

Complexities of School Choice: Some Reflections from the Field

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Abstract: *The paper is an attempt to understand how parents choose schools for their children in the present context of changing educational landscape where private schools are increasing in number. I situate the study in the urban fringes of Maslandapur and Madhyamgram where private players are investing enormously in schools. This gives a spatial dimension to the context of choice. The study shows that choice of school is not based on cost and benefit calculation; the guiding principle being social recognition where the choice of private schools is increasingly becoming a part of this culture. Although the parents reside in the periphery, their aspirations are no less than the city dwellers. The study highlights how parents negotiate with their own space and choose schools of different shades, which are hierarchically located in terms of quality, status and glamour, for their children. Differential control over material resources contribute to selection of schools which have differential pay structures. It is thus important that right based approach to education with a common school system is encouraged. The significance of the study lies in bringing out the complexities that surround the notion of choice of school which point out that the freedom to choose does not always bring intended benefits.*

Keywords: Choice, school education, urban fringe, privatization.

Introduction

The paper seeks to explore various dimensions of choice of school by parents from different socioeconomic background in the suburbs of North 24 Parganas. This issue assumes importance against the backdrop of privatization of school education in India where parents are “actively” choosing private schools for their children which is documented in various studies (Srivastava 2007; Nambissan 2010a; 2010b, 2012). At the elementary level, education is conceived as a fundamental right which mandates that every child has the right to education (RTE 2009). Hence various measures are undertaken to ensure education of every child at the elementary level which include incentives as one such measure. They are provided on the

assumption that parents are 'rational' and hence government schools that lower cost through incentives would be preferred because parents maximize net benefits. Despite such incentives in government schools, parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds are increasingly choosing private schools which are fee based.¹ This questions the neo-classical assumption that human beings are "rational". If the cost of education is low or free, then it is more likely that parents from low income group would prefer government schools over private schools. But the mushrooming of low fee private schools and the subsequent rise in enrolment of students from lower income strata show that it is not a mere calculation of monetary cost and benefit. Looking closely at the statistics we find that in India, the percentage of students enrolled in government schools have fallen from 80.37 % in 2009-10 to 74.75% in 2014-15 and there is a simultaneous rise of private school enrolment from 19.49 % to 22.74% (DISE 2009-10, 2014-15). It is at this juncture that a deeper scrutiny at the notion of 'choice of school' becomes pertinent. The choice of private schools over government schools is anything but straightforward and has to be understood within a particular context which the paper attempts to foreground through a multisite case study in two suburbs- Maslandapur and Madhyamgram in the district of North 24 Parganas. The analysis goes beyond Rational Choice Theory (RCT), which treats individuals as calculative, self-interested agents. Rather, I draw from the literature of psychology and sociology to unravel the complexities of choice in the education market. Specifically, the paper uses Bourdieu's concept of capital - social, economic and cultural, and Simon's (1982) bounded rationality to understand the process of choice. Choice of school is a complex process which needs to be investigated against the background of various policies undertaken by the Government as well as the structural changes in the economy which is increasingly getting integrated into the global market.

Education policies in India have undergone massive changes since the 1990s after the introduction of economic reforms. One of the notable changes is the reduced role of the Government (Venkatanarayanan 2015). In the 1980s expansion of schools took place through programmes like Operation Blackboard which aimed at providing access to schools within 1km. At the elementary level, the policies have shifted gradually towards market-based reforms where private actors participate in the provisioning of education. The manifestation of privatization has taken different forms. First, the increase in low fee private schools in education which provide an alternative way to the low-income parents to opt out of government schools. The second is that Section 12(1) (c) of the RTE Act of 2009 allows private

unaided schools to enroll students from the disadvantaged section. Third, it is through the introduction of public private partnership in India that education landscape is changing towards the “private management”. There are also various advocacy networks in the education market which invest in schools claiming it to be a philanthropic effort. What we see today is a rapid drift towards privatization. This has also resulted in closing down of government schools in various parts of India as they are unable to attract students. The issue of school choice is important to our understanding of how “private” is slowly entering the domain of school education. By looking at the factors that are taken into account while making choice, one can ascertain what is going wrong with public education or it is just a ‘culture’ of private schooling that parents are responding to.

The study is situated in the urban fringes of the city in the census town of Maslandapur and Madhyamgram. Urban fringes are defined as transition zones which have shown substantial changes in the occupation structure of its dwellers and are characterized by significant increase in population density (Pryor 1968; Rao et al. 1991). These areas provide a fertile ground to understand choice because of the transformation that is happening within these spaces with urbanization. As the city is not able to hold its population pressure, people who are migrating from nearby villages are pushed into its periphery. I have observed that the educational opportunities in these spaces do not match that of the city and that the aspirations of the people in these areas are no less than that of the city dwellers. As private schools are getting established in these areas, there is a shift of students from government schools to private schools in these areas because of the growing preference for English as a medium of study. The paper thus throws light on how people negotiate with their space and make choices on schools. These two sites provide insights as to how parents who have resources and stay close to the city are able to make choices outside their areas. Contextualizing choice of schools would allow us to bring interplay of geographical, social and historical contexts in the decision-making process.

Are parents rational?

The literature on school choice is dominated by Rational Choice Theory (RCT) which maintains that parents weigh costs and benefits of education while arriving at a decision regarding choice of school. The theory is untenable because it assumes that parents have complete information about schools and are able to act at the best interests of their wards (Bosetti 1998; 2004). The parents are considered to be agents who maximize utility of sending a child to a school subject to constraints like income and other

household assets. The preferences of the parents are also considered to be exogenous as if decision making takes place in a vacuum. That ‘social structures and institutions thickly structure (but do not determine) individual understandings, preferences, aspirations and expectations’ (Hogan 1999) is simply ignored in this theory. Research on school choice is mostly based on developed countries where education reforms have taken the form of providing vouchers (Lubienski 2007; Schneider et. al. 2000, Chubb and Moe 1990). The proponents of RCT whose ideologies are shaped by neoclassical thoughts are of the view that vouchers would enable people to choose between options which render more autonomy to the parents in school selection. This will also create competition among schools in the sense that schools would try to perform better to attract parents and hence “efficiency” would be achieved. This is symptomatic of how the market functions through increasing consumer sovereignty and incentive to the schools to supply “good quality” treating students and parents as consumers. This goal of providing voucher to parents rests on the assumption that parents prefer good quality schools for their children (Chubb and Moe 1990). But “school quality” is often a misnomer for “student quality” as argued by Wells and Crain (2003) where the selection of schools by parents also depend on the social background of other students i.e. by class and colour. This suggests that giving more options to parents might not result in the intended benefit of improving schools and creating competition. That school choice is a dynamic and complex process involving aspirations of parents and also sometimes a strategy to maintain class position (Ball 2003) has been well established in the sociological studies on school choice and this focuses on the “non-rational aspects of choice and strategy”.

The limitations of RCT have been put forward by Simon (1986) while explaining the concept of “bounded rationality”. He incorporated subjective element in the decision making (self-perception of the decision maker) by demarcating it from objective rationality. Constraints on the decision-making process such as i.e. incomplete information, a lack of self-confidence, or low expectation lead to what Simon calls “satisficing” as opposed to maximizing (Well and Crain 1992). This concept is relevant in the domain of educational choice which is dominated by uncertainty of future returns, expectation and informational constraints. Although Behavioural Economics have gained from exchanges with the discipline of psychology, it has taken a backseat in explaining how social structures or institutions might affect decision making. The complexity of choice in education needs one to consider the context in which it is situated because decision making in education is closely connected to the culture and societal norms in which

the individual makes decision. Choice-sets, which are constitutive of various set of schools, are not the same across all the social class because of the resources (both social capital and economic capital) which constitute the choice set (Bell 2009). This means that working class families has a choice-set of low-quality schools while the middleclass families have better schools in their choice-sets. The difference lies in the social networks that are activated differently by the parents from different social milieu. Thus, individuals enter the market with some bundle of market capacities derived from the families, schools and neighbourhood (Hogan 1999). This brings forth the importance of social context in which an individual is embedded.

The cultural reproduction theories locate the school choice process within a specific social context. Most of the sociological studies attempting to understand school choice have borrowed Bourdieu's (1986) framework to understand decision making across families. Contrary to rational choice theory, there is a role assigned to human agency in Bourdieu's theory. Bourdieu's different forms of capital- economic, social, cultural and symbolic - are important tools to understand reproduction of class positions. It is through education that existing social class structures are maintained through cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passerson 1977). Bourdieu's concept of cultural and social capital along with the notion of habitus provides a good theoretical framework to understand choice in the present context. While cultural capital is loosely defined in terms of educational qualifications, social capital is in terms of networks and ties and each of these capitals are convertible into economic capital. The concept of habitus is important because it refers to the disposition of an individual which guides him to use these different forms of capital which helps him/her to gain educational advantage.

In India, there is a dearth of research on school choice except for a few (Nambissan 2010a; 2012; Vincent and Menon 2011; Srivastava 2007). Research on school choice point out that choice of a school is guided by socio-economic conditions and "the large institutional and social context" (Nambissan 2012: 53). Studies that have examined choice of school have not considered the potential of urban fringe as a powerful destination for the private players and how parents are responding to it. I bring the context of location in the choice problem that parents are confronted with and how they navigate the sphere of decision-making subject to the constraints they face.

Context, methods and data analysis

The study is located in the suburbs of North 24 Parganas. It is a multisite case study because the localities chosen are different. The multisite case study method uses more than one case to arrive at an understanding of the desired phenomenon. Miles and Huberman explained: 'By looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single - case finding, grounding it by specifying how and where and, if possible, why it carries on as it does' (1994: 29). As it is a multisite case study, it enabled me to draw an understanding of how location plays a role in choice of schools and how people from similar social class could make more choices because of difference in location. I have purposively selected the field sites of Madhyamgram and Maslandapur in North 24 Parganas, where private players are gradually investing in the form of private schools. Denizens of Madhyamgram are at an advantageous position as it is located near to the city but the area of Maslandapur is farther away from the city and hence some choices are out of reach for the people in that area. Maslandapur is a census town with about 2685 households with literacy rate of 87.86% while Madhyamgram has 48942 households with literacy rate of 89.60% (Census 2011). Schools in these areas are predominantly government run but the number of private schools has been increasing over the years in these areas. In North 24 Parganas, the number of government schools in the year 2001 was 4559 and the number of private schools was 162 whereas in 2012, the number of government school is 5863 and the number of private schools is 939. If we compare the numbers, we observe that the growth of private school has been much higher during this period which is almost five times the number of private schools in 2001. In these areas, new low-cost private schools are mushrooming as parents from low income group are demanding private schools (they perceive private schools to be of better quality). Microfinance institutes like Bandhan have set up schools in these areas in the name of "corporate social responsibility" where students from disadvantaged background can learn free of cost. At the same time, they run schools called Bandhan Academy which charge fees from students. The establishment of private schools in these areas have opened up many options for the parents who can exercise choice according to their will.

In order to understand the process of selection of schools by parents, I selected some schools which are government run and private schools (both recognized and unrecognized) located in these areas. As my focus was on elementary education, I purposively selected schools which are primary with no upper primary section and primary with upper primary section. I

have selected 5 schools, 3 from Maslandapur (two government schools and one private school), and two from Madhyamgram (one government school and one private school). Purposive sampling was done due to two reasons. Firstly, I needed to interview respondents fulfilling certain criteria, in this case beneficiaries of incentives. It was also a “sampling of context” where selection of students in different locations was done to get respondents from different socio-economic background. The rationale for selecting schools of differential managements was to get parents from diverse backgrounds. This implicitly gave class dimension to my analysis. Within the government education as well there exists difference “in terms of resources, accessibility, clientele and degree of informality” as observed by Majumdar and Mooij (2011: 31). Thus, in some cases, I interviewed parents from a reputed government school in that area and a school where enrolment is falling over the years. In that area, schools which used to be managed by village education committees (VECs) are no more under VECs because of the recent Panchayat election which took away the power from the VECs. In some schools there are mother teacher associations which work together towards children’s development.

In some cases, I went beyond the schools to collect data from the community through snowball sampling and selected some parents from these areas who chose schools outside their locality. Some of the parents thus selected were schoolteachers of different management (both government and private) who provided insights to how the system of education works and how they apply their own experiences as teachers when they select schools for their children.

Visits were made during recess in schools so that information could be extracted when respondents are relatively free. This involved interviewing schoolteachers and mothers who would wait outside the school gate for their children. I made frequent visits to the respondents’ houses to get internal dynamics of decision making.

I interviewed the respondents using an interview schedule as well as took field notes when I visited schools based on direct observation. I recorded some conversations with the respondents’ permission. I have carried out focus group discussion with students, parents and teachers of various schools. Informal conversation helped me understand the class structure to which a particular respondent belonged. In this case, it helped me understand how choices made are reflection of one’s class position. I became an “insider” to them and hence communicating with them became easier.

I started my fieldwork using snowball sampling. I thought it was a convenient way to start in the beginning when one does not know how many people to interview. According to Bryman, in this process ‘the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research (2012: 424). I have interviewed 19 parents, 20 teachers and 18 students. Of the 19 parents interviewed, 10 parents were from government sponsored schools and 9 were from private English medium schools. The interviews were semi structured and open ended which encouraged the informants to speak their minds and helped me get additional information. The interviews with the students were mainly confined to how they think of their schools and mostly on learning that takes place within school. As decisions are mostly made by parents on which school to consider for their children, students were not asked questions on choice of school.

Data analysis is done by breaking the qualitative data into themes. The analysis of data started during data collection as argued by Merriam that “qualitative design in emergent” ((2009: 169). Thus, some of the issues which were not considered important before entering the field sites emerged as important determinants of choice of a school.

Deconstructing the black box of choice

The important factors determining school choice are divided into various components which include academic aspects (reputation of the school, medium of instruction, students’ performance in board examination), discipline in school, geographical proximity of school and non-academic characteristics (socioeconomic background of other students). Although the starting point of unravelling the meanings of choice was based on the above criteria, there were other factors which emerged as relevant to choice-making in education. For instance, the present policy of the state government related to admission in schools also acted as a constraint in decision making. Children enrolled in schools up to the primary level often faced difficulties in securing enrolment in schools of their parents’ choice at the upper primary level due to the lottery system of admission. Therefore, often the most desired school in the parents’ choice set² cannot be accessed due to the state’s system of lottery. One of the reasons of low enrolment rate in many government-run primary schools, as cited by a Headmaster of a primary school, is that parents look for schools up to higher secondary level. This is because some parents do not want to take the risk of going

through the hassles of the lottery system after the primary level. The schools having primary and higher secondary levels in the same premise are preferred because a child can easily move to the upper primary level without going through the system of lottery if he/she is a student of that school at the primary level. Thus, parents who are more informed about the school system look for schools up to higher secondary levels. This process is also mediated by spatial inequalities as some areas that are my field sites do not have secondary or higher secondary schools. But well-resourced parents overcame it by looking for schools outside their localities. The decision to make a choice of one school over the other is a result of interaction of many factors as my findings suggest. The factors include a person's social and economic status, the social environment in which a person is embedded, the state policy, the information that one has and the desire to be recognized as "dignified". The subtleties or nuances of choice making are traced through the qualitative interviews of parents and students of various social and economic backgrounds which reveal how choices made by individuals reflect their class status.

The issues addressed here are – (a) increasing preference for English medium private schools by parents from lower income groups³ in the suburban area, and (b) how the middleclass⁴ parents are responding to it and hence making decisions that make them distinct from other low-income parents. The shift towards the private school by low income parents emerged from the following field observation in Maslandapur where a private school has been set up in the year 2012 by Bandhan Micro finance institute in the name of Bandhan Academy.

The two primary schools are adjacent to each other so much so that the clamour of children from one school pervades through the wall of the other school. Both the schools provide education up to the primary level (Class IV). Both the schools have parents who belong to low income strata (earning approximately Rs. 5000 per month) and work mainly in the informal sector which is confirmed by the headmaster and headmistress of the schools. The fee charged by the private school is Rs. 200 per month and the school bus fee is Rs. 300 per month while primary education in government school is free. Interestingly, the low-cost private school which is newly established has 183 students and the Government primary school has enrolment strength of 139. The head teacher of the government run primary school opined that parents have taken

their children out of his school to the private school because they think the quality of private school is better.

The above observation hints at the demand for private schools among the parents from low income group. Earlier, there were no private schools in the vicinity and the parents had no choice but to avail government primary schools. But as the private players are now setting up affordable schools for the poor in suburban and rural areas, they are able to attract many parents. Parents can exercise choice in a market where there are more options, which, in this case, is the presence of private provisioning of education. In this case, it did not depend on whether the government schools were non-functioning. It is interesting to note that the government school that I visited was functioning well with regular classes and had a good infrastructure in the form of concrete buildings, better seating arrangements, and good toilet facilities. During my field visits in the school, the headmaster was seen actively engaging in activities of the school from monitoring the classes by making rounds to seeing whether children washed their hands with Dettol before having mid-day meals. The question then arises as to why there is a flight of children from this school when it is functioning well or why some parents chose private school over this government school. It prompted me to delve further into the process of school choice through the lens of parents.

Parents from both the schools were interviewed to understand why they chose one school over the other. Parents who enrolled their children in the private school want “quality education at low cost”. The notion of “good” in education that the parents constructed varied. The majority of parents in the private school were in favour of English medium instruction. They feel it is important to learn English from the beginning (at the primary level) to get a job. A parent took pride in saying that her child who studies at class IV speaks good English and recites poems in English and also scores good marks in English. All the parents interviewed do not understand the language but the mere fact that their children are learning English and speaking English made them ecstatic. English as a “marker of status” has also been discussed by Nambissan (2012) who argued how English speaking is associated with getting a middle-class white-collar job.

Information asymmetry is a part of the choice making process and this problem gets aggravated when parents do not possess the required capital (social and cultural). The mere advertisement of “English medium school” gave them the signal that the school is good. This supply side inducement through advertisements often lures parents to make certain choices. When

a priori assumption of the parents in the locality is that “government school e porashuna hoy na” which means “no learning happens in government schools”, it becomes easier for the private players to attract ‘clients’ as in case of the private school in Maslandapur. As the parents were mostly uneducated, they never sought information about how learning takes place inside schools. The parents do not seek information about the credentials of teachers or whether the teachers are able to teach in English. Apart from English medium instruction, few parents liked school uniform which distinctively represents English medium school as against government school. One of the parents remarked “school dress ta amar bhalolage. Oder tie porte hoy jeta onno kono school e nei ei area te” which means ‘I like the school uniform. They have to wear tie which is not there in any of the schools in this area’.

What we observe is that there is an attempt by parents to come out of the poverty trap through education but by not merely gaining education through government schools. Private schools appear as a “positional good” for them which they can brag about in front of other parents that they consider are their likes. Thus, by exercising choice the parents from the same income group try to become “distinct” in their own group. It is also noteworthy that the parents who chose private schools were also members of Bandhan Samity who provide them loans. It is through the members of the Samity that the information about the school got transmitted within the community. Some members of the community took different positions in terms of investment in private mode of education point out the tension between structure and agency which can be best understood through the notion of habitus developed by Bourdieu (1977). Within the same community some members enrolled their children in government schools and some preferred private schools although the average income level is the same in these two categories. Thus, in this case, habitus, which is the disposition of individual towards certain action works independently of the social class to which the individual belongs thereby giving more autonomy to individual agency. This is also indicative of how the concept of habitus can hold both the agency and structure in tension (Reay et. al. 2005). We should also note that within this community, the members of the Bandhan Samity chose this particular school thereby falling into a particular group and exhibited group specific behaviour. Bourdieu (1993) also suggested how members of the same cultural group can differ because ‘no two individual habituses are alike’. In case of the parents who are members of the Samity activated their social networks through other members to choose this school. We also observe traces of “aspirational habitus” which is a concept used by Baker and

Brown (2008) to describe how people from disadvantaged background, who had no or little formal education, understood the value of education as a tool of social mobility. This behaviour is observed among the parents who chose private school for their children. But their imagination of “good” in education followed the larger perception of good in education constructed by the upper middle class and the middle class, i.e., the quality of private school is better. As discussed earlier, understanding of quality among parents is fuzzy and sometimes it is synonymous to English medium instruction.

Other important factors of choosing a private school over a government school are extra-curricular activities which the private school encourages and the government school does not. This involves taking part in sports, playing computer games and other indoor activities like singing and dancing. One of the parents who have two sons, the elder one studying in government school and the younger son in Bandhan Academy, understands the difference between the functioning of two schools. She remarked: ‘There are too many students in government schools and my elder son finds it difficult to learn computer because one computer is shared by four students.’

But what is striking is that apart from academic criteria, these low-income parents accorded primacy to co-curricular activities. This is quite similar to Lareau’s (2003) observation of upbringing of middle-class child in the USA which she termed as “concerted cultivation”, which means a strategy used by middle class parents to rear their children through organized activities like swimming, playing basket balls and other extra-curricular activities and hence fixing their leisure time. While the capacities of these parents in my sample are limited, there is an element of “concerted cultivation” which they might have imbibed from the middle-class parents. While the middle-class parents do not rely on co-curricular activities within the school, the low-income parents rely on school to fulfil this objective as their limited means would not allow them to invest on these activities outside school.

There are important family dynamics of choice which also influence the decision of choosing a particular school over the others. There is a lot of negotiations and bargaining that happens within the family about investing in a private school. The schooling experience of the first-born child also helped the parents to make decisions on the second child. Bidisha, a mother of two sons, who serves mid-day meals in a government school, sent her younger son to Bandhan Academy. She explained why she decided to enroll her younger son in a Government school:

The income of our family is around Rs. 4500 and sending two children to a private school is difficult for us. When we considered schools for our elder son, this private school was not there. We could have shifted him to the private school afterwards but he got his friends there in government school. Also, the elder one is not as smart as the younger one. He likes sports. So, we thought we should spend more money on the younger son. The younger son comes first in the class.

This suggests how the parents face complex choices about schooling decisions within the family and hence the choices they make are an outcome of family dynamics. The limited income that they earn is not sufficient for enrolling all their children in a private school. So, they have to favour the one who is understood to be more promising. So, compromises are part of the choice process when there are economic constraints and it is as if the members within the family compete to grab resources. In case of schooling decision, the resources that the parents possess are diverted more towards the child who is considered a better student and is a prospective future earner. We also observe that the presence of an affordable private school made it easier for this family to enroll their second son to a private school which could not happen for the first child because Bandhan Academy was not established then. The mother showed preference for a private school for the elder son as well but in this case the choices made appear irreversible because the elder son got accustomed to his school as the mother quoted. We find that children's friends appear to be a significant factor in the decision of changing schools and hence choice of schools other than the resource constraint. This is similar to Reay and Ball's observation of decision making within the family among working class parents who emphasize on "children's concerns about their friends" (1998: 432). It may not be just about friends. Having studied in a Bengali medium government school the child develops a "comfort zone" (where the medium of instruction and light course load matter), which she/he would not want to lose by shifting to an English medium private school.

Location plays a significant role in selecting schools which are considered to be of better quality outside their locality. The parents who reside in areas proximate to the city are in a better position as they are able to extend their choice sets by considering schools outside their area. Although these areas are located at the fringes of the city, the well connectedness of these areas with the city through various means of transport enable them to go beyond their own space to make choices on schools. The aspirations

of the city dwellers pervade this space as the parents at the fringes of the city make additional effort to “look like” the city dwellers through the choices they make. This is observed in areas which are few kilometres away from Maslandapur, the areas where land prices are escalating as more migrants from nearby villages are pushed into the fringes for the lack of space in the city. Madhyamgram, on the other hand, is closer to the city of Kolkata. Madhyamgram has few private schools which attract students from adjacent areas of New Barrackpur and Bisharpara where private schools are only up to the primary level. Some parents with both economic and cultural capital residing in these areas are able to exercise choice by sending their children to top notch schools in the city even though that requires a lot of investment of time on travel. A mother of an 11-year-old child explained why she took the risk of sending her only son to a school far off from her place:

Although there are many English medium schools in the locality, I preferred this school because of the brand name it carries. You do not find branded schools in Madhyamgram. Also, the quality of teachers is good in this school. We do not need to provide private tuition for him. We can afford the school fee since we have only one child. The school bus comes here and it is expensive as I have to spend Rs. 3000 on school bus. We spend around Rs. 7000 per month on his schooling which includes transportation fee. If I had two children, I could not have spent this amount on one child. The school has smart boards as well where the concepts are visually taught. I want to provide him the best education.

The above remark reflects various links that connect the reasons for choosing a school. There appears to be an attempt to “stand out” by making choices outside one’s locality for the sake of a “brand” name. The attitude demonstrated by this family is not completely based on school quality but towards getting recognition in the society through school choice. This recognition also drives the parents to move out of their familiar spaces to the other space which is unfamiliar to them, i.e., the city. This is in contrast to various studies (Bell 2007; Burgess et al. 2014) which state that geographical proximity is considered while choosing a school. The desire to be labelled as different from others has driven the family to make choices beyond their locality, even when it meant spending a large amount on transportation. Unlike the parents interviewed in Maslandapur, this particular middle-class mother talks about the quality of school teachers as an important factor in making choices. As an educated mother, she goes through the

lessons taught in school as she teaches the child after school and hence, she has an idea of how the school is imparting education. Also, she keeps track of the pedagogical practices inside the classroom as she mentions the use of smart boards. Once again, we find the working of habitus, which differs from the low-income parents of Maslandapur. The understanding of the society and schools are different for this middle-class mother who has cultural and social capital. Her internalized dispositions and the social networks (her friends and husband's friends) have helped her to make the decision on school.

We also observe how the number of children in the family is linked with the type of school to be chosen. In this case we observe "quality quantity trade off" in Becker's (1991) term, i.e., how investment in education decreases with increase in the number of children. The remarks made by the mother points out how the best education of her child is related to her fertility decision taken earlier.

Gender dynamics of choice among the middle-class parents also throws light on how subtly girls are discriminated against in choice decision where distribution of resources within the family is in favour of boys. This finds reflection in the choices made by Mr. Karmakar who is a father of two children, one daughter and a son. The son, who is elder of the two children by two years, goes to a private school in Sodepur while the daughter studies in a nearby government school. The decision to send the daughter to a government school has been very aptly put by the father as follows:

My daughter is more inclined towards extra-curricular activities like dancing and singing. So, I thought that sending her to a costly private school is not worth it. She does not like to study. The school is also close to my house so I chose this government school.

There is a stereotypical belief that the daughter is not competent enough as compared to the boy and hence government school is the best place for her. His sense of who belongs to a particular school is guided by the internalized belief system that daughter's education does not require as much attention as his boy's education. The extra-curricular activities that he focuses on are tools of justifying why he chose a government school for his daughter. Thus, through this choice the daughter and the son are being brought up differentially through schooling. There is also an attempt to bind the daughter to her familiar space through a school which is 'close to his house', and to the socially constructed feminine roles like "dancing and singing".

It is interesting to note that some parents in the same region who are themselves teachers of government run schools prefer their children to study in private schools citing reasons like 'English medium schools fit this corporate world'. Also, curriculums in English medium schools which are mainly affiliated to Delhi boards are one of the motivating factors for choosing English medium schools for these parents in Madhyamgram. As these parents are teachers in schools and aware of what is taught in Bengali medium schools, they are able to make decisions taking into account what is taught in schools. They are of the view that the state curriculum is not updated. Also, some of the schoolteachers of government school also tutor students from Delhi boards like I.C.S.E. and C.B.S.E.⁵²

One pertinent question is whether the choices made on schools bring satisfaction to the parents. It is at this juncture that psychology enters in choice problem. Too many choices might not always make a person better off as suggested by Schwartz (2009). Schwartz (2009) argues 'too much choice can lead to paralysis, inferior performance and dissatisfaction'. A parent who had many schools to choose from and ended up choosing a private school 14 kilometres away from his locality remarked:

I chose an English medium school for my son which is quite reputed. But I am disappointed with this school. Only passing the examination is what the school stresses on. Everything, from uniforms to books to copies, is to be brought from the school. Even after spending so much on school, I have to provide tutors after school. I could have rather chosen a government school for him and could spend more on tuition.

Although choice of school after all rational considerations should have brought satisfying results for the parents and children, we find that the aftermath of such choices is not always satisfying. It is because what private schools advertise and promise and what they actually deliver are not the same. The lack of information about the actual performance of the schools before selection often causes dissatisfaction for parents after the child is enrolled. This also happens because while making choices parents are bound by their own perceptions and also the networks that surround them. This leads parents to blame themselves for their inability to select the best school for their children as in the above case. According to Schwartz, 'When the choice set is large, blaming the world is a much less plausible option ...In other words, self-blame for disappointing results becomes more likely as the choice set grows larger' (2009: 397).

Thus, what we observe is that choices are not merely made by taking account of only academic quality of school. In many cases, parents follow the suit and exhibit 'bounded rationality' as Simon (1986) calls it. There are various social elements that mediate the space of decision making. There are tensions, bargaining and negotiations that make up the choice process. There is also consideration of child's development that encompasses extra-curricular activities. Because changing schools frequently might affect the child's learning, choice of schools also is a risky task for the parents. We observe how social and cultural capital along with the parent's disposition and his sense of the world or his habitus plays a role in selecting a school. While location is an important factor in choosing a particular school, we find that availability of transportation facilities of the school in the suburbs from the city enables a parent to choose a desired school of the city.

School choice and private tuition

Private tuition among the students is very much prevalent in the field sites. It is sometimes considered to be mandatory to go for tuition after school. As most of the parents from low income group in Maslandapur can hardly write their names, they find it difficult to guide the children. Thus, private tuition emerges as a compulsory investment for them. While the parents decide on school, they keep searching for tutors who would guide their children. In many cases, the schoolteachers who are poorly paid in the private schools provide tuitions to these children. The parents believe that the prevalence of the tuition market enables them to compensate for low quality learning in schools. For instance, Mr. Karmakar, whose son goes to an English medium school, is not satisfied with the school and he believes that it is only in tuition that his son is learning. All the parents that are interviewed agree that tuition is important for their child and hence look for tutors while making decisions on choice of school. This culture of tutoring is very much commonplace in the areas I have visited. This also suggests that parents do not rely on schools completely for their ward's education. But the type of tuitions varied according to the fee structure, class size, subjects taught and it depended largely on how much extra a parent can spend. While engaging private tutor has become an integral part of upper and middle-class education culture the lower-class families also follow suit, since the perception of "good" education builds the pressure.

Conclusion

The present study reveals the complex interaction of various factors in making decisions on schools. It is not only the academic criteria on which parents choose a particular school and is not a mere cost and benefit analysis. The preference of private schools in these urban fringes indicates parental aspiration which propels them to spend more on education. However, information asymmetry and one's own individual habitus and resources restrict the best choices that could be made for the children. We also find traces of family dynamics in choice of school where the most promising child goes to a private school which parents consider "good". Gender also comes out as an important determinant of whether the child would go to a private school. The drift towards the private by many parents is also because government schools are considered to be of inferior quality which is sometimes linked with the curriculum in the school. The parents with both economic and cultural capital are able to put extra effort by sending their child to city schools. These parents do not want to compromise with the brand value when it comes to selecting school. Selecting such schools is also a means to represent oneself as distinct from others in the same locality.

We have found that too many options to choose from often lead to confusion due to informational constraint about the functioning of schools. The lottery system of admission followed in government schools often restricts the parents to enroll their children into the schools of their preference. Thus, some parents are seen to prefer schools where secondary education is also available, abandoning primary schools. Private schools lure parents through English medium instruction. In this study, we find that the members of Bandhan Samity mainly chose Bandhan Academy for their children. Contrary to the belief that government schools are discarded by parents due to low quality, we find that parents in Maslandapur chose private schools due to English instruction.

Nevertheless, the parents want their children to get quality education but parents from the lower strata of income are not informed about the functioning of school because of their less interaction with the school. Learning by rote is one method that is followed in the private schools which have been confirmed by the students in my sample. What is happening within the school is often monitored by parents with cultural capital who make it a point to see what is being taught from time to time. This study thus highlights how choices made by parents are not always good for them because of the resources with which they make such choices are not equal. With the advent of privatization, inequality in delivery of education is expected

to increase because the school system is hierarchical from low end private schools to elite private schools. The social and economic inequality finds reflection in selection of school and quality of school helps perpetuate social inequality. We also find spatial inequality which restricts the parents to make certain choices because the good private schools are situated at the core of the city. There is thus a need to probe deeper into how people make choices before making any policy. With the advent of privatization of education, the idea of common education system would be a challenging one because private bodies lure “customers” to sell their products. Private English medium education stands fetishized. As the policy of the state in the neoliberal era is drifting towards “public private partnership”, we can find instances of government schools not able to hold more students. This stands in contrast to the Right to Education (2009) Act.

Notes

1. Srivastava (2007a; 2007b) has worked extensively on low fee private school and showed that parents from lower income strata are choosing low fee private schools.
2. Bell (2009) used choice set to mean set of schools that parents consider.
3. Low income group are those parents whose income is considered below the annual per capita income of West Bengal which stands at Rs. 65932 in the year 2013.
4. Middle class in this study is defined in terms of education level, language competencies, occupation, consumption pattern and based on the respondent’s self-definition. In many cases, the respondents’ assert themselves as “moddhyobitto” in the interviews conducted. It is not a homogeneous group but there are some social and cultural similarities among the middle class and the way they reflect on the world. They have an urge of searching for something better and a constant anxiety of whether they would be able to maintain their status.
5. I.C.S.E stands Indian Council for School Examination and C.B.S.E. stands for Central Board of School Examination.

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