons from textbooks so that they '[can] attend to administrative tasks'; teaching mainly entails rote-oriented, text book based routine exercises, loud reading, dictation, and question-answer sessions.

Our own observations in schools in selected areas of Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal also reveal similar practices. Classroom processes mostly involve mechanical and routine exercises such as teachers reading out from textbooks, giving dictation to students, asking them to copy from books, children repeating in chorus and so on. Rote-orientated learning and question-answer sessions seemed to be one of the most common practices not only in government but also in the presumably better-quality private schools. In one such private school that we visited, the teacher asked a child to give a precise, one-line answer to her question and strongly rebuffed the kid when she tried to answer in her own words. There are indeed set question to which teachers expect set answers, strongly discouraging students to think creatively and independently.

At the time of our visit to another school one teacher was taking a history class. 'What is our mother tongue? What do we mean by the mother tongue?' - he wrote on the blackboard. The children were asked to write the correct answers in their notebooks. The same 'pedagogic' practice was followed in the next class on geography: 'How many districts are there in West Bengal? Write down their names', instructed the teacher, followed again by another set of questions on Natural Science: 'How do we define planets and stars? Write down their names'. Some wrote names of countries instead of those of districts. The teacher wrote the names of districts, perhaps for the nth time, on the blackboard, taking the help of a notebook. Everybody started copying the same again, also probably for the nth time. This is how continued the endless process of writing and re-writing some information, which the children kept on forgetting as the teacher himself admitted. And hence followed his directive: 'Memorize, whatever you write'.

We were witness to another question-answer session in Class 3 in a suburban private school. We were struck by the wide range of questions asked (some far removed from the immediate environment of the children) and the ease with which the children replied, thanks to ceaseless grinding, and coaching on trivial information passed off as 'general knowledge'. 'In which

year did India win the IFA shield?' 'In which year did India win the World Cup Cricket?' 'How is the rainbow formed?' 'Why is the colour of the sea blue?' Which day is celebrated as the International Labour Day?'” We were struck by the efficiency of the ‘drill.’

An ethnographic study by Benei (2005) of a *Sainik* school in Maharashtra – an elite boys’ boarding school- presents a similar picture of cheerless grind. A copy of the Western-style Public school system, this school is a training ground for regimentation, order, conformity and discipline. Intriguingly, while schooling is often considered as one sure way of saving childhood, there may be situations, as the following quote from Benei suggests, in which childhood gets sacrificed at the alter of the school.

‘.....I was visiting the hostel with the principal (Pal). As we got to the mess, the Pal knocked twice on the barred door. The silence behind it was total. After a few seconds, the door opened and revealed an assembly of young boys all sitting at tables and doing their homework without a word, with no noise,.....-an amazing sight and vision, almost eerie in the heat of this late February afternoon. For anybody who has seen a boys’ school anywhere and particularly in India, this was a surreal sight- as if these children were already old men, wearing a seemingly grave and sad air on their faces.’ (p.144-145).

In a class on Mathematics the teacher routinely instructs his pupils to translate a mathematical problem described in words (for example, there were 9 people in the bus, now 4 more get on; how many passengers are there?) into a mathematical symbol. The child just sees that there are two numbers and he only knows that he has to insert a mathematical symbol between these two numbers, which allows him to make an operation. Why, he does not quite know. Indeed, he is encouraged to follow a mathematical recipe rather than to appreciate the number system. The child is not invited to imagine the situation, say, with a set of people inside the bus and another outside and then think of a union of these two sets, i.e., addition. As a result, no common sense develops; only a mechanical skill is acquired if the child is lucky. During a session of substitute teaching in a school we visited we asked the grade 4 children, ‘If you come to school at 10 in the morning, and go home at 3 in the afternoon, how much time do you spend in your school?’ No one had a clue.

The burden of non-comprehension that a rigid style of instruction from an authoritarian teacher in a hierarchical classroom environment can foist on his pupils is evident from the following comments by the distinguished mathematician Penrose, ‘No doubt there are some who, when confronted with a line of mathematical symbols, however simply presented, can see only the stern face of a parent or teacher who tried to force into them a non-comprehending parrot-like apparent competence – a duty, and a duty alone – and no hint of the magic or beauty of the subject might be allowed to come through.’

To be sure, a playful but academically challenging pursuit of knowledge cannot fully avoid some amount of routine training, some memorization, some degree of standardization and some common guidelines for student evaluation. Memorization has some role to play in any kind of training of the mind. So in the name of critiquing rote learning we are not approving of or indulging in the alternative called sloppiness. As Dore (1997 edition) readily agrees, to develop ‘a full range of minimum competencies’ in language, mathematics, science, social studies etc. does require discipline and hard work. To try to learn and master an idea or concept, ask questions and think independently is no less tough than ritualistic memorization. The idea therefore is not to advocate taking ‘the tough slog out of learning’ but to imbue that effort, industry and exertion with academic purpose and meaning.

Similarly, we certainly need to worry if we hear, as we often do, that a sizable number of children have not achieved a minimum level of proficiency, that they cannot read or write a simple sentence. But we seldom ask what kinds of questions have been made use of to assess their academic competence. Are these mainly, or even solely, ways of testing factual knowledge and information, and that too either quite trivial or remotely related to the child's environment? Here we discuss a set of sample questions, pertaining to the primary school curriculum, which are in circulation either in the examination market or used for external evaluation of children of primary grades conducted periodically by the department of school education in West Bengal. One qualification is in order here. Ideally, a critical examination of examination papers needs to be supplemented by a study of textbooks and of classroom discussions on particular topics- an exercise that we do not take up here. Also, one may find a certain bias in our selection of the sample in that we tend to pick out some of the more strange and freakish types to the relative neglect of the relatively more sensible ones. This is somewhat deliberate since we want to underline that in a significant number of cases the questions that are asked force children to memorize and regurgitate on exams.

A set of commercially available question papers – at times prepared by a group of government school teachers- on various topics in science, language, history, mathematics, geography and so on read as follows. 'What is each marking in the thermometer called? How does it rain? Who repeatedly invaded India and went back with a lot of looted wealth? (There are clear ambiguities here as the character could be Taimur Long, Nadir Shah, Mamhmud of Gazni among other likely candidates.) How was copper discovered? Among the animals the first to be domesticated was _____. In human life (cooking/eating/shelter) was the first step towards civilization. Who was awarded the green Oscar and why? Who first translated the Bible from Latin to German?

A popular study guide on 'General Knowledge' carries another set of weird questions, to say the least. 'Who was the first *female* Miss Universe from India?' 'Who was the first Bengali to have taken a balloon ride?' 'In which country there is no female?' 'What is the height of the Tower of the High Court Building in Calcutta?' 'Who was the first *popularly elected* king in Bengal?' (emphases added)

Questions are strange, ambiguous, and even plainly wrong and often seek only trivial information. Some are about realities, practices, gods and goddesses in remote lands. It is not that children need to know only about their immediate surrounding; the aim of education is indeed to expand the horizon of their knowledge. It is not desirable that pupils remain home-steeped like a frog in the well. But should education make them totally home-snapped? As they are expected to know when the Bible was translated from Latin to German and by whom, are they also encouraged to know the history and geography of their own environment? One educationist we spoke to astutely observed, 'In primary and high school we learn about world history and geography, and we learn to draw a village map only when we begin to do our Ph.D.'

Again a quick look at some of the question papers used for the officially conducted external evaluation of 4th grade children in West Bengal leaves us with a similar impression that these are mostly routine questions which do not test pupils' conceptual understanding or critical abilities. For example, papers on mathematics ask students to identify odd and even numbers, name units of measurements of weight, height, liquid, volume etc., identify various geometric figures, expand LCM and HCF and so on. A special affinity for Greek and Roman history

again becomes palpable when children are asked, 'Is Herodotus called the Father of History?', or 'Were amphitheatres built like stadiums?'

To cope with such tough challenge of mechanically remembering various facts and figures children are seen to be heavily depending, more in West Bengal than in Andhra Pradesh, on private tuition. Tutorials homes and coaching institutions are indeed very popular and populous, ostensibly providing children with a crucial additional support. One such institution in a semi-urban location in Bengal is rather boldly, and with a sense of wry humour, is named the Parrot Academy. Do such institutions in general sharpen the analytical abilities of children, or do they further numb their curiosity by repeating the same drill of memorization and regurgitation? Indeed, we have to make a distinction between academic stimulus and spoon-feeding. Through endless drills and cycles of exams, for example, a different kind of brain drain occurs, culminating in a really testing time for a high school graduate – a 17 year old youth – who has to appear for nearly 20-23 tests (school leaving exams, and various entrance exams for places in good engineering/law/medical colleges) in a short span five months (Subrahmaniam).

It is not our intention to argue that exams are an unqualified bad. Rather, high quality examinations can support improved teaching methods and pedagogy. We therefore need to work out a balance between examination orientation and intrinsic learning to ensure high quality education. Also, in the name of expressing concerns about low quality assessment systems, we need not make a reductionist argument that tends to trace all current malaise that beset the education system to the prevalent system of assessment, to the relative neglect of the paucity of resources, shortage of teachers, and poor quality teacher education as the other possible contributing factors. Moreover, it is also the case that schools that are not rigidly structured around examinations do not always offer high quality education (Little 1997). The real issue is the kind and quality of examinations. To belabour the point once more, school quality reforms therefore crucially hinge on examination reforms.

Yet examination reforms are often resisted. As Kumar (2008) perceptively comments, '...any proposal to reduce exam stress is often suspected to be a strategy to dilute standards'. Policy makers as well as the public boastfully declare that our system has rigour, that our students are competitive and do so well abroad. Even parents make similar arguments. Unfortunately, however, the competitiveness and rigour one talks about it is not necessarily an academic stress; on the contrary it often leads, as Kumar suggests, to 'the loss of originality and creativity'. Sadly, even parents are under the grip of such narrow educational imagination.

Parental Choice amidst Social Pressures

Like many other studies on the subject our field work in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal clearly suggests that parents across the social and economic spectrum show growing interest in their children's education. Indeed, the thesis of parental lack of interest is ripe for abandonment. However, their heightened interest is not the same as their involvement in school-related issues. In fact, parents in most cases, and especially when they are poor and socially disadvantaged, do not have much scope for participation in schooling matters.² Nor are their educational choices necessarily a product of discerning judgement.

² By parental involvement here we mean their freedom to participate in school-related activities. In another sense, some parents appear to be deeply involved in the educational affairs of their offspring, to the point of becoming overly anxious. They are jokingly called helicopter or hovering parents.

Also, parental ambitions are not totally insulated from the larger social forces or pressures. Rather it reflects the society's current (mis-)understanding of what our educational goals and needs are. For example, the incidence of private tuition is much more common in West Bengal than in Andhra Pradesh, while private primary schools are far more numerous in Andhra Pradesh as compared to West Bengal. In West Bengal almost every student goes for private tuition, who needs it and who doesn't. Indeed, a teacher in West Bengal commented on the practice of private tuition thus: 'even Alexander the Great had a private tutor'.

What does this society-wide practice of private tuition for children, even at the level of primary education, tell us about parental choice? Does it reflect their discerning views on what is good for their children's education? Or does it imply a mindless pursuit of a perverse social 'norm'?

Is this an exercise of choice, or its absence? Are these choices indicative of parental autonomy, free from manipulative and aggressive advertising on the part of the so-called teaching shops? Choice or taste is, by definition, diverse and plural. But what we notice in the 'KG (Kindergarten) –to-PG' (Post Graduate) coaching strategy is just the opposite. That is to say, we notice almost a suffocatingly uniform and homogenized craving for private coaching, carefully manufactured and nurtured by an elaborate and deeply entrenched network of commercial interests active at almost every stage of school education, starting from the production of school textbooks to the marketing of question banks. Again, the craze among many parents for the so-called English-medium schools, without paying any heed to wide unevenness in their quality, is one more example of such 'compulsive choice' – an oxymoron.³ Poor parents too internalize middle class educational values and send their children to English medium schools so that they can pick up a smattering of English. This may be taken to be an assertion of low caste social ambition, but contrarily as a derailed vision. Perhaps this is how inequality is legitimized.

Our conversations with parents indicate that while choosing a 'good' school; buying 'good' education, parents often do not appreciate new pedagogic style or non-standard teaching and learning material; they want standardized training, proper school leaving certificates, and social/formal signifiers of education. This partially explains the spread of budget-category, low-fee charging private schools in cities and even small towns to apparently serve the 'unmet' educational needs of the poor. Parallely, deficiencies of government school become all the more palpable. We indeed notice a growing feeling among the middle classes – even among the poor in some cases –that the services offered in public schools are highly inadequate. These perceptions have something to do with the sharp polarization that has recently emerged within the school system, with only the desperately underprivileged children going to government schools and the have-enoughs flocking to private schools. The segmentation is so acute that government schools are taken to be almost synonymous with 'dalit' schools.

More disturbingly still, perhaps our routine diatribe against government schools reflects much more than our frustration with the quality of these schools. At a time when children from less privileged backgrounds are increasingly joining public schools, our routine castigation also reflects a tendency to distance ourselves from the so-called Dalit schools – a flight away from integration and inclusiveness, a subtle support for school segmentation in favour of elitist

³ When a parent observes, 'My child will get by with a smattering of English' (*Ingriji janle kore khabe*'), one appreciates her practical sense. But when she almost blindly purchases English education from any teaching shop, without being able to judge the quality of its product, one begins to wonder whether this customer follows even the basic norms of economic rationality.

schools for `our' children, and a strong reluctance to tax-finance the education of `their' children.

Simply put, it appears as though the dominant view of education as a fiercely competitive race for marks not only thwarts the pedagogy of freedom but it also produces new segmentation within the school system.

Standardization and Unequal Inclusion

It is our contention that excessive standardization of the curriculum, pedagogy, and student evaluation poses a particular problem for the children from disadvantaged background. Although the moneyed too suffer as a result, the distortion of the education system harms the disprivileged the most. Because their inclusion into an already constricted notion of education often becomes unfavourable and unequal, producing fresh inequalities. The middle class children squeeze through the grinding system because of massive home support.

The privileged have a shortcut to material success due to a lot of cultural capital at their disposal. But the indigent, sans other social disadvantages, are to depend on the available, often inferior, quality of the merit good called education. Had the system allowed greater plurality and flexibility in the curriculum, had there been a greater chance for an interaction between the creative mind of the child and the knowledge system, had there been a greater representation in schools of the cultural heritage of dalits and tribes, it would have been easier for them to come up and out of poverty, drawing upon the very richness of educational resources. Since with excessive standardization the change potential of education itself gets compromised, the assertion of `low caste social ambition' through the channel of education becomes that much more difficult. Many from underprivileged sections of society, unaided by all kinds of middle class home support, are unable to put up with `the burden of non-comprehension' and hence eventually drop out of the system. In the end, since there is little scope for the use of the richness of their experience, and since the curriculum is remote from their realities, they suffer more due to undue standardization. Described as `failures', they are pushed out of the wasteful schooling system, without gaining anything much, and possibly losing their traditional skills. Thus the deadweight of an unimaginative mainstream falls more heavily on the margin. In short, the system homogenizes but fails to equalize.

Again, new forms of private education are coming up; enhanced roles of tutorials and coaching institutions are also evident. However, their quality remains illusive. The public authorities show very little interest in acknowledging, let alone regulating, these institutions. An urge for their regulation is not another plea for standardization or a denial of plurality in educational provisioning. It is an urge for ensuring the quality of the so-called poor man's private schools (Majumdar forthcoming). In official statistics they remain almost invisible. The States of Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal are no exceptions in this respect. Only the State of Maharashtra publicises openly, warning parents not to admit their children into these unregistered, unrecognized schools (Mehrotra et al 2005). Some label this as state-sponsored privatization (Chopra and Jeffery eds.2005). In West Bengal, a student enrolled in a private unrecognized school sometimes has to pay as high as Rs3500 as a fee for tying up with a recognized institution through which she can appear for a public exam. One can suspect a nexus between private education entrepreneurs and the regulatory authorities, explaining further the lax attitude of the latter.

The point we wish to reiterate is that the effect of ‘the intense examination rate race’ is not the same for every student, nor is it for every type of school. Some students suffer more than others under the weight of the dulling examination drudgery, just as some schools compromise their standard and quality more than others, when judged in terms of curricula and pedagogic practices. In short, a seemingly ‘common’ tedium produces, under conditions of systemic inequalities, new disparities both at the individual and societal levels. We try to substantiate this argument with some empirical evidence that relates to the question of ability of children, their class background, the uneven quality of private schools, and the practice of private tuition and its inherent gender bias. And all this, we fear, is in danger of solidifying social divisions instead of contributing to social inclusion.

Clearly, a great deal of anxious effort to do well in exams is made by a large number of students – mediocre as well as meritorious. But as Dore astutely observes, “It is not the most able children whose intellectual and personal development is likely to suffer most from a ? qualification-oriented schooling.Curiosity is kept alive and zestful pleasure in learning and problem-solving, most readily in minds to which such activities come easily, without too much painful effort. The chief victims of an examination-oriented schooling are likely to be those who are bright without being the brightest, those who are within sight of whatever is socially defined as the desirable prizes in the competition but by no means certain of reaching them without a very great deal of anxious effort. That can be a lot of children.” (1997 edition, p 13)

The question of ability, when knotted with existing class divisions, creates further inequalities. That is to say, the deadweight of ritualistic schooling falls more heavily on the underdogs of society, due to their lack of access to any alternative. Thus, for education to work as a potent instrument of mobility and equity hinges crucially upon its quality. Alternatively, the dilution of quality through heavy reliance on rote learning and the neglect of cultivating children’s imagination is bad news particularly for poorer children. For Dore, one of the concerns is that many of them even upon completion of school education will not get a job in the so-called ‘modern’ sector and will therefore have to ‘settle down to their fate in the traditional sector’. And this process of ‘cooling them out’ is politically problematic. However, our argument in this paper, centering on primary schooling and its woes, resonates more with his more fundamental, first-order, concern that children “...have certainly been schooled but they are the victims of a system of schooling without education.” (p.7) And we try to suggest that ‘schooling without education’ is a particular affliction on historically disadvantaged children.

One may argue that the expansion of education involves some degree of standardization and that ‘qualification escalation’ suggests massification of school education and thus can be viewed as a cure rather than a disease. Surely, egalitarian school reform to bring the hitherto excluded children within the fold of education is a democratic objective of the first order. But the actualization of this goal is compatible with and indeed contingent upon school quality reforms. In short, there is no ineluctable quantity-quality trade-off.

Scholars such as James Tooley (2000) contend that low cost private schools –coming up recently in both urban and rural India - enhance both quality and equity. We interrogate this claim and suggest on the contrary that the so-called poor man’s private school more often than not intensifies test-orientation but compromises on quality. Private schools of reasonable quality, on the other hand, still remain the preserve of the privileged. Both these tendencies –

namely, low-cost low-quality private schooling and elitist exclusionary private schooling – cause further segmentation in the school system.

In this current climate of a worldwide urge to learn the ‘language of power’, i.e., English, it is understandable that parents across the entire social spectrum in both Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal indicate a preference for private schools because these teach English. Indeed, one of the reasons for preferring private schools over government schools is ‘the penchant for learning English’ (Pratichi, 2006). But parental aspirations for private schooling of their children often remain unfulfilled, since mainly children of upper class and caste background, several studies suggest, are enrolled in private schools. This is true in general in our study states, even if we concede that low-cost private schools are coming up mainly in urban but also in rural areas to cater to the so-called ‘unmet’ educational needs of the underprivileged sections of society (De et al.2002, Tooley 2000). This is not difficult to understand for simple economic reasons. As a recent study on the spread of private schools in some parts of West Bengal (Pratichi 2006) demonstrates, average annual parental expenditure for schooling a child in a private school is much higher than in government schools. Also, parents are guilty of a clear bias against girl children in allocating household resources for private schooling.(P) More precisely, girls’ share in the total enrolment of private schools is much lower than in the government primary schools. (ibid) According to another recent district-wise study of private school enrolment in West Bengal carried out by the Bureau of Census, gender bias is clearly evident in the enrolment patterns of private schools. Thus, the expansion of private schooling notwithstanding, gender and class biases persist and even intensify in some situations. For example, the Pratichi study shows that of the sample wage-earning households – families at the lower end of the income scale – only 12 percent sent their children to private school. In contrast, for households with service or business as occupation, the corresponding figure was as high as 65 percent. Similarly, the ratio of boys and girls in the sample government schools was 54:46; in the sample private schools it was 59:41.

Moreover, it is not only that all cannot afford private school education, some of those who avail of this after a lot of hardship do not necessarily get quality education. Children’s capacities of criticism and questioning are routinely dulled in private schools and through private coaching, yet parents hardly complain. Indeed, widespread support (including parental support) for examination-oriented learning is evident through the pervasive practice, more in Bengal than in Andhra Pradesh, of private tuition among children of all economic classes and at all levels of education. Even low-income families appear to be spending up a significant proportion of their income on private coaching for their children. But quite often private coaching also works on the same pedagogical mode of dull drills, memorization and cramming at the expense of nurturing creativity and curiosity among children. Besides, in our conversations with teachers – mostly teachers in government schools - some of them have complained that several of the private tutors are not fully trained and hence it is not possible for them to coach pupils properly or adequately. Intriguingly, however, the Pratichi study reveals that many private school pupils also go for private coaching. 62 percent of parents with children studying in private schools had to incur additional costs on private tuition. And 25 percent of the private school pupils received private tuition from the teachers of the same school. A kind of forced imposition of private tuition (which some parents can ill afford) running parallel to school education works to further segment the school system.

Such a silent process of (often quality-compromising) privatization is likely to cause further disparities. About resource-poor government schools the middle classes have not raised much voice. About low-cost private schools can we expect much public outcry and demand for

scrutiny? Albert O Hirschman () has coined two pithy terms to denote two main response mechanisms used to both criticize and improve upon poor performance of institutions and quality of services, namely, choice/exit and voice. The question is who is making the choice in favour of a better alternative, and who is voicing her dissatisfaction with the available inferior option. The middle class routinely castigate the declining quality of government school and desert them in favour of private schools, allowing the former to deteriorate even further. That is to say, the force of the demand for improving government schools gets that much weakened as the elite whose voice counts and who can make a difference to the health and quality of public schools are no longer interested in them (Majumdar). Those who are left behind in resource-poor government schools are bereft of a potent voice or a political clout. Our surmise is that the elite will also remain quite inactive and inert about the low-quality budget private schools, which are often rendered invisible through policy silence and indifference (Mooij 2007).

This brings us to discuss in brief an alternative vision of inclusive education that respects plurality, quality and equity.

IV. An Alternative Vision of Education with Quality and Equity Amidst Plurality

In this section we take small steps beyond diagnosing the problems that beset the school education system in most parts of the country and look for a viable alternative to the coercive dominance of 'memory-based short term information accumulation' (Pal) passed off as knowledge. More precisely, we briefly focus on three issues, namely, the role of a 'new centre', the importance of professional teacher networks, and the idea of multicultural yet inclusive education.

Just as we see the value of greater educational decentralization to lessen the pernicious effects of a highly centralized educational apparatus, there seems to be a need for a 'new Centre' (i.e. – new role for supra-local officials) to provide critical support to local actors 'through the provisions of training, resources, and various kinds of coordination' (Fung 2001). That is to say, while several school-related decisions and academic choices need to be decentralized right up to the school level, the 'central party' – be it the provincial or central government – should not disappear or abdicate its own responsibilities in schooling matters.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005) – a recent major education reform initiative under the aegis of the National Council of Educational Research and Training – appears to be playing such an enabling and leadership role in a number of ways. First of all, it is important to point out that this is not another attempt at standardization and homogenization. This is not a national curriculum, but a national curriculum framework, 'a flexible and enabling framework' that aims to break away from 'a monolithic system' and seeks to promote instead greater autonomy for schools and teachers. The NCF document talks about 'school-based, teacher-based assessment' of students and promises to genuinely facilitate development of diverse curricular approaches. For example, the document contains interesting proposals for using 'plurality of textbooks and other learning material which could incorporate local knowledge and traditional skills'. There is indeed a serious discussion in the document on how to link formal education with the country's rich and myriad crafts heritage. 'This would help children develop', the document persuasively argues, 'their own understanding based on their lived experiences'.

We came across another example of the centre's facilitating role during our fieldwork. The newly introduced mid-day meal programme in West Bengal has been gradually taking its

roots in different parts of the State after having experienced various initial troubles (especially the nagging 'middle class' skepticism about its worth), particularly because a handful of reform-oriented officials at the State government level have made several timely interventions, issued useful general guidelines from time to time, taken a number of midstream corrective steps, and above all have genuinely encouraged regional variations in the programme, extending strong support for diverse local level arrangements for the supply of cooked meal in schools across the State. While there has been a genuine push from this 'new Centre' for the local actors to own up this programme and the associated responsibilities, the former has also adopted several innovative strategies to ensure local accountability. For example, phone numbers of concerned State-level authorities were notified in several newspapers, requesting concerned citizens to contact them in case of any complaints with the school meal programme in their localities.

Teacher autonomy and professionalism, a primary condition for a vibrant knowledge system to flourish, can be fostered through professional teacher networks. We have come across a few cases of regular professional meetings and exchanges between subject teachers regarding innovative teaching practices and aids (e.g. the mathematics teacher network organized by an education NGO that involves several government school teachers). Moreover, there is some heartening evidence of local initiatives and innovative teaching practices that survive and flourish even within an otherwise centralized structure of educational decision-making. In the deeply perceptive view of a teacher, for the first-generation learners the first encounter with an almost alien world of a formal school could be traumatic unless teachers are sensitive and sympathetic about their special educational needs, and creative in their dealings with them. Initially, some of these children find it difficult to concentrate on their studies and therefore easily lose interest and become restive. In such circumstances it would be counterproductive, he observed, to act as a strict disciplinarian. He even made a bold suggestion that it is helpful not to use any textbooks in the first two months of their school life. Not long ago his school, catering mainly to 'Dalit' children, was on the verge of closure. But due to concerted efforts on the part of teachers, local panchayat members, and the chairman of the District Primary School Council the school has regained health and transformed itself into a vibrant, functioning school, with the active involvement of its pupils in classroom activities as well as other cultural and extra-curricular programmes. Another inspired teacher observed that a teacher is to get the impetus from the students themselves; they act as the source of the teachers' motivation; it is the students who learn and teachers only inflame their minds. Teaching is not just transmission of information; there are textbooks, teaching aid etc. But much more is needed; teacher's own involvement and humane relationship with students are essential. Listening to her we could realize that teachers who combine care with competence receive children's love and loyalty (Page 2005).

Finally, we address the larger question of inclusive education. As a part of our research, we have made a brief foray into the school system in the Netherlands. This snapshot comparison does not attempt to draw any facile generalizations about the school system in the developed North and the developing South. Rather the idea is to take a quick look at the structure and functioning of primary schools in a widely different setting to explore whether any common problems persist and common solutions exist, despite contextual differences.

School site and teacher autonomy appears to be one of the most distinguishing features of Dutch schools in comparison to schools in West Bengal or Andhra Pradesh. Curriculum design, textbook selection, decision to use or not to use any textbooks, appropriate pedagogy and teaching methods, student evaluation etc. are not only school-specific, but also variable

within the same school, across various grades and even within the same grade across groups of students depending on their aptitudes and levels of preparedness. Teachers are thought to be professionally capable and responsible to make such important academic decisions, which are, in turn, expected not to be uniform but diverse and disaggregated in tune with divergent academic requirements. Active parental participation in various curricular and co-curricular activities of the school, ranging from weekly semi-mandatory tutorial services (drawing upon several kinds of parental expertise) to supervision during lunch hours, is another striking feature of a number of primary schools in the Netherlands. In some basic sense, teachers and parents are truly collaborators in the common project of children's education. Simply put, professionally the Dutch school system appears to be more school/teacher-centric and parent-friendly.

Politically the issue that dominates the contemporary school debate in the West, including the Netherlands, is the larger political question of multi-culturalism and social integration. Not surprisingly, the larger political debate about identity politics and cultural rights that has wracked societies in many Western countries, i.e. the so-called 'clash of civilizations', has seeped into the country's contemporary discourse on schooling. Should education aim at cultural integration or protection of cultural differences through 'separate but equal schools'? Should schools be more socially mixed or more socially homogeneous? Is integration tantamount to coercive assimilation into the mainstream, which itself is claimed by some to be a 'false universal'? In the current context, what does the notion of 'inclusive school' mean? At present, the Turks and the Moroccans seem to be facing tougher integration test than Dutch citizens of Surinami-Indian origin.

At one level, there is no apparent similarity between the political agenda of school education in contemporary India and the Netherlands. But at another broader level, the common issues (though their concrete expressions are different in the two disparate lands) are those of aims and values of education, of school segmentation, of inclusive education if not assimilation, and above all of the potential of education to 'enrich every life', including lives of the marginalized people.

About inclusion amidst plurality we do not proffer any definitive answer. We simply submit that the school curriculum should reflect the lives, views and voices of groups that have been previously excluded and ignored. This is not only good for those particular groups but for everyone else. As Gitlin () says, 'this is the deep value of multiculturalism'. However, respecting various identities in educational ideas and processes is not the same as giving any one identity coercive dominance. In Said's () deeply perceptive understanding of multicultural education, there is no need to substitute one dominant norm with another. 'Assertion is important for those emerging from marginality and persecution'; but it is equally important 'to share in the general riches of human culture'. India's education regimes will hopefully benefit from the riches of its diverse cultures but at once reduce marginality through adherence to equity and quality.

And in this pursuit what would be of utmost importance, as Nussbaum (2005) so astutely observes, is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's social, political and economic surroundings, for living, what Socrates called, an 'examined life', and not a life full of ritualistic examinations.

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