Research Article

Shadow Education and Online Learning in Pre- and Post-Pandemic Contexts: Experiences of Parents in a Resettlement Colony of Delhi

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand the educational experiences of parents from marginalised and vulnerable communities, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in a resettlement colony in Delhi. The study examines shifts in shadow education in pre- and post-pandemic times, how marginalised families in a Delhi resettlement navigated school closures and online learning, and how these shifts reinforced exclusion and privilege based on parental ability to support children's education. This qualitative study used purposive sampling to select 46 parents (15 fathers, 31 mothers) to provide insights on availing private tuitions for children. It is observed that despite the adoption of online mode of learning during the pandemic and its subtle normalisation in the post-pandemic period, parents from the marginalised backgrounds seems to be compelled to turn to relatively affordable [in-person] private tutoring services to address the learning loss experienced by their children due to the school closures. Pandemic-related school closures have further accelerated the proliferation of shadow education in Delhi, embedding it more firmly within the post-pandemic educational order as families at the margins increasingly seek supplementary academic support to bridge the learning gaps children suffer.

Keywords: Shadow education, Supplementary education, Pandemic, Education market, Online education

Introduction

Shadow education, popularly known as private tuition or private coaching, a form of supplementary academic support outside the school hours, has witnessed global expansion. A number of studies have been conducted to understand the nature of the shadow education market in different countries (Bray, 1999; Bray and Links, 2010; Majumdar, 2018; Rao, 2017; Yadav, 2022). Scholars emphasise that "this phenomenon has received significant attention due to its impact on the upbringing of new generations, economic growth, the functioning of formal education systems, cultural and social development" (Rao, 2017; Hajar and Karakus in Karakus, et. al, 2024). The crisis of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, led to closing of schools which further forced working class parents to look for private tuitions as a means to compensate for learning loss suffered by children due to lack of access to online education. The literature on impact of COVID-19 on education of marginalised children highlights that lack of access to digital devices has further aggravated the educational inequalities (Chanchal

and Lenka, 2023; Tilak, 2023; Meo and Chanchal, 2024). The pandemic-induced shift to online learning compelled underprivileged parents to reassess strategies for keeping their children engaged in educational activities. To counter learning losses, many turned to supplementary tutoring services also known as shadow education. Researchers have focused on the shadow education market with an emphasis on coaching institutions which prepare students for entrance examinations for professional courses such as engineering and medical in the Indian context (Kumar, 2005; Panjabi, 2020; Rao, 2017; Orberg, 2017). How parents across different social classes and geographical locations perceive private tuition still remains an under-researched area. The present study attempts to understand how working-class parents perceive private tuitions in the context of online learning and reopening of schools in post-pandemic.

With the rise of the education technology market specially during the pandemic that hit the world in 2019, private tutoring became increasingly accessible, essential, unavoidable and diversified. Though, its purpose continues to differ across social classes. In fact, private coaching, especially in the online mode, witnessed a significant rise across states in India during the pandemic and continued because of its increasing demand in the post-pandemic era. Research evidence shows that growth of private tuitions is not just the result of parental demand but schools have also encouraged students to go for private tuitions (Majumdar, 2014; Sharma, 2018; Sujatha, 2014). Middle class families avail private tuition to provide a competitive edge to their wards and help them perform well not only in their school level examinations but also to prepare them for competitive examinations to enter into prestigious higher education institutions. Interestingly, for parents belonging to the marginal sections, the need for private tutoring visibly emerged as a measure to compensate for the learning loss that occurred due to school closure during the pandemic. This is coupled with parental failure to meet the paraphernalia when school moved to online classes, due to financial setbacks and loss of employment (Deshpande, 2022; Kabir et al., 2021).

According to the ASER 2021 report, about 40 per cent of the school going children depended on tuition in 2021 (during pandemic) as compared to 36 per cent in 2020 and 28.6 per cent in 2018 (pre-Covid times). This rise is witnessed across the states, except Kerala, which according to the report was a natural response to the prolonged school closure in the country amidst COVID-19 related social distancing measures enforced by the state. Therefore, the questions that arise are: has the acceleration of the private (in-person) tuition market emerged to compensate for corporeal classes that schools failed to provide as they shifted to online mode of learning? In what ways is the formal education system falling short, driving the continued and strong demand for supplementary education, especially among marginalised groups, even in the post-pandemic period? Primarily in this context, the paper attempts to explore how the shift to online education during the pandemic, particularly for underprivileged children, prompted parents to turn to private in-person tuition over digital alternatives—a trend that persists post-pandemic. It focuses on how, despite school closures and income loss, parents in a low-income Delhi neighbourhood have managed to sustain their children's education through reliance on private tuition. The study, situated in a low-income settlement of Delhi, examines the impact of pandemic-induced online education and the growing reliance on private tuitions among marginalised

communities. It further explores how this shift has deepened exclusion and privilege, shaped by parental capacity to support children's learning. The discussion that follows first outlines educational provisions in Delhi, highlighting inequalities in access and the limitations of online education that have driven vulnerable families toward private tutoring. It then explores how working-class parents in a low-income settlement navigate these options to address persistent learning gaps faced by the children.

Marketisation and Shadow Education

Shadow education provides the most significant form of academic support outside regular school hours (Bray, 2023 cited in Karakus et al., 2024). This explanation of shadow education does not include school managed co/extra-curricular classes or programs related to cultural events or sports. Nevertheless, shadow education corresponds to and has a strong relationship with regular schooling and comprises a wide range of academic activities undertaken outside of formal schooling that not only include private tutoring to take care of the scholastic aspects, it also catered to the non-scholastic aspects through enrichment programs, and extra-curricular activities for the overall development of the children (Kobakhidze and Suter, 2020 cited in Karakus et al., 2024).

In India, shadow education has flourished seamlessly with the increasing aspirations of the parents. Shadow education remains highly marketised with a variety of providers ranging from housemakers, 'underemployed' individuals and big corporate companies (Gupta, 2023). The private tuition market may be categorised into three segments viz. group tuitions (personalised setup), private tutoring (exclusive) and coaching centres (competitive) (Yadav, 2022). Emphasising on the scale of the private coaching market, Rao (2017) in a study of Kota city argues that the city has transformed itself into a shadow education market hub since the 1990s. Parents across the diverse social classes send their children for private tuitions to supplement school education, acquire competitive skills and crack high stake board examinations to achieve their desired academic goals (Panjabi, 2020; Gupta, 2023). Majumdar (2014) argues "the extent to which 'shadow education' has broken into the school life of a child in Bengal in our time is rather exceptional. The demand for tuition is increasingly rising across the different social classes. It became both a culture and requisite standard practice for children to upgrade their skills and supplement schooling for a better future. The costs incurred on tuition vary considerably according to the quality, location, size of tutorial group, nature of premises, and other factors (Bray and Links, 2010).

Internalising the growing culture of tutoring and influenced by the climate of competition in the market driven age, even the parents of the marginal sections are increasingly sending their children to private tutors or coaching centres to facilitate competitive advantage to their children for a stable future, something that their immediate, stigmatised social milieu fails to provide. However, parents from the margins are yet to believe that sending children for private tuitions can actually bring social transformation and change their impoverished lives (Majumdar, 2018).

It has been challenging to get precise data about the extent of the private tutoring market in the country, especially with respect to its geographic and class-based specificities, subscription and impact. Nevertheless, the 75th round of National Sample organisation (NSSO) data highlights that at all India level approximately 20 percent of children enrolled in pre-primary and upper levels attended private tuition during the year 2017-18. According to the

report, out of the total expenditure on education approximately 12 percent is spent on private coaching at all levels of education (GoI, 2019). Further, according to the NSSO report on household social consumption on education in India, approximately 32 percent of students were found taking private coaching (ibid). Sujatha (2014) in her study discusses the shadow education market in four Indian states where she found that the extent of private tuition depends on the socio-economic status and location. In rural areas at secondary level of education 29 percent of students were going for private tuition in comparison to their urban counterparts which is 64 percent (ibid). Further, tuition for certain subjects such as Mathematics, English and Sciences, often termed as 'hard subjects' is much sought after.

Studies highlight that the shadow education system experienced significant growth during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the closure of schools worldwide (Hajar and Karakus, 2023a; Lee et al., 2023). In many countries including India, face-to-face tutoring was also put on hold, prompting tutorial centres to shift to online mode quicker than the regular schools. Additionally, shadow education played a crucial role in helping children cope with the learning gaps that happened due to missed schooling during the closure. As a result, the pandemic considerably boosted the shadow education market, solidifying its position as an alternative medium to regular school systems (Karakus, et. al, 2024). Shadow education has thus taken an online route to foreground its operations further. It has attempted to cover rural areas or small towns which have been sort of unreached geographies especially to the new actors emerging in EdTech domain (Mohan, 2023). Taking a note of the shadow education market, the government of India in its National Education Policy, 2020 had put on record the harmful effects of coaching. Ironically, the government also attempted to legalise the 'coaching cultures' by publishing the guidelines in the month of January 2024 (Rao, 2024). School closure and sudden move to online education marked a line between those who were able to afford and access online learning and those who couldn't. Along with issues of access, abrupt shift to online mode of education delivery also showed lack of teachers' preparedness, poor content and pedagogy (Jain et. al.,2020). In this context the shadow education modified its operations and launched online spaces for individualised learning in forms of various learning apps. Sayed et al., 2023:135 argue that the model of ed-tech equipped shadow education adopted in the post pandemic world attempts to stand alone where "EdTech can be packaged, personalised, platformed and made available to consumers at their convenience and capacity to pay for devices and resources". It can be said that shadow education rooted in neoliberal and consumerist sensibilities have thus challenged the earlier socialist visions of education in society (Hajar and Tabaeva, 2024; Verger et al., 2020).

Unequal Educational Landscape of Delhi and the 'Tuition Culture'

The educational landscape of Delhi is segregated and hierarchical. There are multiple types of government and private schools in Delhi which vary in terms of infrastructure, number of regular teachers and clientele. Elite private schools were quick to use online platforms to continue the teaching-learning process while government schools, especially those run by local bodies took refuge to WhatsApp schooling as majority of the students enrolled in government schools lacked the necessary means to access online classes in a synchronous mode.

Amongst the government schools, the Municipal corporation of Delhi (MCDs) managed schools occupy the lowest tier in the educational hierarchy, primarily serving the children of Delhi's working-class migrant population.

Like the hierarchical landscape of schools, Delhi's residential geography is also marked by stark spatial and social inequalities. On one side are well-planned, gentrified neighbourhoods housing the elite and middle class; on the other are unplanned settlements, including slums, 'jhuggi-jhompri' clusters, unauthorised colonies, and resettlement areas. The unauthorised residential spaces lack access to basic services including education. The social inequality between Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and other social groups continues to accentuate due to a variety of reasons. Studies show that in Delhi slums/poor settlements are the mainstay of the low-income population who have low literacy level and poor access to schools (Chanchal, 2022; Chugh, 2009; Nambissan, 2023). Devi and Ray (2022) in a study of Delhi highlight the fact that chances for upward mobility are restricted for people living in low-income areas particularly resettlements colonies due to lack of access to non-economic resources such as networks to access information about education and employment opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic not only exposed the digital divide across rural and urban areas and poor technology infrastructure and lack of teacher's preparedness to support online education, but also the state's neglect towards the 'learning crisis' faced by underprivileged children (Reddy and Vaidehi, 2020; Singh at el., 2020). According to NSSO reports, only 9 percent of students enrolled in any educational course have access to online education (cited in Reddy and Vaidehi, 2020). Reddy and Vaidehi (2020) also highlighted that there are stark spatial disparities when it comes to ownership of computers with internet connection as only 4 percent of rural and 20 percent of urban households respectively have it. It is also important to keep in mind that urban areas are further segregated on socio-economic basis which means over 80 percent of households in urban areas do not have computers with internet connection in the country (ibid). Coupled with digital disparities in terms of access to appropriate devices with internet connection and pandemic induced closure of educational institutions across the country has created a 'new kind of educational crisis' for disadvantaged children. UNESCO 2021 data shows that approximately 800 million students are facing different problems and disruption in their education due to complete closure of schools in 38 countries while in 48 countries students are accessing part-time academic institutions. Further due to COVID-19 on an average two third of the academic year is lost worldwide as a result of school closures. Emphasising the adverse impact of school closure on marginalised sections of the society Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO aptly noted that the prolonged and repeated closures of education institutions are taking a rising psycho-social toll on students, increasing learning losses and the risk of dropping out, disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable. Complete school closures must therefore be a last resort and reopening them safely a priority.

The integration of digital technology in education remains a topic of debate in India, where the system is deeply stratified. For the majority of underprivileged communities, equitable access to quality education continues to be an unmet goal. According to a study conducted by the Azim Premji Foundation, almost 60 percent of school children in India cannot access

online learning opportunities. Learning online not only remains an 'operational nightmare, it rather forces many to opt for alternate ways such as in-person tutoring services within their reach in the colony or outside. Many studies found fault and flaws in its chauvinistic nature, surveillance, and parental inefficiency in handling the digital technologies, etc. in the operation of online mode of educational dissemination (Azim Premji foundation Report 2020; Oxfam, 2020; UNICEF, 2021; Save the Children, 2020; Tilak, 2023; Meo and Chanchal, 2023).

Research Methodology

This exploratory study adopted a qualitative research method to gain an in-depth understanding of the parental experiences and concerns about children's learning loss, private tutoring and online education in pandemic context. The study focused on three key objectives. First, it examined the transformative impacts of shadow education from the pre- to post-pandemic contexts. Second, it explored how families from marginalised communities in a resettlement colony of Delhi navigated the pandemic driven learning crisis with school closures, learning loss, and the subsequent shift to online education as a compensatory measure. Finally, the study analyses how the shift towards online education platforms has led to exclusion and privilege based on parental ability to support the education pathways of their children.

Field Site

The field of study is a low-income resettlement colony of Delhi. The colony was developed by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) under the Plan Scheme of JJ Resettlement during the period 1960 – 85. Located in north-west Delhi, it is a large slum cluster which is divided into 12 blocks. The area comprises migrants mostly from the states of West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. As per the Census of India (2011), the population of the study area in 2011 is 1,97,148; of which men and women are 1,06,388 and 90,760 respectively. 76.5 % are Hindus while Muslims comprise 21.5 percent of the population. The remaining two percent comprise other religions like Sikh, Christian, Jain, Buddhist, etc. A larger section of the population belongs to scheduled castes. The average literacy rate is 77.6 percent; the average literacy rate of the men is 84.21 percent that of the women is about 70 percent. There are more than 5000 households in the area and most are engaged in the trade of rag-picking and daily wage earners. As the population of the area majorly includes migrants, no uniform or single language is spoken. Migrants who came from diverse native locales spoke their regional dialect. Since the migrants belong to the states of West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the language or the dialects most commonly spoken are Hindi, Magadhi and Bengali. All the houses in the area are pakka houses which are mostly constructed in a cramped manner leaving no space between the adjoining houses and, connected through quite narrow streets and constricted walkways.

Sampling and Respondents' Profile

This study employed purposive sampling to identify parents of the school-going children. This approach was particularly effective in selecting participants who were most likely to provide relevant and insightful information aligned with the objectives of the study. A total of 46 parents (15 fathers and 31 Mothers) were interviewed to understand the issues of accessibility, learning opportunities and private tutoring driven by the pandemic. Table 1 shows the socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

Table-1: Socio-demographic Profile of the Respondents

Sample Characteristics	Respondents (n=46)	%
Social Category		
Scheduled Caste (SC)	23	50
Othe Backward Classes (OBCs)	15	32
General Caste Groups	8	17
Education attained		
Non-literate	10	21
Literate	5	10
Primary	12	26
Elementary	9	19
High School	5	10
Secondary	3	7
Graduation and above	2	4
Respondent's Occupation		
Not working at present/Housemaker	6	13
Domestic help	22	47
Daily wage labour	8	17
Regular salary Earner*	10	21
Occupation of Respondent's Spouses		
Lost employment**	10	21
Daily wage labour	21	46
Regular salary Earner*	8	17
Petty business	7	15
Total Monthly Income (in Rs.)		
8,000-10,000	23	50
10,000-15,000	16	34
15,000-22,000	7	15
Type of Mobile Phones in Family		
Basic	34	73
Smart	6	13
No Mobile Phone	6	13

Source: Field Study, 2021, * working as a security guard and school bus/personal driver (Father), **It is reported that respondents' spouses (particularly fathers) work as and when they get some work.

Table1 shows that the highest level of education attained by the men respondents is post-graduation and the lowest is till the fifth standard. As far as the education of the women parents is concerned, it varies from non-literates to graduates. Many of the parents reported that they either lost their job or their salaries were reduced, which had put an added pressure on them. The monthly income of the respondents ranged from 8,000/- to 22,000/-. Most of the men parents worked in private companies as supervisors, security guards, daily wage workers, and a few were into petty businesses. Mothers reported that they were mostly working as domestic help before the pandemic and some are doing piece-rate work to supplement the family income.

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted telephonic interviews to collect data. We used snowball technique along with the purposive sampling to reach out to the parents. A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared by the researchers. The telephonic interview lasted for 40-45 minutes on an average. The data was collected in 2021. The same respondents were reached many times to probe some of the issues related to schooling, tuition and seek further clarifications. The participation in the study was voluntary. The researchers explained the aim of the study and informed the prospective respondents that the data collected will be used only for academic purposes. The participant parents had children enrolled in both government and private schools, spanning grades from Kindergarten to Class 12. The data was analysed using narrative analysis, guided by emerging themes relevant to the study objectives.

Discussion

Underprivileged Parents, Resources and Online Education

Delhi is home to a heterogeneous landscape of government and private schools that cater to varied socio-economic segments. During the pandemic and in its aftermath, the majority of these institutions adopted online modes of instruction, employing both synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (flexible, self-paced) delivery formats. This shift marked a significant transformation in pedagogical practices, driven by the urgency to ensure continuity of education amidst prolonged school closures.

The synchronous mode of online education is perceived relatively better by parents despite technical issues and data limitations as children get a chance to listen to the teacher and interact with their peers. A few parents whose children are enrolled in government schools were worried about the quality of homework received through WhatsApp. Quite often the nature of work given is based on copying and children tend to copy-paste without putting their minds on the tasks given. Critical thinking and group learning tend to be compromised in asynchronous mode of online education. Many parents reported that their children are facing difficulty with time management and discipline as they tend to ignore teachers' instructions. Many times, due to connectivity issues children are not able to listen and follow the instructions given. Parents reported that they were not prepared to have online education classes while the schools expected that they should be able to help children with their lessons.

The online education has added another layer to the highly segregated and stratified school system of Delhi. The access to synchronous classes also depends on the kind of school a child is enrolled in. For instance, children enrolled in private schools attend online classes while those in MCD schools receive homework in asynchronous manner. A particular set of competencies and preparedness is required to navigate the online learning space(s). Online education fundamentally relies on the availability of technology, the learner's preparedness to engage with digital instruction, a disposition toward independent learning, and proficient online communication skills as essential prerequisites

The already existing inequalities exacerbated in the pandemic as parents from vulnerable sections felt that they are unable to provide the minimum facilities such as smart phones, and most importantly a conducive space for children to attend the online classes. Parents were found devoting a lot of their time and energy not only to educate their children but also to keep them under surveillance as staying at home and hardly getting to interact/play with their peers in the neighbourhood, they stopped leading a disciplined life. Hence parents juggled between the educational needs of their wards and meeting the basic familial requirements in the times of financial scarcity. Parental anxieties were well-founded, stemming from concerns that prolonged school closures may lead to a loss of interest in studies and increase the risk of dropouts. Beyond the fear of disengagement from the education system, parents also expressed apprehension about the academic setbacks their children experienced, as the learning materials shared through WhatsApp were often limited in scope and sometimes disconnected from the prescribed curriculum.

Parents, especially mothers, shared that their work during the COVID-19 had increased as they have to constantly make sure that there is minimum background disturbance during the online classes of their children. In resettlement colonies, space is always scarce. Hence to ensure a silent environment, many times mothers ask children who are not attending online class to go outside or wait on the stairs so that the one having online class is able to attend without any disturbance.

Most parents shared that school closures have disrupted the daily routine of children, resulting in a lack of a routine-life and significantly reduced peer interaction. Many expressed concerns over their children's growing frustration at not being able to go outside or meet friends, highlighting the serious constraints placed on children's social lives and emotional well-being.

In the online mode of education, the personal touch of the teacher is lost. There are no one-to-one online interactions to facilitate the process of teaching and learning. Many parents felt that use of WhatsApp for sending homework fails to fulfil the purpose of education. Parents expressed their discontent over the kind of work received through WhatsApp as they revealed that children do not pay any attention to the work. They simply copy it without any understanding. The parents were asked to take a picture of the work and send it to the teacher. A few mothers opined that because all the children have to stay at home and attend online classes quite often children tend to fight for the only smartphone available in families. Also given the limited available physical space, mothers have to bear the brunt of children's anger. Rama mother of three school going children, said,

"I have to ask my two children to either sit on the stairs or go outside the home so their sibling can attend her online classes with some concentration. When the online classes are going-on, the other members have to keep quiet. I have to also do my household chores accordingly so that it does not get in the way of the scheduled online classes of my children".

Parents have to complement and compensate for the learning opportunities children missed due to pandemic forced school closure. Parents' lack of expertise and confidence made it challenging all the more to support their children. The lack of financial security adds further stress on parents which hinders the genuine involvement with their children's studies at home. Parents do not feel entitled to intervene during the online class or convey anything to the school authority about the quality of online classes or about their children's learning lacunae even if they are aware of it. Most of the parents expressed that their children's educational deficits have accentuated due the continuous closure of the schools for one and half years. Parents also highlighted that even when schools opened, children felt left out due to lack of mobile internet data as the schools continued to send homework over WhatsApp. Children felt left out as they couldn't access the information provided by school teachers.

Parental Involvement and Education

Post-colonial Indian education policies have invoked family/parent participation in the process of modernisation. In this context, the goal of creating future citizens is shared with the families and its support and contribution is garnered. At the same, "family is seen as a passive site of state cooperation" (Hodges, 2004:1162). Researchers such as Maithreyi and Sriprakash (2018) illustrate that India's education policies recommended community participation in the process of schooling in the form of school management communities (SMC) to ensure parental participation under SSA. They further highlight that 'responsibilized family' subjects in the project of education have taken precedence. The RTE 2009 Act explicitly makes it obligatory on the state and parents to ensure that children in the age group of 6 to 14 years are enrolled in schools.

In the context of COVID-19 and online learning, parents ought to uphold their children's right to education and provide necessary resources. The underprivileged parents are targeted under the online educational push despite the fact they do not have the required resources. All the respondents, particularly mothers, said that they monitor their children and ensure that children are attending online classes or completing the worksheets shared by the teacher on WhatsApp. The online mode of education adopted by the schools in general and government schools in particular is based on the assumption that parents share a similar experience of involvement in their children's education. Working class parents feel that they 'hadn't been listened to' as they struggle to afford smartphone and broadband internet connection. For instance, one of the mothers shared,

"*Even after lockdown was over children remained out of touch with the teachers and online learning for months. Later we borrowed money and purchased a second-hand (smart) phone and recharged it with an internet data pack. Sometimes, the network is not good, so the children are not able to listen to the teacher. Children are not able to talk or ask anything from the teacher. I feel helpless as I can't ask the teacher to listen to my child's concern."*

'Self-certainty' is considered crucial for academic success which is often lacking amongst the underprivileged parents given their own limited success [in the field of education], capabilities and confidence. While most of the parents conceptualised their relationship to online education as one of complementing the education of their children and backing up the efforts of the teachers, they lacked expertise to control the content taught online or provide avenues for their children, to interrupt the online lessons to ask the teacher questions or to repeat the content. A restricted educational level undermines parent's sense of competency in relation to academic work and leaves them feeling disempowered in online mode of education.

Flourishing Private Tutoring Market

Parents find it easier to arrange for private tutors within the vicinity. Most of the private tutors live in the neighbourhood and they call children in different batches of four or five depending upon the availability of space and social distancing protocols during the pandemic. The tuition fees charged by these tutors vary based on the student's grade level. Monthly fees range from Rs. 100 for pre-nursery classes to Rs. 350 for upper primary levels. Additionally, some parents mentioned the presence of NGOs in the area that also offer paid tutoring services. There were parents who also mentioned NGOs that not only tutor their children but they also provide good quality free meals along with books and stationery. Parents stated that more than schools, NGOs as learning centres contribute more towards the overall development of their children. In fact, parents are of the belief that in the tuition spaces children are far more expressive and vocal in asking their doubts to the tutors over teachers in school who create an atmosphere of threat and fear for children which prohibits children particularly from the marginal sections to open up to teachers for clearing their doubts that further impact their learning comprehension in the classes.

Amidst the uncertainties brought by the pandemic, parents have turned to private tuition as an immediate solution to keep their children engaged in learning and to ensure they receive individual attention from a tutor. Parents informed that these private tutors are their only hope given the fact that their children are lagging behind academically. Many of them were worried that if the schools remain closed for a longer time, then there are chances that their children will lose interest in their studies which will further have a long-term adverse impact on their future.

According to many parents, sending children to private tuition helps them to keep children disciplined and focused on their studies, and excel in their school activities and examinations. Though all the parents agreed that sending children to private tuition incur extra financial burden but they are willing to cut on other household expenditure to facilitate their children's education. They said they have a high level of anxiety about the poor academic performance of the children and their inability to support their studies at home. Hence, they have to look for private tuition even if it incurs a substantial cost. One of the fathers forlornly said,

> *"Well, it is difficult to pay for the private tutor in these times. But it is the question of children's future. I cannot help the children with their studies. I am sending my son for private tuition, to get that extra support required to perform better or else I am afraid he might fail in the examinations. It will then be a huge problem for us and most importantly affect the morale of my child."*

A few parents said that they arranged for private tuition to compensate for the learning loss their children suffered due to school closing in the pandemic. They said that for children it is always better to have face-to-face interaction with the teacher. Hence, they prefer to send them for in-person private tuition. Moreover, a few parents said that they find private tuition better than online classes. This is still 'cost effective' as there is no need to invest a huge amount on the smartphone at once and buy internet data regularly. If their family has two –three children, they can be sent to private tuition intermittently without putting much financial strain on the household. Moreover, parents conveyed that they feel at ease as children get individual attention in the offline tuition class, interact with the teacher and can clear their doubts without any hesitation. A few parents also mentioned that in case they fail to pay for the private tuition fee for one or two months they can negotiate with the tutor and children can continue to study. Some parents reported that the private tutors have also agreed to give some discount and also the payment can be made as and when parents have the money. This flexible payment options are preferred over data recharge packages as it helps the children to continue their studies with individual face to face interaction. It is seen as an added 'benefit' of private tuition.

The future remains deeply uncertain and the cumulative effect of the school-closure especially for marginalised children is likely to be far more concerning. Many parents suggested that their children miss the school space which provided them a sense of 'belongingness'. There they had a space (socially and culturally) embedded with transformative potential, whereas the online learning spaces have restricted the children's imagination as well as their abilities to relate with the teacher, class-mates and the subject.

Measures to provide infrastructure and support to facilitate access to online learning found to be non-existent in low-income areas of Delhi. In times of school closure during COVID-19 and after for many working-class parents, private tuition was the only support to rely on since they were unable to make sense of the worksheets given online by the teachers as it hardly had coherence with the content given in the textbooks. Parents said that tutors were saviours as they helped children to complete the worksheets received online from school.

Many parents expressed that once the schools will restart, children will have to switch back to textbooks and hence the need for sending children to private tuition which will help them cope-up the academic pressure with teachers expecting them to engage with the content given in the textbooks. For instance, one of the fathers said,

> *"Now the schools have started to call children and the online system will not work. In the class, children will read from their books and have to answer the questions asked by the teacher. I decided to send children to private tuition so that they can learn from the books and prepare. WhatsApp learning was of no help to the children".*

Parents are informed that tuition teachers use textbooks and hence it becomes easier for the children to relate and understand what is being taught. Parents further said that private tuition provided children with a time bound routine which is essential for children when they are not attending the regular school. Online pedagogical practices, especially the lessons and the worksheets are disconnected from

the textbook content and are not age/grade/level appropriate which do not promote real learning—just copying. As a result, parents felt compelled to opt for private tuitions to ensure some quality learning through textbooks. For instance, a father with a graduate degree said,

> *"The worksheet given by teachers online doesn't reflect anything written in the textbooks. It just required children to copy and paste and complete the worksheet. Hence, I thought that it is better to send children for private tuition so that they can study from their textbooks. Now children go to tuition on time and study for at least one and half hour. Sooner or later children will have to go to school and then shifting back to books will be easier".*

A number of parents also said that they were sending children to private tuitions earlier as well because there is a lot of pressure from the school teachers to provide children with academic support at home to cope with the learning process in school, particularly for those who are weak in their studies. Teachers, in fact, themselves suggest that if parents are unable to provide support, then they arrange for private tuition to strengthen their learning progress.

It appeared that the private tutors filled the void left by an unresponsive formal education system, offering face-to-face support, motivation, and individual attention to working-class children who were effectively abandoned by schools for nearly a year and a half since March 2020. It is argued that access to education and supplementary tutoring remains gender biased where preference is given to boys. A number of studies on access to digital resources during the pandemic also document the fact that girls had relatively poor access to smartphones with internet data packages to access online classes/reading material. Meo and Chanchal (2024) in a study in Haryana highlight the fact that parents and other male members were sceptical about giving smartphones to girls and if they were allowed to use the device, it was done under strict surveillance of parents. The present study also found that parents availed private tuition relatively more for boys than girls with few exceptions where parents said that they are sending both to private tuitions. Parents cited financial constraints as the primary reason for not sending girls to private tuition. The literature suggests that families tend to discriminate against girls due to larger societal norms of patriarchy which governs the access and type of education provided to girls (Chanana, 2001; Gupta, 2015; Härmä, 2011; Karlekar, 1988).

Conclusions

This paper critically examines how school closure and the shift to online modes of educational delivery had far-reaching and multifaceted implications for the education of marginalised communities in a resettlement colony of Delhi. The abrupt transition to online mode of learning exposed and exacerbated existing structural inequalities, particularly in terms of access to digital infrastructure, parental support, and learning environments. The use of digital devices and resources in the field of education in the post-pandemic world has become indispensable as schools continue to use digital media to circulate school related information, reading/resource material and other activities. At the same time reliance on informal and often unregulated forms of shadow education amongst underprivileged parents to ensure their children remain in the education system has accelerated. Parents felt that online instructions were piecemeal and lacked a holistic approach as many complained

that there was no parity between the worksheets and the textbooks. Hence, parents and children were not able to make any sense of the work given by the teachers. Many parents turned towards private tuitions as an alternate measure to ensure children learn from the prescribed textbooks. Parents opined that in private tuition classes, children are able to meet and interact with the tutor face to face and learn from the textbooks. It also has the added benefit of clearing doubts and confusions while receiving individual attention. Though the quality of private tutoring remains questionable, parents find it cost-effective as they don't need to provide individualised physical space and smart-phones with high-speed internet simultaneously to two or three children in the home. Further, the reliance on private tutoring as a substitute for regular classroom teaching amongst the working-class families will adversely affect the credibility of government schools which are seen 'dysfunctional' in the city. The new forms of inequalities emerging due to the push towards online education with negligible support for working-class parents and students will have long-term ramifications for the public education system at elementary level. Continued use of digital means to disseminate information and reading/ resource material without ensuring mass digital literacy and access to compatible digital devices will further push parents to look for private tuitions as a stop-gap arrangement.

Overall, the unchecked expansion of the shadow education market carries serious implications for both the formal schooling system and social justice (Yung and Bray, 2017). It not only weakens the formal education system but also exposes disadvantaged parents and students to market-driven vulnerabilities. The tradition of supplementary education that already existed that further got accelerated in the pandemic is meant to stay particularly with the increase of its market in the neo-liberal era. At policy level it is important to regulate the private tuition market. 'Schools must ensure that their teachers do not give tuition privately to students. Schools need to also ensure that the practice of burdening children with homework is lessened so that there is less dependency on tuition to complete extensive home tasks. Examination systems in schools also need to be worked upon to discourage the tuition market where children are prepared to cope and succumb to the pressure of examinations' (Majumdar, 2014). At policy level interventions are required to make sure that children and parents from underprivileged sections of society have equitable access to digital devices, resources and appropriate training to use the same for educational purposes.

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