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Capitalizing aspiration and growing inequality: Market philosophy of coaching classes

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Abstract

In the present modern times, the neoliberal economy has increased space for capitalization and privatization of all sectors and education is not an exception. The rapid growth of coaching institutions does not only intend to deliver and produce knowledge but it has emerged as a potential market sector. Present study aims to explore the Intersectionality of market and coaching institution. Mukherjee nagar has been selected as a field of research study. Under quantitative method questioner has been adopted.

Keyword: education, coaching, knowledge, capitalism.

Introduction

If one were to stand at Batra Cinema Complex in Mukherjee Nagar area of North Delhi and merely follow one's eyes in different directions, one gets entrapped, quite unconsciously, in the 'gaze' of 'coaching'. Numerous hoardings, billboards, pamphlets and banners of different coaching institutions present, unambiguously, the gateway to success. Notwithstanding the diversity of such coaching institutions, they all stand united in their claims of outlining the roadmap of success. Besides, advertising hoardings of coaching institutions display impeccable clairvoyance: they specify the exact duration of time, mostly in months and some even in days, required for an individual in order to become successful. Nonetheless, coaching institutions have managed to become industry in its own right and they continue to attract students at ever increasing rate.

'Coaching' is a broad and vague conceptual category. In literal terms, coaching signifies a process of training geared towards attainment of specific objectives. Based on this meaning, variety of activities would qualify as coaching, for instance, the practice of adhering to the dietary and physical instructions of an instructor in a gym or learning the technicalities of a sport, as a routine over a period of time, under the guidance of an instructor. One of the implications of this meaning is that it is oriented towards developing or enhancing certain attribute, skill or capacity of an individual.

However, this paper is concerned with specific category of coaching, one that pertains to the field of education. Consequently, it intends to explore the bearings of 'coaching' in various fields which are either directly or indirectly related to education, for example employment provided by the state. Along with the objective of exploring the political economy of 'coaching industry', I also intend to explore the sociological implications of the same. Broadly speaking, this paper is an attempt to highlight some of the sociological causes and consequences of coaching in India. My research questions were:

- Why and how coaching became an industry?
- Does coaching reinforce inequality at the social level?

Within the field of education, coaching institutions can be classified into two categories: one is 'Entrance Preparatory coaching' – that provides coaching to secure admissions in various Universities and colleges, and the other is 'Job Preparatory coaching' – that provides coaching to secure employment in the Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs)/bureaucracy. Interestingly, the former is a recent phenomenon (not more than two decades old), while latter is relatively an older one (at least four to five decades old).

The first research question implicitly seeks to situate education in the debates over commodification of public goods. Education, as Freire would suggest, is the most powerful

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tool for overcoming exploitation. In any case, education is the most effective tool for social justice. The issue that arises then is the distribution of educational opportunities among different sections of society. However, state expenditure on education has been decreasing over the years, from 80% in 1983 to 67% in 1999 (Kapur and Mehta 2007). The onslaught of neo-liberalism has rendered education as privilege for the few. There has been rise in the number of private engineering and medical colleges. In engineering, from accounting for 15% of total seats in 1960, private engineering college accounted for 86.4% in 2003. In the same period, corresponding figures for private medical college rose from 6.8 to 40.9% (ibid). It is important to analyze the proliferation of coaching institution against this background, keeping in mind the importance of the year 1991 which heralded neo-liberalism in full scale.

The other useful way to look at it might be Marcuse's concept of '*technological rationality*'. In other words, the logic of competition has pervaded individual's psyche to such an extent that one willingly becomes cog in the wheel. In a way, individuals voluntarily submit to the diktats of competition in order to devour it.

However, it is pertinent to keep in mind the fact that government employment accounts for only eight per cent of formal jobs (Economic Survey 2014-15), and prestigious technical and management institutions like IITs and IIMs account for one per cent of seats in their respective field (AICTE). The obvious question arises: how can coaching industry be viable faced with such scarce opportunity? The answer lies in its capacity to sell dreams. In other words, what coaching industry does is nothing but capitalizing *aspiration* – aspiration of future secured in socio-economic terms. The end of coaching institutions – enabling admission in universities or enabling to secure jobs, has been perennially tied up with notions of status and privileges and hence it spurs aspiration on a scale which could be capitalized.

Field and Orientation

In terms of geographical site of study, Mukherjee Nagar, Guru TegBahadur Nagar in North Delhi and Munirka and Katwaria Sarai in South-West Delhi were the sites of study. The obvious reason for choosing these specific areas is the preponderance and underlying density of coaching institutions in and around these areas. Through systematic observation of the area and some informal interactions with residents, I came to understand some of the complexities which couldn't be captured through survey. There is a very sound reason for categorizing coaching as industry. There is a huge number (tens of thousands) of outstation students who reside in Delhi with the sole purpose of attending coaching classes. There arise several issues attendant to the clustering of outstation students: accommodation (house on rent), food (mess system/dhabas), domestic help (cook/maid), cybercafés, photocopy shops and so on and so forth. The reason I have enlisted these aspects is that in totality they constitute a network which hinges on the core that is coaching classes.

The aspiration either to secure a government job or to get admitted in top notch colleges is so strong (which is impaired by lack of proper functioning educational apparatus) that coaching institutions become the indispensable link in the chain. However, there remains the issue of affordability and hence there results concomitant

exclusion. This is wherein theoretical field and my theoretical orientation have bearing on the study. My perspective is rooted in Neo-Marxism and post-structuralism. In other words, I intend to examine that how coaching reinforces structures of inequality, and in the process, how it carves for itself a distinct authority in the knowledge industry in the sense that though it presents itself as non-coercive, yet claims to be indispensable for the attainment of success.

Method

This study is comprised of two parts: one deal with the coached student and the other pertains to the coaching institutions.

For Students

Research Design – Survey

Survey was done amongst the coached students. The sample size of the study was 100. Sample was selected through non probability method. I would like to point out here that specific coaching institution was selected through probability technique. However, within the selected coaching, students were selected through the technique of incidental sampling. Clustering was done according to the type of coaching – some institutions provided coaching for civil services examinations, while others provided for clerical jobs (Grade 2, 3, 4 – Staff selection Commission, Bank PO, Sub Inspector etc). Similarly, some provided coaching for entrance examinations of IITs, IIMs, medical colleges like AIIMS, A.F.M.C while others did for exams like GATE – the required eligibility for pursuing M.Tech in IITs or securing technical jobs in PSUs like BHEL, ONGC etc.

Data were collected through the survey instrument of Questionnaire.

For Coaching Institutions

Sample Size – 30. Coaching institutions were selected through clustering technique of non-probability sampling.

In this case, one of my objectives was to ascertain the year of establishment of such institutions. I obtained the required information (mostly) through websites of various coaching institutions. Some information like class size, duration of class and their timings, recruitment of teachers, preparing study material etc. were gathered through interview. I would like to mention here that such interviews could be conducted only for three coaching institutions.

In addition, advertising hoardings of coaching institutions, their brochures and were also used as source of data.

Research Findings and Analysis

The hypothesis of the study is that coaching institutions reinforces the existing structures of inequality. This study was confined to aspects of class and caste.

Notwithstanding the ambiguity surrounding the definition of middle class in India, approximately all of the respondents belonged to category of middle class. This doesn't imply that all the respondents were from the same income group, rather they were marked by some difference. However, the lowest amount of a household cited by the respondent in this survey was a monthly income of Rs. 23,000/month, which clearly illustrates that all of them belonged to middle class. Some respondents were found to be working on a part time

basis (mostly private tuition) to meet their expenditure needs. This corroborates the observation that the system of coaching favours those having monetary resources. To the extent that coaching augments the chances of qualifying an exam, it can be safely argued that it reproduces as well as reinforces inequality. The poor who can't even afford basic education automatically gets excluded and thus they are doubly disadvantaged.

The pattern of level of educational qualification amongst the preceding generation of the respondents presents an interesting picture. In case of civil service aspirants, 63% were second generation learners while the corresponding figure for first and third or more generation learners is 18% and 19% respectively.

In terms of caste, of 82% of second and third or more generation learners, 57% were from general category, 34% from OBC and 9% from SC/ST category. Only two respondents among the civil services aspirants were Muslim. In case of jobs through SSC, for Bank PO and other similar jobs, 73% were second generation learners and the rest were first generation learners. However, the highest educational qualification achieved by preceding generation was higher secondary for 38%, graduation for 33% and matriculation for 29%. In terms of caste, general- 40%, OBC- 43% and SC/ST – 17%. There is a variation with regard to highest educational qualification compared to civil service aspirants. In that case, highest degree in the preceding generation were: Graduation - 58%, Post-Graduation – 29%, higher secondary – 13%. In case of students preparing for GATE – figures for second and third or more generational learners are 74% and 26% respectively. In terms of caste the figures are: general – 79%, OBC- 17%, SC/ST – 4%. The data obtained from the survey does illustrate the convergence of caste, class and cultural capital at the top of the hierarchy. If one were to reflect on the intersectionality of generation of learners, highest educational qualification among preceding generation and caste, it becomes quite clear that upper caste and to an extent upper/middle class enjoys the advantages offered through the system of coaching. I think Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' helps to elucidate the above findings. It is the upper caste who has been accessing educational apparatus and thus its major beneficiary. To the extent that there is a convergence of caste and class at the top or bottom of the hierarchy, they can be regarded as possessing the required set of strategies and skills to convert their acquired knowledge into permanent resources.

In case of coaching institutions, there is preponderance of upper caste which attests to the foregone argument.

From a different but relevant perspective, the phenomenon of coaching can be analyzed through Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatus. The coaching industry is an offshoot of educational apparatus. The discrepancies and inconsistencies in the curricula at various levels, for instance higher secondary and entrance exams of IITs and AIIMS create opportunities for coaching institutions to arise in order to exploit the curricular gap. These coaching institutions, once established continue to expand in scope and number and they reach a point where they become indispensable for attainment of certain goals. However, whatever be the level of indispensability, it is so only for a select section of the society, for rest it is simply a question of affordability which inevitably renders them disadvantageous.

At another level, I think system of coaching reifies the logic of competition and muzzles creativity. Somehow, coaching institutions seem to get hold of the secret to qualify various examinations. What follows is mere prescription of formula. As Krishna Kumar puts it, s/he need not be the most creative to qualify certain exams; rather s/he must be adept at reproducing the certain codes or formula which in turn mechanizes the process of education (Kumar 2005).

Experience in the Field

My experience pertains primarily to two aspects. One is the disillusionment with the privilege that I subjectively used to feel as a research scholar. I had my set of strategies and notions for eliciting 'information' from the respondents.

Despite being vaguely of the debates on subjectivity, objectivity, inter subjectivity, self-reflexivity etc, I stepped into the field with the positivistic zeal that I would discover the 'causality' of certain things, but this wasn't to be the case and fortunately so. I realized it, subjectively, that there was nothing waiting for me to be discovered. I just happened to be there because of my position of research student. Whatever, I have concluded isn't a path breaking revelation, its mere confirmation of what many amongst my respondents knew with utmost clarity. I realized that the dichotomy of subject and object is a concocted invention.

The other important aspect was the opening of horizon. I had my research questions and appropriate method outlined with utmost clarity in advance. However, the moment I 'entered' the field, the visuals that I encountered created a lasting impression. At the formative stage of this study, I had not thought about the aspect of advertising and strategies of representation. However, as I looked in different directions, I was amazed with sheer preponderance. I realized that 'marketing' is one of the most important aspects of coaching industry. There's a whole range of tactical means by which these institutions keep on expanding. However, I haven't included those in my study.

One of the most important experiences has been coming to terms with the limitation of the intended study. I realized that conclusions derived from this study would have been more authentic, reliable and having much more validity, if I would have extended the study to include those people who have qualified an exam after being coached. Had I been able to contact fifty or sixty such individuals, I would have been able to reliably conclude that system of coaching structures the distribution of advantages in a way that favours few while discriminate against others. I also observed that gender is also one of the categories around which inequality is structured, however, my study hasn't dealt with the aspect of gender at all. I might justify the omission citing the limitation of time but I realize this has more to do with my subjective bias and priorities than viability. On the whole, I can safely say that my understanding of the phenomenon has improved.

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