

## School as a site of Cultural Reproduction and Class Hierarchy

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### Abstract

*Existing research on the relationship between education and social stratification has underscored a host of organizational, institutional, and psychosocial mechanisms. It is through these mechanisms that contemporary pedagogy perpetuates an inequitable distribution of educational credentials, as well as the economic and social rewards that accompany them. The paper aims to unite profound theoretical knowledge with empirical research and analysis. The paper will provide not only a strategic engagement with the theoretical architecture of Bourdieu's work, but also its relevance in the Indian schooling system. It addresses the need to elaborate the concept of school as a site of cultural and social reproduction, aiming to address some of the questions that need immediate consideration.*

**Keywords:** *School, Reproduction, Culture, Hierarchy, Society.*

### Introduction

Schools are the microcosm of society; they inevitably play a central role in not only generating new knowledge, but at the same time, reproducing the social and cultural inequalities from one generation to the next. Michael Young, in his paper raises a crucial question of “what are schools for?” Undeniably, schools serve as a means to achieve the



ends, but the question one needs to ask is, what are the ends it strives to achieve, at the same time, reflecting on the means through which the ends are achieved. Thereby, according equal importance to both means and ends. Ends can also be termed as aims of education, which are further narrowed down to the specific objectives. Is the ultimate aim, the transmission of knowledge, or the inner happiness and joy, is it the production of new knowledge or is it the maintenance of existing power structure? Every education system needs to brood over these aspects, prior to execution and implementation of the charted out policies and plan. However, it is a known fact that most intellectuals and academia do not go beyond the universal functionalist definition of schools. Hence, the hidden and disguised functions that the schools perform often go unaccounted. Theorization and reflection on such a critical issue often escapes the researcher's and intellectual's attention. Or on the other hand it might be possible that despite being aware of the reality, they perform the task of making the 'unobvious', seem most natural. Since decades, school education in India aims to ensure universal access to knowledge. However, some of the fundamental questions that need outright attention are: Whose knowledge is transmitted through schools? Which knowledge is considered worth transmitting? Why only such knowledge is transmitted? Who decides the knowledge to be transmitted? Whose culture is reproduced in schools? How such a culture is legitimized? Why such culture is reproduced? What are the means through which such culture is reproduced? What ends does reproducing such culture serves? Which particular group's interests are served by reproducing such culture?

Considering the above-mentioned questions, the paper involves a detailed discussion of the key concepts of cultural capital, habitus, field and symbolic violence, central to Pierre Bourdieu's theory. Since, Bourdieu, a renowned French Sociologist, has had an enormous influence on social-cultural thought, leaving an indelible mark in the field of sociology of education; for developing a comprehensive understanding on the subject, his ideas and thoughts have been elaborated.

The larger question is of forming a coherent understanding of the mechanism of cultural reproduction and class hierarchy, through which social inequalities are perpetuated in the Indian schooling system. The aim is to understand, how cultural reproduction takes place through/in education, and its intimate connection with class hierarchy and power. Since, the concepts developed by Bourdieu intersect and interweave



in complex ways that make it difficult to abstract one from the other. Hence, what follows in the next section is a long essay on the topic.

## **Education: Its Purpose and Structure**

As affirmed earlier, since time immemorial, schools have been conceived as a miniature society, which aim at educating the young individual through both, transmission of previous knowledge, and generation of new knowledge. Schools as part of formal education system have always been accorded with certain goals, which are supposed to be achieved within a well-designed structure. In the past, various theorists and educationists, considering the socio-historical conditions, have accorded different meanings to education; and the institutions of education i.e. schools. *“The scriptures in all religion and the classics of all ancient societies have treated education as an aspect of the constitution, preservation and maintenance of society itself and the process of education as a means of reproducing the earthly society”* (Shukla and Kumar, 1985: 2). In international context, Durkheim conceptualized education as a tool to maintain the existing social order, and Dewey thought of education as an ongoing experience, which enables an individual to acquire skills and values for self-growth and development. In the Indian context, while Mahatma Gandhi emphasized upon the overall development of the child, Tagore stressed on the natural development of the child. These and other such educationists and theorists conceptualized the purpose of education and, therefore of schools as both, functional and liberated. Coming to the critical question of the nature of knowledge being transmitted through schools, Krishna Kumar raises a significant question of “what is worth teaching?” which is inseparable from the question of “what is worth knowing?” He rightly asserts, *“The problem of curriculum is related to our perception of what kind of society and people we are, and to our vision of the kind of society we want to be”* (Kumar, 1987: 1). On zooming in, it will be found that it is not only curriculum that reflects our perceptions and intensions, but every aspect of school unveils the layers of meanings beneath it, be it the pedagogical practices, or assessment procedures.

In Bourdieu’s views, academic field does no more than reproducing and legitimizing the existing class divisions. The class divisions that legitimately perpetuate in the social space. In order to maintain social hierarchy intact, schooling processes



perpetuate the inequality through its three-edged sword; prejudiced curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. In order to understand the power structure existent in the society, Bourdieu considered school to be the best place for observation and analysis of rampant power dynamics. *“The role of schools besides producing ‘educated men’ of judgment is to produce intellectually skilled wage-earners for production and circulation of commodities”* (Lane, 2000:60). From the admission of the students to primary classes, to the choice of subject stream at the senior secondary level, every aspect of school education accelerates the distinction between the social classes. The adjournment of “Right to Education Bill” since so long speaks volumes about the dubious standards of the political leaders of our nation. The problem becomes even more aggravated in the Indian capitalist state where there are distinctions based on several counts, such as caste, class, religion and so on. Reiterating the Marxist perspective, it is said, *“Education does not stand alone and remote from the practices and thought processes of society in general. It both reflects and supports the social inequalities of capitalist culture”* (Hill: 2009: 102). In the present age of neo-liberalism, the market forces have a profound influence in shaping educational institution’s policies and programmes. Thus, considering “state”, and school to be “autonomous” is nothing more than a farce.

### **Understanding Basics: Social Space, Field and Habitus**

In defining the social world as "social space", Bourdieu considers the latter as a multi-dimensional "space of positions", in which agents and groups of agents are defined by the relative positions occupied by them within that space. Academic field, like every social field is perceived by Bourdieu as a site of “struggle” wherein every participant tries to establish one’s position over and above the other. He believes that the individual does not live a rootless life. He does not lead his life, afresh and does not experience it anew each time. It is said, *“Although men make their own history, they do not do so in circumstances of their own choosing”* (Jenkins, 1992: 70). Hence, there are many factors working simultaneously, which give meaning to person’s life. Apparently, life trajectory is not a result of linear progression, but a constellation of numerous multi-folded factors.

Therefore, in Bourdieu’s view, fields are not open spaces, but structured spaces of dominant and subordinate positions, based on types and amounts of capital that a person possesses. The struggle within every field pits those in subordinate positions, against those in superordinate positions. Academics is one such field that exuberates such



struggle. Moreover, fields impose on actors (in academic field- different stakeholders of education, primarily the students belonging to varied social strata), specific forms of struggle (like making an entry into the system). Entry into a field requires a tacit acceptance of the rules of the game (like definite eligibility criteria for admissions) meaning that specific forms of struggle are legitimized.

Academic field, like any other field has objective structures, through which the agents practice. The relation between structures and practices is not linear but cyclic, of which habitus is an integral part. Bourdieu accords much importance to “Habitus”, which plays an indispensable role in the process of socialization. *“Habitus in Bourdieu's work refers to a system of embodied dispositions which generate practice in accordance with the structural principles of the social world”* (Nash, 1990: 432-33). The main point is that habitus is a mediating construct, one that mediates between rigid structures and evolving practices.

### **Class, Classification and Class Hierarchy: The root/route of “Distinction”**

Although, discrimination can be done on the basis of any of the indicators such as class, caste, gender, ethnicity etc., yet class remains a crucial indicator of perpetuating inequality in any society. Bourdieu considers a multi-dimensional view of class practice. Class according to Bourdieu does not have only an economic base, but is also dependent on social position that an individual procures. *“Social Class is not defined solely by a position in the relations of production, but by the class ‘habitus’ which is normally associated with that position”* (Swartz, 1997: 146). Class as an overarching concept in Bourdieu's theory, constitutes both material situation i.e. based on the economic income, wealth or property a person possesses (similar to Marxian perspective of class), and symbolic position i.e. based on one's lifestyle, dispositions or status one occupies (similar to Weberian notion of status). For Bourdieu, social class and culture correlate. In his view, *“Cultural practices are markers of underlying class distinctions”* (Ibid., 143). He includes in his class analysis, lifestyle indicators, tastes, educational credentials, occupation, income, gender and age. On theoretical grounds, the constellation of stratifying factors makes sense, but in reality, there are no clear-cut boundaries. There is an immense plurality of possibilities. Common, collective, shared material and symbolic resources constitute class in Bourdieusian theory. In order to understand the social-class position, one needs to understand the important constituent factors of social classes,



which in simple terms is volume of different kinds of capital. Social class determines not only how far the student will go on in the school, but also the kind of streams they will be placed in and the life they will lead. From seating arrangement to their participation inside the class, almost everything is chalked out based on class distinctions. Otherwise, social classes have no meaning in themselves; the meaning is accorded to them. Moreover, schools as a support system exacerbate the class distinctions even more. PROBE report makes observation on the basis of the study conducted in rural villages that, “*By negating working class experience and glorifying values and ideals which lie outside the world of working-class children, lead the child to see himself as aliens in the school world*” (PROBE:1999, 75).

How class distinction existent in Indian society is reproduced through educational system can be understood by focusing on the hierarchical stratification of the educational structure. Velaskar, emphasizes on the external and internal hierarchical structuring of the paper (Velaskar, 2006: 202). All existing schools can broadly be classified into: Exclusive, elitist, Private schools and impoverished government schools. Dual system of education exists in India; wherein both government schools and private schools are run. Public Schools cater to the lower class students, while private schools encompass the whole lot of upper class and middle class students. It is said that schooling tends to create a mind-set a way of seeing, thinking and relating to the world. Social class is the crucial axis along which such disadvantage, or privilege, is continually reinforced. Students from divergent class backgrounds encounter very different educational opportunities and experiences, follow distinct academic and professional trajectories, and are accordingly channeled into dissimilar positions within the social hierarchy. The accounts from the field reflect the grave realities wherein “*the schooling system acts as a filtering process, which picks the best and the brightest and helps them to realize their potential*” (PROBE, 1999: 3). In this way, cultural reproduction reinforces social reproduction, thereby maintaining the existing social order intact. Schooling in general intensifies the existing divide between elite and masses in several ways. In the same vein, Ramachandran highlights the disturbing trend of hierarchies of access, providing evidence to “*the large number of out of school children on one hand and growth of and enrolment in private schools on the other*” (Ravi Kumar, 2006: 76).

At the ground level, the state’s role in maintaining class hierarchies cannot be overlooked. State is regarded as an effectively neutral means of delivery of intended



outcomes. However, in actuality things are not that linear and straight forward. Schools are perceived as having ‘relative autonomy’, through which they can take decisions as per their discretion. Ironically, the state has a hidden stake in the everyday practices and processes of the educational institutions. Especially by having a glimpse on the funding pattern of the state, one can see the hidden agenda that is kept under cover by the state. The trends in educational expenditure bring to the notice the agenda of the state in promoting higher education, while showing a resource crunch in case of universalization of elementary education. Through its policies and programme, it maintains its position and exercise power. It is a widely accepted fact that *“the lack of education leads to greater vulnerability in labor markets”* (Srivastava, 2001: 219). The profound interrelation of the education and the employment opportunities is a well-established fact. In Bourdieusian view, more educational qualifications a person has, greater are the chances of success. However, in case of economically underprivileged groups, the child is the only hope who can alleviate family from the abject poverty and dreadful conditions. Hence, child labor is an obstacle, which put shackles around child, thereby weighing heavily on his life experience. Even if a child makes an effort to go to school, he is bound to drop out, since he does not possess the cultural capital as other elite class children do. The mechanism can be explained in simple words as, *“Unable to cope with the burden of non-comprehension, many children give up. Others are withdrawn from schools by their parents...ironically, these parents themselves uneducated, are often resigned to believe that their children are not ‘brainy enough’ for school. The system gradually filters out most children”* (PROBE: 1999, 82). In an empirical study on working children’s thought processes and cognitive structures it was found that *“Working children’s ability to free themselves from rules stand in sharp contrast to the kind of schooled thinking exemplified in the use of single algorithm to solve all types of given problems”* (Arvind, 2007: 163). One needs to pay heed to the fact that there are several ways of problem solving used by children, depending on the social context that prepares them.

### **Culture, Cultural Capital and Cultural Reproduction: Challenging the ‘Natural’**

India as a country has a distinctive culture, however within Indian society, several exclusive cultures foster together. Indian society is known worldwide for its unity in diversity, although, the situation is quite different, when a microscopic view is taken. It is true that, it is the culture, which provides the very source of human communication and interaction, but equally true is the fact that culture can also be a source of domination and



control. “The arts, science, religion, indeed all symbolic systems- including language itself not only shape our understanding of reality...they also help establish and maintain social hierarchies. *Whether in the form of dispositions, objects, systems, or institutions, culture embodies power relations*” (Swartz, 1997: 1). In Indian society, distinctive cultural practices can be discerned by taking a closer look at one’s region, religion, caste, class, and so on. Since, Indian society is socially, politically, and economically hierarchized, one culture is not considered as ‘different’ from the other, but as ‘superior’ or ‘inferior’ to the other. For instance, in case of cultural regional differences, North India is not only distinct from South India, in terms of language, color, values, dress, demeanor etc., but is also assumed to be superior by the North Indians in terms of its cultural practices and notions. Similarly, in Hindu religion, the basis of stratification is caste, wherein, priestly caste enjoys all the privileges and claims their castes to be on the top of the hierarchy, while pushing the other castes at the bottom. In the same vein, the cultural practices of one group are not considered as “different”, but as “superior” or “inferior.” In almost all industrialist societies, Bourdieu and Passeron assert that the order and social restraint are reproduced by indirect cultural mechanisms, rather than direct, coercive, social control. In view of Bourdieu, when the practices and experiences of the dominant class are enforced upon the underprivileged class as legitimate, is what “symbolic violence” is. The enforced culture is perceived as a symbolic violence by Bourdieu, which distances the disadvantaged child from his native culture. Infliction of symbolic violence is most evident in the life accounts of the underprivileged classes in the PROBE report. Illustrations of arbitrary cultural imposition, as highlighted in the PROBE report are most profound in case of the content of the texts. The texts make the poor child internalize their subservient position in society as the stories of the text emphasized the power of the mind over manual labor.

About cultural capital, Bourdieu asserts that the capital is inherited from the past and is in a continuous process of creation. He does not restrict his account of capital to material/economic capital alone. In Bourdieu’s view, capital can present itself in three fundamental guises:

- “Economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights.
- Cultural capital, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as



- Social capital, made up of social obligations (connections), which is convertible in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility” (Ball, 2004: 16).
- Cultural capital assumes a significant place in Bourdieusian theory. It can exist in three forms: the embodied state i.e. in the form of long lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods; and in the institutionalized state, as in case of educational qualifications.

The institutionalized state of cultural capital, particularly acts as a mechanism in enhancing the future-life options of the children. Various researches bear testimony to the fact that “The probability of sending a child to school improves because of parent’s education”; it certainly adds to the child’s cultural capital (Srivastava, 2001: 220).

Education occupies a central place in Bourdieu’s work. In view of Bourdieu, in educational institutions, it is the culture of the elite that is propagated and practiced. Family is the first principal institution for the production, transmission, and accumulation of various forms of cultural capital. However, schools reproduce the cultural capital initially built within the family.

Education actually contributes to the maintenance of the inegalitarian social system by allowing inherited cultural differences to shape academic achievement and occupational attainment. Educational system undoubtedly perpetuates the social inequalities by masking the real intentions and motives behind the process of socialization. The schools tend to socialize the child into particular cultural tradition, the tradition of the elite class. A working class child is expected to imbibe and assimilate the dominant cultural practices, in order to achieve success in future life. Although, it is the economic capital that underlies the cultural capital, yet cultural capital has its own significance.

The process of cultural reproduction is not always explicit, but symbolic, disguised or hidden. The hidden agenda of cultural reproduction is certainly in maintaining social hierarchies. In view of Bourdieu, culture is arbitrary in two senses, in form and content. Students compete for access to the scarce social and cultural capital, as educational credentials and networking opportunities, enhance the life-options of the



disadvantaged children. Access to education for the disadvantaged children is the primary step towards improving their life-chances.

However, data of the BIMARU states, which lie at the bottom of the rankings in rural India, speak a ton about the existing unequal access to education. BIMARU states are those states in the northern parts of India, which remained in abject poverty, while southern States registered dynamic economic growth. The social hierarchies of these states provide a glimpse into the working of the cultural capital mechanism. The condition of provision of education in these states is quite unfortunate.

## **Conclusion**

One can say that school as a site of cultural reproduction and class hierarchy is a result of the complex interplay of caste, class, gender, and ethnic dimensions, which further differ from region to region. The inculcated dispositions that the students bring with them to school are of vital importance in their interactions with educational institutions. Therefore, in the end it can be said that school helps maintain the hierarchical social system and serves as a chief “legitimizer”. School under the garb of being “neutral” reinforces the existent class hierarchy.

Academic field emerges as a marker and reinforcer of already existing social class divisions. Through this paper, I have attempted to break the “myth” of school as a liberating force, instead highlighting the cultural reproduction mechanism of school, which further reinforces the social class hierarchy. The main thrust of the paper had been the contention that educational system puts into practice the hidden curriculum, implicit pedagogic action, and masked centralized meritocratic examination system, all of which require initial familiarization with the dominant culture, as the only means of success for the underprivileged group.

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