

Dynamics of Choice and Inequality in Higher Education: A Grounded Theory Exploration with Young People

Brajesh Kumar,

Department of Sociology, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow

Abstract

Over two and a half decades of economic reforms in India brought everything to the market, and education is no exception. A privatizing educational industry links such arguments to conceptions of education as a commodity rather than a public good. It has produced a fresh form of inequality in higher education. A grounded theory approach was used to develop a theme of the dynamics of choice and inequalities among young people in higher education in metropolitan Delhi. The proliferation of private educational institutions offering technical and management courses gives opportunities to those youth who cannot seek admission to reputed educational institutions of their choice. Further, better access to higher education does not guarantee quality and equality. The false claim made by the educational market augments the challenges for young people in higher education. They pick higher education in various ways, arbitrated by parental support, social capital and self-efficacy.

Keywords: Choice; higher education; inequality; privatization; youth.

Introduction

Education has a pronounced bearing on young people's lives. It is a foremost agent of socialization during formative years of life and a key instrument for cultivating their impending prospect of work. Education is the historical basis of youth construction; the notion of youth develops as a consequence of the development of education systems (Musgrove, 1964). Schooling and education aid in developing young people's skills for employment. Due to massification, growing youth from diverse social groups enter the higher education system. Today, the significance of learning in higher education has gained momentum. The affirmative association between enhanced education and greater economic yields is partly proved by the reasonably faster developing South Asian nations (Chakrabarti, 2009). The government has expanded higher education. There is a resilient supporter for economic reforms by the government with more involvement of the market and a more prominent role of the private sector to stimulate and sustain development. An essential step in this direction is the privatization of education which has led to a new state of affairs in higher education.

Background and Objectives

With the marketization of education, the desire to acquire education remains the same, but the motives to attain a degree have changed entirely. Education is well-maintained as goods in the liberalized economy. Because of the shift in the occupational

structure and evolution of the service sector, the demand for less skilled work has diminished. The need for a new capable labour force has developed. Young people are postponing their entrance into the labour market by stretching their education to make themselves proficient in the new economy. Several private educational institutions have been set up in Delhi.

Massification of higher education (Trow, 1974; Scott, 1995; Lee, 2016) is a worldwide process. Young people now give more importance to higher educational qualifications. A university degree is perceived as a noteworthy improvement for their situation of admittance into the labour market. However, it is not the solitary determinant of employability. It is one of the critical indicators of their impending employability.

Educational institutions are proposing several market-oriented courses to cater to the student's needs, thereby enhancing the choice base of courses for the students. The young people look for entry into higher educational institutes to acquire a degree to lead in the job market. The persistent inequality in the academic and economic accomplishment of citizens of different social and economic backgrounds is undoubtedly one of the thorny challenges today with profound social implications (St. John, 2003). Even though education has expanded remarkably and reached every individual, it is accessible differentially by young people. Further, despite getting a suitable degree from expanding educational market, young people are not making a smooth transition to work-life. That has resulted in 'credential inflation' (Collins, 1979). The higher education market has become the cradles of the production and reproduction of inequality in the new economy. This paper examines the dynamics of choice and inequality among youth in higher education in metropolitan Delhi.

Methodology

The research strategy is primarily qualitative. It aims at producing an in-depth examination of the topic. Twenty-six young people were subjected to an in-depth interview to collect data. The fieldwork was carried out in Delhi for three months, from February 2012 to May 2012. All the young people subjected to in-depth interviews were between 18 to 26 years. In a way, these young people were 'liberalization's children' (Lukose, 2010). They were born around the same time the Indian government started economic reforms in 1991. The economic and social transformation of the last twenty-two years before fieldwork was common to all of them. The raw data provided by the respondents were analyzed in the context so that the portrayal of the case and evolving themes are related to the explicit events and circumstances (Creswell & Maitta, 2002). All the interviews were transcribed, and texts were read and reread in search of themes and sub-themes. Finally, the theme was developed from the description of narratives given by the respondents. The developed theme was taken back to a few respondents to validate the findings.

Findings and Discussion

The population bulge of young people, migration to urban centres and the requisite of novel abilities for the labour market have ensued greater than before demand for higher educational credentials. Lee (2016) also argued that growing social demand results in the

fast expansion of higher education in several countries. Empirical observation in metropolitan Delhi also points in this direction. In an interview, 19-year-old female respondents belonging to a middle SES said:

It is undoubtedly worth doing graduation to make you more suitable for employment. You may not rise beyond some stage if you do not have a college degree. That is why I applied for a university degree and pursuing a B.A. [Bachelor of Arts] in social sciences.

Employability is fundamental today, and individuals falsely believe that a university degree is a testament to this. Opening up private educational institutes cater to the necessities of the diversity of youth. Higher education is no further elite creativity as many young people from middle and lower SES have access to it. To a question 20-year-old male respondent said:

Several graduates work in KFC, McDonald or big malls, earning little money. But I am sure it [university degree] will help me later. It will give me a cutting edge over non-graduate. That is why I am here.

This type of reasoning is ubiquitous. However, some youth from low-income families fail to go to university for various reasons. One 18-year-old respondent from a low-income family said:

Everybody should go for a college education. It is good. Still, I feel it is better to go to work than spend three or four years acquiring a university degree. I think that even after having a university degree, I will have to search for a job, and many people are doing this. And it also requires a lot of money for a college education. So why waste time and money and not go into the world of work today itself?

Everyone desires higher education; however, spending money on getting a higher degree is impossible for the poor. The typical cost of higher education is swelling substantially in private institutes. Only about two to three per cent of students avail of education loans compared to 85 per cent and 77 per cent in the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively (Agarwal, 2006). The privatizing education industry is manoeuvring the needs of potential aspirants out of the wave of massification of higher education. Low-cost private educational institutes have sprouted in Delhi. So there is a likelihood that low-income families will also contribute to the massification of higher education in the coming days, and we will witness a new kind of inequality in higher education.

Dynamics of choice

Each year lakhs of young people qualifying for class XII (higher secondary) examinations are uncertain and anxious about what will happen. Only a few schoolchildren get admission to a reputed institution of their choice. These institutes' engineering, medical, and other academic programmes are complicated for most young people to reach.

Some government institutions like IITs, AIIMS, Delhi University and its affiliated colleges are the first choice for school leavers.

Getting admitted to such institutes is like a dream for numerous young people. The race to get into these institutes is a hard-hitting job. A minimal number of school leavers who appear for the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) pull through to the closing list of selected applicants. Further, getting a high rank is vital because the best position gives the candidate a choice to cherry-pick the campus and branch/ major of their choice. Even bright students view that risk factors are high for entry into such institutes. So the young people start groundwork very early. By fifteen, most young people join coaching programmes to prepare for the entrance exam. Parents also enthusiastically back their children in this pursuit. Parental involvement, which refers to the frequency of parent-child interaction, becomes an important indicator that influences the child's success (Singh et al., 1995; Steinberg et al., 1992). Parental involvement melodramatically diminishes the challenges for young people for academic attainment. A Bachelor of Technology (B.Tech.) student of IIT, Delhi, said:

I used to wake up early at 04:00 am during classes eleven and twelve. From 4:00 am to 7:00 am, I prepared for the JEE mains and advance and then attended regular school from 7:30 am. My mother was always around me, caring for my needs and giving me a cup of tea in the morning. My father also sat with me in the evening, discussing my studies and motivating me. He promised to buy a bike for me if I clear JEE advance. He used to drop me in for coaching classes in the evening. I never missed the coaching classes, taking mock tests and practising previous year's papers. I truly worked hard to crack JEE advance. I am happy now; my dream to go abroad and earn handsome money will come true.

Entry into such elite institutions not only inculcates a sense of self-confidence but also makes them popular among neighbours and the community. Most aspirants fail to get admission in engineering or medical courses offered in IITs, AIIMS or other reputed institutes. They answer back by looking for access to private engineering or medical institutions. The mockery is that the price of learning from private colleges is swelling without developing the quality of education. Three types of private colleges are - unrecognized but mediocre private colleges recognized but pitiable private colleges, and unrecognized private colleges. A respondent from a recognized but the mediocre private college said:

I am not good at Mathematics. Even then, my parents pressured me to appear in the entrance exam for admission to IITs. Because I could not access IIT, I preferred to get admission here.

Another respondent from the same college alleged:

My father is a multinational company general manager and earns a handsome salary. I don't bother about studies. Don't you know there is no connection between what is taught in class and what is required in Industries? I only need a degree that would be sufficient for me to obtain an excellent job through the contacts my father has developed with people in industries. This place is perfect for me, I think.

The private institutes attract students by assuring them of campus placements. Thousands of students enrol themselves in diverse degree programmes or diploma or certificate programmes floated by institutes which claim cent per cent placements with eye-catching packages. Deceived by the lofty claims, young people do not crosscheck for the genuineness of the claim made by the institute. A respondent from a recognized but the pitiable private college said:

The management course from this college promised me a job through campus placement. My parents were also enthusiastic about the assured job. This year only three campus interviews were organized, and only seven students were selected out of the strength of about 160. The packages offered were also not good. Now I find myself nowhere.

Education has to become a product in the marketplace; many institutes have burst out floating attractive courses. Young people often overlook whether the institute is recognized or not to obtain a specific credential that would give them an advantage over others in the labour market. Parents and students are sometimes unaware that private institutes cannot award degrees independently, be it management, engineering or other credentials. A graduate from an unrecognized private institute said:

I curse the institute for false promises made. They charged an exorbitant fee. Ex-students are appointed as faculty; it has damaged my career and life.

Most young people who fail to enter professional courses join conventional humanities, social sciences, science, or commerce programmes. Except for some of the leading colleges, most of the colleges in Delhi are below average. Students make a beeline to admission in these handfuls of leading colleges of the University of Delhi. The bulge in the youth population, increasing educational ambitions, and commodification of education are the fundamental causes for intense competition in search of admittance to even conventional courses offered by Delhi University. Forget professional courses; even those who score as high as 95 per cent in the higher secondary examination cannot be assured of entering these conventional courses in the top colleges of Delhi University. Many students compromise and switch to another stream but settle down with these leading institutes. A student of a women's college said:

I scored 89 per cent in class 12, but I could not get admission to B.A. (Honours) in Economics in the college of my preference. My

parents, friends and neighbours advised me to pursue graduation in English. After all, it will add to my soft skills, which are very important in getting a job. Finally, I took admission B.A. (Honours) in English. Further, I joined an add-on course in Advertising and Marketing Communication to refine my curriculum vitae to reflect additional skills. These add-on courses are run with industry collaboration and give good exposure. I do not regret not getting admission to Economics.

The University of Delhi claims that it offers equal opportunity to everyone irrespective of caste, class, religion and gender. However, the locale of the high-status and leading colleges is dominated by upper-middle class culture. New entrants from subordinate social class positions feel trouble adjusting to such a milieu.

Young people's understanding of the structure of higher education is crucial for deciding the institution of their choice and their course of study. Selecting amongst hundreds of institutions and thousands of courses is itself a massive task for young people in Delhi. The importance of institutions is determined mainly by the reputation of the institution. A fresher at Miranda House said:

Students here look utterly different from people like me. I find myself alone when I am among them. I feel looser.

Ball et al. (2002) have divided young people into two categories according to their understanding of the choice of course and educational institution. These two categories are 'embedded choosers' and 'contingent choosers'. 'Embedded choosers' are conscious of the peculiarities of the institutions. They have the vast social capital to use in their favour. Their parents are well educated, and they get proper guidance from childhood. Such youth are generally from upper SES. Their network ties help them to inquire about the credibility of educational institutions and courses offered and their prospects in the labour market. If the 'embedded choosers' fail to get admission to the institution of their choice, they prefer to stick to the course of their choice. They think that it is ultimately the course that is important. They adopt a more cool response with the view that, ultimately, they will be able to establish their curriculum vitae so that the university's reputation does not come into the picture. Still, youth among 'embedded choosers' compromise with the choice of their course but not with the choice of their institution. Young people generally apply for more than one course at Delhi University. If they miss their first choice, they opt for the second. Simultaneously they join add-on courses to strengthen their curriculum vitae. Delhi University has introduced add-on courses run with industry collaboration and give a good exposure. Whatever the means of achieving educational credentials among 'embedded choosers', they finally acquire good skills to direct their transition to work life.

On the other hand, there are 'contingent choosers' who fail to reference educational institutions' reputations. Such youth, usually from lower SES, also inherit lower social capital. Their parents or family do not have experience in higher education. They perceive all educational institutes as homogeneous and exclusive ivory towers (Pugsley, 1998). For them, pursuing higher education itself is a gigantic thing to do. They have little knowledge

of status differences among different educational institutions. Some others know the status of various institutions, but they anticipate in the very beginning that reputed institutions are not for people like them. They perhaps hesitate to go to reputable institutions, thinking it is for elites only. They feel looser when they are among students from these reputed institutions. So they hesitate to be at a university with students from the elite class.

Young people's SES is critical in examining the close association between educational hopes and outcomes. Young people's SES is an essential determinant of decision-making about the choice of education. It is like a 'class matching' (Reay et al., 2001) process where certain kinds of institutions are understood as not made for them. Most young people are applying for institutions where they find themselves at low risk and find it easy to mix with other students from a similar background.

There is some youth from lower SES who act on their reflexive power. They overcome the bewildering mixture of expectation, wishes, appreciation and uncertainties and the idea of 'demonized' schools (Reay, 2004). Their agency helps them to develop an important logic of the significance of the educational institution and their market position. They also establish some contacts throughout their higher secondary education. This social network development helps them choose the right institution with good market value.

Choices regarding higher education are administered by what it is 'reasonable to expect' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Some youth have a particular university or college where they want to study. The importance of choosing an educational institution where one feels harmless, safe and joyful raises the concern of risk about their choice. Some from lower SES or minority communities prefer colleges or universities where they find students from various ethnic groups. They will discover academically good peers if they are from the privileged section. One can witness more awareness among youth around cultural mix and extra reflexivity by social class position. A respected university's conception is racialized and classed (Reay et al., 2001). Working class family life fosters the development of restricted codes (Bernstein, 1977), which further translate into the educational vulnerability of poor youth. Since speech is an essential medium of communication and learning, educational attainment may be related to differences in speech patterns. In general, youth from low-income families are limited to restricted codes. They have an inbuilt barrier to learning in school and colleges. Their style departs from that of the youth from upper SES. Teachers also adopt an elite pedagogy, much to the disadvantage of lower SES youth who fail to grasp the meanings embedded in the teacher's grammar and accent.

Regarding the choice of the higher education stream, it is revealed that more females join the Humanities and Social Science stream than their male counterparts. For streams like Science, Commerce, Engineering and professional courses, there is a gender bias in favour of males. The difference and inequality that emerge during primary education continue into secondary and university education. Distance education seems to be a supporting measure to give a second chance to those who do not get the desired education. More and more young people are pursuing higher education through distance mode. Many young people cannot acquire adequate basic skills even after university

education. The employability levels of most of these youth are too low regardless of their higher educational levels. It restricts their effective participation in the global market economy. Inequality is embedded in the pattern of choice in higher education.

Responding to Inequality in Higher Education

Their education level and soft skills influence youth achievement in the job market. In the global market economy, the economic costs of not procuring a higher degree are perceived as more significant. Some young people from lower SES have high expectations and come up with the expectations using their agency. These youth would have been unlikely to pursue a university education as recently as a decade ago. They break class-based obstacles that obstruct their achievement. These youth react to the structural challenge differently from others who give in to the class structure. Their narratives are archetypal and give attention to class-based discrimination. They seek help from counsellors, which positively affects their education and career. The help-seeking approach of these young people provides a clear picture of gaining proper knowledge. They also interact with peers from upper socioeconomic status and teachers. Although most of them fall short of parental involvement, they mobilize enough support from acquaintances and peers. They know that interaction outside the classroom is as important as classroom interaction as it favours learning. They also develop critical thinking abilities and other life skills. Their agency helps them move ahead in the right direction at par with middle and upper socioeconomic youth.

Gurin et al. (2002) argued that complex social structures could produce opportunities for interpersonal contact that change how students think and behave. A complex social network allows students to interact with unfamiliar people and encounter people with different expectations. This network helps to enhance educational outcomes if youth activate their thinking and adopt a conscious mode of thought (Langer, 1978). Young people develop their opinion; acquire fresh thoughts and ways of handling helpful information for their academic and future careers. Their self-efficacy also helps them to achieve what they aspire about their education.

On the other hand, youth from upper socioeconomic status generally enjoy high educational success. They typically inherit better social capital by being born into a privileged family. Personal resources of the family accrue and motivate young people to achieve more. Parents, peers and neighbours usually discuss educational choices and career opportunities which update young people with the knowledge required to get a good job. Parents' attention and care in primary and secondary education also affect students' educational attainment. Parents' help in their children's learning has a much stronger effect on young people's educational attainment (Trusty & Harris, 1999).

The involvement of parents, peers and neighbours in young people's educational activities helps young people to socialize in the larger educational environment and achieve more. They inherit an excellent social capital which makes their task of accomplishing their target efficiently. There is some exception to this situation; few youths from upper socioeconomic status also cut short their education, but not to their disadvantage. Most importantly, they have assured the future and established family

business. They take more interest in taking part in strengthening their own business. Once they complete the desired level of education, they join the business.

Young people from lower SES appear more vulnerable to the educational system. Although these youth and their families recognize higher education as the prime means of upward mobility, they lag in educational attainment. Some youth do not prefer to attend reputed universities even if they are offered admission. Having a bad experience of education in schools, their primary concern is to join an institution somewhere they are comfortable, where there is a hope they are at ease in pursuing education. Due to a lack of self-efficacy, these youth miss the complex social environment at more prestigious institutions. They learn little from their experience, which limits their career prospects. Low SES youth also have limited access to counsellors. The low expectation from education, low level of familial support, negative school experience, insufficient personal resources and poor access to support system are some of the reasons that youth end up with poor education. A young person from the lower class responded about Hindu College:

I reject the elite college because I feel that I cannot survive in that environment. I want to go to a place where I feel more comfortable.

Youth applying for higher education in colleges and universities make very different choices under different circumstances and constraints. Students' choice is determined by their power position and stratification (Giddens, 1995). The primary role of education is the reproduction of the relationship of power and privilege between social classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Poor youth find it impossible to pursue a course which is increasingly in demand in the labour market. They are excluded from such courses because of the pressure of their economic circumstances. Professional, management and technical courses are essential for getting a job in today's labour market. However, for two reasons, most of these courses are beyond youth's reach. First, there is cut-throat competition, and only a fraction of candidates can get into these courses. Second, these courses are expensive, particularly in private colleges and universities. Although the exclusionary process operates in higher education, some lower and middle socioeconomic status youth respond by taking up paid work while pursuing their degree. Because of low household income, their parents do not extend financial help for their education. However, taking up a paid job takes its toll as it leaves less or no time for studies. All youth have widely different ways of choosing higher education which is class differentiated. Some of the youth from lower SES face emotive and material limitations. Rather than going to a more elite institute, they prefer to go to the place where they feel more comfortable.

Conclusions

The demographic force resulted in the advent of mass higher education in metropolitan Delhi. Education is treated as a commodity that can be purchased from the market. Patterns of choice are very complex in higher education today, reflecting inequality in higher education. Because of low education and awareness of their parents, young people face a lack of encouragement, stimulation and interest from them. Another determinant of low educational attainment among youth is the working class subculture

with an emphasis on fatalism, present-time orientation and immediate gratification. There is an absence of norms and values that promote educational achievement.

Privatization of higher education has further deteriorated the quality of education in Delhi. Degrees are being awarded without taking into consideration the basic minimum standard. Tall claims are made by private institutions that mislead young people to enrol in these institutions without any positive output. Although more and more youth are pursuing higher education, the reason to acquire a degree has unquestionably changed.

Further, social capital in the form of parental involvement, peer support and help from acquaintances has a vital role in educational achievement. In general, middle and upper-class families seem to have a vast social network that enhances their social capital. Young people with more social capital choose to attend more prestigious colleges or universities.

Despite that, some of the lower SES youth have high educational qualifications by their agency. Their self-efficacy helps them to reap the benefit of a complex social environment prevalent in educational institutions. Some young people from low and middle SES do not prefer to go to reputed universities even if they are offered admission because of their restricted judgment of reality. They like to go to an institution where they are comfortable, where they feel the ease at home. Due to a lack of self-efficacy, these youth fail to benefit from the complex social environment at more prestigious institutions.

Finally, it may be held that socioeconomic status influences the choice of higher education and the stream of study. Social capital is not evenly distributed throughout the class structure, which largely accounts for inequality in higher education in Delhi.

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