Key Contexts for Education and Democracy in Globalising Societies

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Abstract. The urban poor in India, aware of the significance of and their lack of cultural capital, invest in education and accumulation of credentials as a strategy to succeed in the changing labour market. The paper based on research on the alumni of government schools discusses the agency of the poor in compensating for this deficiency and shows that their strategies are inadequate to overcome the structural inequalities that reproduce social order. Globalisation promises possibilities of building cultural resources by expanding education but hides the 'impossibility' of converting these into economic resources for the poor.

Introduction

A large section of the poor in India is unable to access or complete elementary education (8 years of schooling), despite a constitutional guarantee. Studies show that this is due to a complex set of poverty induced and school related factors (Probe 1999). Yet the poor make enormous efforts to educate their wards as they see education as having several short term as well as long term returns such as insurance against poverty, means to overcome social exclusion and discrimination and enhancing general social status. The tremendous faith placed on education is due to several factors: the linking of jobs with educational credentials, the experience of lower castes in improving their social and economic status through education, and the state supported rhetoric on development through education. The growing demand for schooling in India is evident from the growth of secondary and higher secondary schools in the last few decades. In the last decade alone, more than 37 thousand secondary and higher secondary schools were opened [Mehta, 2003]. The Secondary School Certificate (SSC) at the end of 10 years of schooling is much coveted by the poor and they invest everything possible to obtain this certification.

While much of the educational research has focussed on issues of access and retention, there is virtually no research on students from poor families who complete ten years of schooling. This paper discusses the educational and employment career trajectories of such students in the metropolitan city of Mumbai in India in the context of globalisation and receding state support for
The paper reports preliminary findings from a recently concluded study of the alumni of government schools in the city.

**Theoretical background**

The human capital theorists and international agencies such as the World Bank argue that education increases human capital which in turn holds the key to development, an argument promoted for poverty alleviation in most southern countries [World Bank 1998]. Evidence for this argument has been inconsistent and weak [Self and Grabowski, 2004]. While education may enhance an individual's earning potential, it is the quantum and quality of education that will determine the entry into jobs in the higher income brackets. Further, the quantum and quality are determined by the class, caste, ethnic and gender backgrounds of the students especially in societies where the educational system is stratified in a manner that corresponds to the social strata.

As Collins argued, even though education may not be relevant to the skills that specific jobs require, jobs and credentials are artificially linked to ensure jobs for the higher economic classes [Collins 1979]. This ultimately leads to a situation of 'credential inflation' wherein education becomes costly and at the same time the returns from given levels of credentials decline. By expanding credential systems of education and inflating the job requirements social mobility for the poor is thwarted leading to the reproduction of the social order at higher levels of education.

What structures and mechanisms ensure that the poor investing in education end up with low paying jobs? Willis [1993] locates his explanation in the working class culture and in the resistance of working class youth in rejecting the alienating educational system and its rewards. The concepts of cultural capital and habitus advanced by Bourdieu provide some insights into how cultural differences reproduce social order through the educational system [Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, Bourdieu, 1985]. Cultural capital represents an array of non-economic assets such as family background, social class, commitment to education, investments in education, i.e., cultural practices and dispositions a person acquires, that influences academic success. Bourdieu distinguishes three forms of capital: as embodied in the individual (what they know and can do, as a type of habitus), as objectified in cultural goods such as books, paintings, machines etc. which can be appropriated for material or symbolic benefits, and thirdly, capital institutionalised as academic degrees [Bourdieu 1973, 1990].

The paper draws upon these theoretical insights critically to understand the influence of culture on educational outcomes and consequences. The paper explores the agency of the poor in compensating for the lack of cultural capital, and the extent to which the force of cultural capital is implicitly recognised,
especially in a rapidly changing and globalising metropolitan context. The paper argues that the compensating strategies evolved by the urban poor may be inadequate to overcome the structural inequalities that reproduce social order.

The study

A study was conducted among 576 alumni of government municipal schools in Mumbai in the year 2003. There were about equal number of men and women in the sample and were of age 19-22 years. Their entire schooling was in the city as they grew up here. Some are first generation literate (11%) while most are second generation literate. More than 80 percent had illiterate grandparents and fathers with primary education. Mothers were generally illiterate and worked only at home. In most instances, the fathers had migrated to the city in search of a job. The sample included Hindus (61%), Muslims (23.8%) and Buddhists (13.4%). More than half the students belonged to lower castes. The average monthly family income was around Rs. 5000/- (US$ 105) and they lived in slums or low income chawls. The fathers were employed as semi-skilled or unskilled labour except for a few who were currently unemployed.

There is a hierarchy of educational facilities in Mumbai city that range from exclusive elite schools to cramped poor quality schools. They include private and government schools, and government supported private schools. The demand for and quality of school vary and the most preferred are the private English medium schools. The government secondary schools are in a state of neglect. The government's focus on primary education, the privatisation of post primary education and the receding welfare role of the state have contributed to this neglect. The declining number of government secondary schools in the city makes secondary schooling almost inaccessible to the urban poor. The neglect of secondary schools by the state and their devaluation by the elite, have also resulted in the decline in the quality of education in these schools'. While the state supported the expansion of private English schools through grants, it took no initiative to open English medium schools for the poor. Thus the government vernacular schools have become a residual category of schools in the city - meant for and availed by the lowest rung of the urban poor.

Crossing the first hurdle: the SSC examination

The performance at the SSC examination, the first high stakes examination at the end of ten years of schooling, determines students' chances of higher education as well as the choice of course of study (arts, science etc.). This is the first level of filtering and there is tremendous pressure on the students not just to

' The pass percentage in the municipal schools is only 35 to 45 %
pass but to perform well. To ensure success and higher marks, students invest in supplementary coaching provided by private coaching institutions that run parallel to the regular schools. Once again there is a hierarchy of coaching centres that vary widely in terms of cost and quality. The perceived necessity of coaching has some basis in reality because the examination system is structured in a manner that provides advantage to those who avail such services.

It is therefore not surprising to find that fifty per cent (288) of the students in our study sample (576) failed in their first attempt at the SSC exam. Of these failed students, an overwhelming majority failed in Mathematics (80%) and English language (70%) followed by Science (27.5%). About 32% failed in one subject, 45% in two subjects, 16% in three subjects and the remaining 7% in four or more subjects. About 60% (171) eventually dropped out with 79 of them passing in subsequent attempts. In all, 362 students (62.8%) of the sample passed the SSC exam.

Mathematics and English considered 'the most difficult subjects' by the students caused maximum failure. The poor quality of classroom teaching, the low quality coaching purchased in the market combined with psychological barriers, and the fact of belonging to families and neighbourhoods inherently lacking in the resources of habitus and cultural capital result in the low academic performance in these two subjects. The students rarely failed in their mother tongue or languages that they are familiar with. Although Hindi is the mother tongue of only a few students, failure in it is low due to wider exposure through movies and television programmes. Even in a metropolitan context, these students have little direct exposure to English unlike the middle class students. Knowledge of English is an embodied form of capital that enhances one's experiences and self-confidence in a globalising city. These young people are acutely aware of the symbolic and material worth of 'knowing English': some showed disappointment at their inability to speak English, others showed resentment against their schools for their neglect in teaching English. As one of the young men said, 7/7 could speak English I could have done well. I would have got a job by now'. There is some justification for the feeling of deprivation and the resentment against the state for its neglect of English education for the poor. While the state actively supported the expansion of private English medium schools that catered to the middle and upper classes, it neither started English medium schools nor paid sufficient attention to the teaching of English in government schools.

The families of some of the students made investments, often disproportionate to their income, in order to compensate for what they understand as a double disadvantage: the general lack of learning opportunities within their families and social networks (a form of embodied capital and habitus) and the state's neglect of their schooling, which deprives them of the credentials (the institutionalised capital). While half of the students (52.4%) in the study could not afford the cost of supplementary coaching through private
tuitions, of the remaining more than 80% sought coaching in English and nearly 87% for Mathematics. A third had invested in private tuition for all the subjects. The meagre resources of the families do not allow them to make repeated investments for their wards and hence students who failed in their first attempt did not seek additional coaching.

The investments in private tuitions show that they are able to avail only low quality coaching. Even this is huge when compared with their average family monthly income of less than Rs. 5000 (Table 1). The fees paid are relatively low compared to the general market rates, which range between Rs. 5000 to Rs.7000 per subject.

Table 1. Payments made for tuitions and coaching classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>No. of Students</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than Rs. 100</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rs. 101 - Rs. 1000</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rs. 1001 - Rs. 2000</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rs. 2001 - Rs. 3000</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rs. 3001 - Rs. 4000</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rs. 4001 - Rs. 5000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rs. 5001 and above</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Higher education: dropping out of their dreams

The desire for higher education is evident from the fact that out of the 362 students who finally passed the SSC exam, 79% enrolled for higher secondary education and 38% (139) were still pursuing higher education at the time of the study. Those who succeeded at the higher secondary level enrolled for further education (Table 2). Others dropped out at different stages.

Table 2. Tracks pursued in higher education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Track</th>
<th>No. of students</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B.com</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.A</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.Sc.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.E. (engg.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITI</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer degrees</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various Diplomas</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students who pursue higher education show a preference for the commerce track (45%). Interviews with students reveal that this choice is carefully made and reflects a strategy to optimise resources and to maximise potential returns. Pursuing a degree in science is costly and needs to be supplemented with additional qualifications before one can find a job. It is also perceived to be a demanding course academically and hence requiring supplementary coaching further escalating the overall costs. A degree in Arts is more within their means but is generally perceived as having no market value. In contrast, a degree in Commerce is seen as having immediate market value and is the most optimal in terms of cost and time. Low marks in the terminal and qualifying examinations and their lack of economic resources to purchase paid seats put the various professional courses (medical, engineering, management etc.) offered by the private institutions out of their reach. Thus the poor students' dream of higher education is limited to a degree in Commerce or Arts.

An awareness that their education, and the degrees that they earn, have low value in the labour market coupled with a firm belief that jobs are linked to credentials force the students to accumulate whatever additional certification that they can. Almost half of them (47.8%) have collected certification of some sort. Men have chosen short-term courses in computers, garage repairs, electrical and electronic repairs, driving, and typing. Women have chosen courses in tailoring, typing, beautician, and computers. Almost all of them have paid a fee for the course. Many of these courses are of poor quality and at best lead to low levels of skill development. For instance the computer courses are in word processing and the beautician's course imparts some very preliminary skills. There exists a huge certification market that addresses the demand for such low quality credential accumulation.

Credential accumulation and the job market

The experience of these young people supports Collins' argument that association of education and credentials to the job market is arbitrary. Only about 32% (185) of them have been employed at least once so far, mostly in short-term jobs or piece-work often unrelated to their qualifications. They include part-time clerical jobs, data entry, office assistant, sales, delivery boy, tailoring and embroidery etc. They are low paying temporary jobs. Except for a few who were employed in such jobs at the time of the study, others were in search of a job. Almost all of them expect the job situation to worsen in future.

The realisation of the bankruptcy of their credentials and the need to fall back on their social network resources such as caste and community ties to secure even a temporary job, at the end of a long struggle and investments, have made some of the respondents disillusioned. Others continue to place their hope in the credential system and turn the blame onto themselves for being
unsuccessful in the labour market. They attribute their inability to find jobs to their low levels of education, lack of work experience or skills and to not possessing adequate social capital such as having 'connections' or 'contacts'. Inadequate or no knowledge of English is another important reason. Thus, they are acutely aware of what is required to succeed in the labour market and that their education and skills are inadequate to compete with the more privileged classes.

The study found that previously, lower educational levels promised more secure jobs than at present. The fathers of the respondents with primary or secondary schooling were able to find a better job than what their high school or college educated children are struggling to find. The tremendous faith in education and its potential for jobs comes from the experiences of the earlier generation for whom basic literacy or primary education made a vast difference in terms of not only securing a job, even a lower level government job, but also overcoming partially the stigma of untouchability [Wankhede 1999]. These experiences and the unprecedented mobility of the middle classes, apparently due to credential accumulation, further the expectations and aspirations of the poor.

Thus the investments in education and credential accumulation are driven by a general belief that these expand their employment opportunities and enhance their social status. The combined effect of these pressures and actions is that the urban poor pay for the supply of surplus low-skilled labour needed for a globalising economy. Further, through the investments in coaching and the certificates the urban poor contribute towards the growth of a private credential market.

To conclude, the urban poor is aware of their lack of cultural capital and the unequal social arrangement that prevents them from accumulating this resource. Yet, unlike Willis' [1993] working class youth whose strategy was resistance, a significant section of them have evolved a strategy of compliance, by collecting credentials. They are aware of the inherently poor quality of their education, of what is lacking about their habitus and that their credentials may not improve their bargaining power in the job market. The efforts to combat poverty through credential accumulation do not succeed as the skills gathered are of inferior quality and are unable to meet the demands of a competitive global market. The changing educational scenario and the market mechanisms operate in a manner that reproduces existing patterns of inequality. While globalisation promises the possibility of building social and cultural resources through varied educational opportunities, it hides the near impossibility of converting these into economic resources especially for the urban poor.
References