Throwing Light on the Shadows: An Inquiry into the Coaching Industry in India

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Abstract

The ushering of neoliberal reforms in India was a decisive moment in modern India's history. The economic reforms drew legitimacy from their emancipatory potential for a large section of the masses. New hopes and aspirations for a better life emerged in this context. Education was seen as a key instrument to achieve various goals, most importantly upward social mobility. This paper centrally focuses on the state of education in post-liberalization India. Emphasis is on inequalities and how education, which was a powerful path to liberation for so many people, is marred with socio-economic inequalities. This study analyzes the emergence of private coaching centers (both offline and online) in urban India, and their centrality to an individual's chances of upward mobility. The crux, however, is to unravel the relationship between neoliberalism and inequalities in India.

Keywords: *Coaching Industry, Social Mobility, Shadow Education, Inequality*

"For we cannot adequately understand 'man' as an isolated biological creature, as a bundle of reflexes or a set of instincts, as an 'intelligible field' or a system in and of itself. Whatever else he may be, man is a social and a historical actor who must be understood, if at all, in close and intricate interplay with social and historical structures"

- ***C. W. Mills***

Introduction

The primary task of a student of sociology, i.e., to scientifically understand and analyze 'society,' requires, at a basic level, a sociological imagination that helps her in grasping the inter-relationships between various sociological variables. Class, caste, gender, something that has an underlying social structure, are considered as sociological variables. The overwhelming presence of structures and processes makes them indispensable in the study of any society. Social structures have a differential impact on various social groups, individuals, and institutions in a society. This attribute – variability – of social structures makes an empirical inquiry possible. Multiple social groups exist in a society and they are hierarchically arranged. There is a constant interaction among these groups, and even structures, broadly speaking, that constitute the core of social processes. Society, contrary to popular opinion, is not an unchanging or stable entity but a dynamic reality that needs to be understood through a meaningful synthesis of theory and empirical evidence. The case of Indian society is no different. Structures such as caste and class wield an influence over each other while also impacting and being impacted by social processes such as globalization and modernization.

This paper aims to understand this complex interplay in a specific site, i.e., the private coaching industry in Indian cities, in the larger context of the forces of neoliberalism. The process of liberalization in India, especially the pace it caught after the 1990s, is significant in understanding the emergence of a private education sector that caters to the specific needs of the neoliberal system. A surge in the requirement for skill-oriented jobs, and the overall growth of the service sector, generated a demand for education that caters to the new job market. Market-oriented courses came to enjoy popularity not only among the masses but also within educational institutes.

Private coaching centers emerged simultaneously, like a shadow of the formal educational institutes, by selling hope to students who intended to excel in academics to fetch a job. One sees a shift in the aspirations of Indian students with the entrance of multiple new industries and firms. Education and employment seemed like crucial vehicles of social mobility, especially for historically depressed sections of society. At this juncture, the coaching industry, or poetically called the 'shadow education sector,' appeared, in its nascent stage, as an alternative to the inadequacy of public-funded education. The notion that the harder one works, the better their chances are at making a career (simply put, the intense capitalist work ethic) took ascendence which ultimately succeeded in establishing the primacy of merit over everything else. A certain path of development and specific notions of success got consolidated because of the entrenchment of new global economic order. The forces of liberalization, or broadly globalization, did not cause erasure of structures and the inequalities that come along with them. Structural inequalities persisted, and continue to do so, to date. Each social group has a different degree of constraints placed on them and this, in turn, impacts their position, and social mobility, in society.

This paper proceeds with the initial hypothesis that structures, such as class and caste, wield variable influence on different social groups trying to access private coaching centers due to the underlying inequalities in society. Each section of the paper addresses a research question. To begin with, the first section discusses the historical background preceding the entrenchment of neoliberalism in India. An understanding of the history of social change, as well as the changes occurring to structures, is required to render a sharper image of Indian society. The focus then shifts to the aftermath of the neoliberal economic reforms and their influence, specifically on the state of education, and generally on the social order. The birth of the private coaching industry, as well as the process of its legitimization, are

located in this context and the third section deals with the causes and consequences of this social reality. An analysis of the variables – caste and class – appears throughout the paper but the fourth section, especially, is centered around the impact of these variables on students attempting to gain access to the private coaching centers in the Indian cities.

The rationale behind the choice to trace the influence of caste and class in the coaching industry is two-fold. First comes the concern to understand the condition of youth in an environment of increasing inequalities, especially in a country with the youngest population in the world. Secondly, it is intriguing to look at the interaction between processes, globalization and liberalization, and structures, class, and caste, in educational spaces.

Historical background

With the advent of colonialism, one observes a particular type of modernity, one which is Eurocentric, penetrating the Indian society. The very conceptualization of India as an underdeveloped nation requiring external intervention, to bring it on the path of progress, reeks of orientalist bias. This construction emanates from the universalization of the western experience of modernity - which is perceived as an unceasing acultural and rational social process. Colonialism, or the occupation of geographical and epistemological space, has not only led to economic drain and suffering of the native people but has also captured the mind and body of the "subjects" (Bhambra 2007). India, an erstwhile colony of the British empire, was also deeply impacted by the prolonged presence of colonial authority. The formal exit of the British forces did not erase the western ideas of development despite conscious efforts of the Indian (political) elites to evolve a unique model. For instance, the entire discourse around community development in ruralities has its roots in colonial governance. It rests on the assumption that Indian villages

are non-modern, communitarian spaces in need of the state's proactive intervention to "develop" them. Similarly, colonial bureaucracy was adopted by the independent Indian state and so were the secular educational institutions retained. These are not merely abstract ideological tools, they are inherently material in the sense that they interact with the structures, and subsequently, have a determining effect on the lives of the Indian people.

The class structure of India underwent a serious transformation as a result of the introduction of a "modern industrial economy, secular education and a new administrative framework" (Jodhka and Prakash, Indian middle class: emerging cultures of politics and economics 2011). The emergence of the intermediary class, the middle class, has its origins in colonial India. It is distinct from both the rich and the poor, not merely in terms of its economic aspects but also on a deeper socio-political level. Its origin lies in the colonial need to develop an indigenous section of employees, trained in modern English education, to carry on the administrative works of the colonial government. Caste comes into play at this point, since it was the already privileged upper-caste individuals who had access to modern educational institutes and consequently came to constitute the middle-class. The subsequent reforms empowered other castes to climb up the social ladder and attain a place somewhere in the middle class, but the hegemony of the upper-castes persisted and still does to some extent. This is not to say that the hegemony was economic, rather it was also social, cultural, and political. The power to define distinctly unique 'middle-class values,' to articulate political demands, and influence the state and civil society rests with the upper-caste middle-class.

Just as the internal constitution of the middle class its nature too has undergone significant changes. Jodhka and Prakash point out, rightly so, that in the initial decades after independence, the middle class

consisted of salariat or those employed in the formal sector. This was alternatively recognized as the Nehruvian middle class, given their predominant presence in the public sector. The changing global economy that brought about the process of rapid liberalization in India caused a private (and service) sector boom. The initial phase was characterized by the entrance of cheap foreign goods, which were otherwise unavailable to the masses before the opening of the economy. This, when coupled with the increased purchasing power of the middle class, saw the rise of a 'new middle class' that indulged in conspicuous consumption. The neoliberal reforms also brought about social mobility among a few depressed sections of the society, to some extent. The middle class, if looked at its absolute numbers, became a huge social base of consumers of various commodities, and even ideas. The private education sector emerged in this context, to cater to the increasing demands of a rapidly expanding class of people. Their predominant dependence on employment makes education necessary, thus they were more than willing to invest in education.

Like class, the structure of caste underwent profound changes too, both in the decades preceding and succeeding independence. Defying the logic of development, caste did not wither away with the process of modernization. If anything, caste persisted and manifested into various forms proving its resilience in Indian society. One might observe a decline in its logic of hierarchy as more depressed caste groups gain power, yet the structure of caste continues to exist as a constantly renewed form of relational discrimination and domination (Jodhka 2015). It is true that historically oppressed middle castes – especially those associated with agriculture – benefited from land reforms, green revolution, affirmative action (especially in the post-Mandal era), etc. Though agrarian reforms brought along economic mobility, ascendence to the middle class was still intricately linked to access to modern education and employment in non-farming sectors.

The implementation of the Mandal commission report in 1992 coincided with the entrenchment of neoliberalism through new economic reforms in India. This coincidence resulted in significant portions of OBCs aspiring to be included in the new middle class. Education, and employment that was guaranteed after it, came to be seen as crucial tools for upward social mobility. It is not merely the OBCs who aspired to be mobile, but also other oppressed sections of the society such as Dalits. The usage of a politicized identity – Dalit – is of importance here. As democracy deepened, historically oppressed sections asserted their rights as well as identities with pride. Political mobilization became an important weapon of the oppressed masses, in this case, Dalits. With the additional support of affirmative action and simultaneous political representation/mobilization, Dalits too aspired for upward social mobility apart from struggling for a more egalitarian and just society. In essence, "the values and aspirations for a dignified life as citizens of a democratic country have successfully eroded the earlier notions of *karma*, the inevitability of destiny attached to one's past birth, almost everywhere in the subcontinent" (Jodhka 2018) – this provided an impetus towards upward social mobility among various social groups.

Turbulence through the 90s

By the beginning of the 1990s, multiple social groups were struggling for upward social mobility. The rapidity with which new economic reforms were implemented in the same decade catalyzed the process of the expansion of the middle class. The liberalization of the Indian economy opened a host of opportunities for everyone. The economic reform program specifically targeted restrictive trade and industrial policies. It aimed at increasing the participation of private players in all the sectors of the economy. Private actors were granted access to invest in enterprises that were hitherto reserved for the state. Additionally, by lifting the restrictions on foreign direct investment,

the international flow of goods, services, capital, human resources, and technology was promoted in an attempt to move towards a higher economic growth rate. For the investors, the Indian middle class seemed like a perfect social base of consumers, given its numerical significance in absolute terms. It was a class in constant pursuit of social mobility, its requirements and composition were diverse, and most importantly, it had the purchasing power. Although, it is wrong to perceive the middle class as an income group alone. It also has a set of distinct cultural values that it utilizes to legitimize the retrenchment of the state and the increased presence of foreign/private enterprises.

Just as other state enterprises, public expenditure on education was also reduced. At the primary and secondary levels, this led to gross negligence towards the government schools. The infrastructure of government schools is in shambles. Official data suggests that 17 percent of schools in India do not have an electricity connection, while the state of internet connectivity is even worse with only 11 percent of schools having access to internet connectivity. (Unified District Information System for Education Plus 2019-20). The negligence towards government schools is not only visible at an infrastructural level, but also in the process of training and recruiting well-equipped teachers. Apart from these, the lack of funds to public schools invariably hurts the students coming from marginalized backgrounds since the state fails to provide them with the resources required for the learning process. The high drop-out rates in India are indicative of the lapses on part of the state. The situation of higher education is even worse. "In 2000, a committee, headed by M Ambani and K Birla, was formed to suggest reforms in the education sector. The committee considered education a very profitable market and suggested that the government should confine itself to primary education while leaving higher education to the private sector These two industrialists made a case for the full commodification of higher

education. In the following years, the budgetary allocation for higher education was decreased and new recruitment of regular academic and non-academic staff was almost halted. As an overall result, between 2007 and 2012, the number of private institutions grew faster than the number of government institutions" (Kumar 2014). The disinvestment in public-funded education gave impetus to the rapid growth of private schools and colleges in India. The predominance of private players in the education sector is such that 64 percent of educational institutes in India are privately owned/funded.

Privatization, when coupled with the process of globalization, has alarming consequences. The spatial and temporal coming together of the world, due to enmeshing of economies and technological advances, has pushed everyone into a globalized social reality. Globalization is, for the large part, a homogenizing force. Concerning education, the homogenizing effect is evident in the universalization of "centralized decision-making, test-driven accountability, and narrow core curricula – (all of which have) unintended consequences (such as) the corrosive emotional atmosphere in schools, large shadow education systems, the normalization of corruption, and a focusing on testing instead of richer, more authentic learning" (Zhao and Gearin 2016).

At a societal level, the homogenizing force of globalization promotes the idea of free and fair competition as a universally desirable ideal. This is problematic especially when structural inequalities already exist within a society. The marginalized sections neither enjoy equality of opportunity nor are all individuals equally privileged, for the competition to be fair. In India, especially in the cities, the hegemony of upper-castes within the middle class is visible in the idealized popular representations of values such as "efficiency through market competition and privatization of public agencies,

transparency, and accountability of the governance apparatus" (Jodhka and Prakash 2011) as opposed to the idea of social justice upheld by the marginalized caste groups within the middle class. The capitalist logic of individualism and meritocracy naturalize structural inequalities by shifting the burden of failure to an individual from the structures constraining her from realizing her potential.

Shadow education sector

The inadequacies in Indian educational institutes, both public and private, can only be eradicated with reforms aimed at the radical restructuring of the education system. Such measures are prevented by the deeply entrenched and hegemonic notions of individualism, a certain understanding of development, and the argument of meritocracy. The inadequacies are not seen as structural problems that have an exclusionary effect on the marginalized sections of the society, rather they are reduced to personal troubles. There is a valorization of individuals who "succeed" in their life, success is defined here as an individual's persistent determination and hard-work in the face of difficulties. The question of structural inequalities being triggered by one's class and caste location is consciously invisiblized. "Inequality has become an industry in itself with thousands of highly paid experts managing the problem in international organizations, think tanks, government bodies, NGOs, and universities. The emphasis is on the management of inequality, not on a serious struggle against it" (Jodhka 2018).

The shadow education sector, otherwise known as the private coaching industry, emerges as an alternative to the failings of schools and colleges. The students are expected to work additionally after their school hours to fill the gaps in the knowledge that they received in the formal educational spaces. The private coaching centers are characterized by "supplementation (of the school curriculum), privateness (tutoring in exchange for a fee), and inclusion of

academic subjects (the subjects that are assessed in the formal education system)" (Zhang and Bray 2020) (Gupta 2021). These are spaces where "informal and paid academic learning takes place outside formal school system (which can be then) availed for public exams and competitive entrance tests. The metaphor of shadow is used because much tutoring mimics the mainstream school system" (Zhao and Gearin 2016).

The homogenization, as described in the previous section, of educational practices also paves way for the legitimization of coaching institutes in the name of preparing students for the standardized tests. In Indian cities, like Kota and Vijayawada, these centers offer full-time coaching for a duration of two years after matriculation under the garb of preparing them for various entrance exams for the undergraduate level. The prevalence of professional courses such as B. Tech and MBBS, due to their market orientation and employability, that are popular within the middle class, has prompted millions of students across the country to prepare for the standardized entrance tests that fetch an admission in colleges offering the course. The standardization of educational practices makes it easier for the coaching centers to enrol an unlimited number of students in each batch given that all of their requirements are the same. Additionally, these centers are not answerable to any regulating body for non-maintenance of the ideal pupil-teacher ratio. In Kota, for instance, 135 registered coaching centers operate, and "close to 150,000–200,000 students live in the city during the period of April of a year, when the fresh classes begin, to the month of March next year when they complete the annual cycle" (Rao 2017).

Private coaching centers also enjoy legitimacy because of the predominance of credentialism in the Indian middle class. Securing admission in IITs, NITs, or medical colleges is a matter of pride and a great achievement in the middle-class, regardless of their caste location. This reflects the hegemony of the upper-caste idea of

meritocracy wherein the worth of an individual is measured through such achievements that take them closer to attaining an ideal career with a stable source of income. These undergraduate-level institutes are prestigious merely because the number of aspirants is exponentially higher than the intake capacity of these colleges. The state, instead of establishing more institutes of excellence to cater to the demands of growing aspirants, slyly encourages the shadow education sector by normalizing the coaching culture. When a student fails to get admission, the question is never "why aren't there more colleges" rather "why did you not study hard enough." The individual ends up blaming herself, or her troubles, when faced with failure. The blame is also directed towards one's peers. Students see each other not as friends but as competitors. The upper-caste middle-class youth is taught that the lack of seats in the elite institutions is solely because of the policy of reservation. They develop a sense of disgust towards their peers belonging to marginalized castes. Students from oppressed castes hoping to pursue education from these prestigious colleges face constant slander and humiliation for being "undeserving" candidates. The idea of merit that is etched in the minds of upper-caste Indians does not allow them to consider structural inequalities while judging the merit on an individual.

School-going students are often pressurized into studying more, pushing their limits, and working harder than everyone else. The student wages a war against the world to fetch admission into a decent college. The alienation they face is extremely under-studied. The extreme manifestation of the pressure they face, the pressure to succeed or to develop themselves, is suicide. 35 students die by suicide in India every hour, i.e., student suicide constitutes 8.2 percent of total suicides that are reported in India every year. They are not only alienated from their peers, but also from the very activity of learning. The pedagogic practices adopted in the shadow education sector are not aimed at promoting creative learning among the

students; rather they train students to cram the subjects through rote-learning. The value of any subject is evaluated in terms of its usefulness from the examination point of view. This strips away the very essence of the process of learning, ultimately leading to estrangement at all levels among the students.

The conceptualization of the coaching industry is important. N Prasad in his study of education in Vijayawada notices that "By 2000s the coaching centers focused not only on professional engineering and medical education but also usurped school education. This was achieved by re-conceptualizing school education in a more 'technical' and 'innovative' way, i.e., through concept schools, techno- schools, foundational schools, etc. These 'new' schools were packaged as early stepping stones to successfully crack the entrance examinations" (Prasad 2017).

Differential access

As established in the previous sections, different caste and class groups have different life chances. The majority of the population hailing from oppressed sections of the society find it difficult to access the private coaching institutes that have become indispensable if one wishes to pursue higher studies. NSSO data suggests that nearly 26 percent of students seek additional academic support through private coaching. "In 2007–08, private tutoring comprised nearly 43% of total private education expenditure (which is equivalent to about 16.5% of the total household per capita expenditure)" (Gupta 2021). S. Rao notes that in Kota the range of expenditure varies anywhere between a minimum of Rs. 300,000 to Rs. 500,000 per annum per student. In Delhi, the numbers are less staggering, because, unlike Kota, the aspirants are not out-station students staying in rented accommodations. "The fee for a one-year classroom programme ranged from Rs. 70,000 to Rs. 160,000" (Punjabi 2020). This creates an immense financial burden on the

families of aspirants which in turn pressurizes the students to crack the examinations given the huge sum of money being spent on their education. In a country where the bottom 50 percent of the adult population earns Rs 53,610 per annum on average, it is impossible for half of the masses to even imagine accessing these coaching institutes. The empirical study conducted in Delhi reveals that those who chose the high-end institutions mainly belonged to well-to-do higher professional families, further substantiating the claim that access to these institutes is determined by one's class position.

Government figures tell us that 39.9 percent of the urban population below the poverty line belongs to the SC category and another 31.4 percent are OBCs. The sky-high fees of the coaching institutes affect the marginalized castes the most since they make up almost 70 percent of the poor people finding it nearly impossible to access these institutes. Data from National Sample Survey reveals that being from a lower caste limits the access to shadow education, as 11.8% of the SC students under the study were accessing private tuitions whereas the corresponding proportionate figure for upper-caste students (i.e., UR) was 18.7%. This evidence makes the inequality in opportunity clear.

Lurking in some corners of the shadow education sector were the Ed-tech platforms. These online interfaces offer digital classes, and other educational services to students at a certain price. While some of the classes and content are free, a complete access requires a student to subscribe to their preferred courses. Start-ups like Byju's, and Unacademy are two of the major players in the Ed-tech sector. Most of their courses are centred around different competitive exams such as JEE, NEET, UPSC etc. Though these platforms were gaining popularity among the students from the past few years, Covid-19 pandemic boosted their growth immensely. With schools and private coaching centres shut, students found an opportunity to keep learning

through these digital learning portals. Schools and offline coaching centres did not have the necessary infrastructure to make their services online. But Byju's and Unacademy, for instance, were functioning completely online, and thus were immediately available to the students. On the face of it, they appear to provide quality education at cheaper prices as compared to the traditional coaching centres. Another major point of attraction is that the students can learn interactively at the comfort of their homes. The last, and the major, unique selling point is that they evoke enthusiasm among the students through visualised learning content, and creative teaching methods. A closer look at their subscription rates reveals that Byju's charges approximately Rs. 5,000 per month, or Rs. 60, 000 per annum. Unacademy, on the other hand, charges anywhere between Rs. 625 to Rs. 3,500 per month depending upon the subscription plan. It has recently opened up coaching centres in different tier-1 and tier-2 cities wherein the students can enrol themselves for JEE coaching for a period of 15 months for Rs. 60,000.

The fees, although slightly cheaper than the traditional coaching centres and techno-schools, is still a major hurdle for students belonging to marginalized castes and low-income households. A possible explanation for the competitive pricing is that a lot less fixed capital in terms of infrastructure, is required for the Ed-tech platforms. In fact, a look at some of their classes during the pandemic reveals that the employees (educators or teachers) on these platforms were taking online classes from their houses itself. Secondly, the content available on their website or mobile app, once made, incurs no further spending. It keeps fetching recurring profits as the number of students paying to watch grows. Byju's, in fact, has recently become a $1 billion company.

The pressing concern here is not the fee itself, per say, but the institutionalisation of exclusion. To begin with, the very existence of

different subscription plans suggests that the best of the facilities are reserved for those who have the required purchasing power. The entire idea of meritocracy, upon which the shadow education sector built itself, appears to be abandoned now.

Furthermore, the basic pre-requisites to effectively study from Byju's or Unacademy, are - a stable internet connection, and a personal computer or mobile. International Telecommunication Union - World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database suggests that, as of 2020, only 43 percent of Indians use internet. Within this only 1.64 percent have a secure broadband connection, and 83 percent of the total internet users depend on their cellular data. The access to computers is even more pathetic. NSO survey reports that only 4 percent of rural students, and 23 percent of urban students have access to computers in the country.

The analysis thus far indicates that these education-technology platforms primarily cater to the needs of urban middle-class students whose parents can afford to purchase different subscription plans for them. The cheaper price is not the only point of interest but also multiple creative facilities such as live problem solving, visualised content, one-on-one counselling etc. These open up various avenues for the students. Apart from making them tech-friendly from an early age, these platforms aid in preparing them for a job-market that requires technical skills and acumen. It also erases any possibility of interaction among students belonging to diverse backgrounds, further entrenching the idea of competition. It openly legitimizes institutionalized exclusion and leaves no room for social justice.

Conclusion

This study began with an analysis of the historical factors that have had an impact on the structures of caste and class. Interaction of these

structures with processes such as globalization and liberalization in the late 1980s also brought about significant social changes. The emergence of a new middle class is of importance here as it is a point of intersection for caste and class. Though different caste groups have successfully entered the middle class, the hegemonic ideas - of individualistic development, ignorance towards structural inequalities, and a general inclination towards meritocracy – emanate from the upper caste neoliberal values. The ideal path of success/development in the life of an individual has an overarching influence on the education sector in India, which was by the way, significantly impacted by the new economic reforms of the 1990s. This is the critical juncture where the shadow education sector emerged, as an additional supporting system for the inadequate formal education system. The focus was on the urban spaces, drawing especially from Kota, New Delhi, and Vijayawada, we understand that immense socio-economic inequalities exist among the students trying to access the private coaching centres. The emergence of education-technology, or Ed-tech, platforms has also played a vital role in institutionalizing exclusion and legitimizing inequalities. The push towards digitisation that came forcefully along with globalization flourished in the shadow education sector during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The online platforms, ready with required technological infrastructure, thrived by offering educational services to students who were devoid of any learning as a result of the lockdown. Intense competition and individualisation are coupled with a gradual erasure of spaces for communication, among students, with the emergence of Ed-tech services. These seem to be accessible to the upper-middle class urban households, but the opportunities, and futures, of the rest of the India students still hang in uncertainty.

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