

Caste, Class, and Gender in Education

Notes from an Ethnographic Study

PARAMJIT S JUDGE

The *Social Construction of Capabilities in a Tamil Village* offers us an interesting account of the way a Tamil village has undergone changes over a particular time period. I think what has been offered by way of data and analysis could be generalised at a much wider level than what we think is a village or a region and whose study is applicable to a specific empirical situation.

Theme and Methodology

There are three notable aspects to keep in mind about this work. First, it is a study of the village, Sripuram, in Thanjavur district, which was earlier studied by André Béteille (1965) more than 50 years ago. Second, it studies the village with the perspective of Amartya Sen's capability approach by emphasising the element of social construction. Finally, it strongly argues for intersectionality and identifies three axes, namely caste, class, and gender.

Methodologically, it is an ethnographic study with three main concerns: the relationship between poverty and educational outcomes; the kinds of capabilities acquired by the poor through education; and the role of social capital among the poor across caste in educational outcomes. If we just forget the complex terms used in the book to simply put what the work is all about, then we may say that the consequences of getting education in terms of the acquisition of capabilities are to be examined by taking into consideration caste, class, and gender of the people. Let us have a look at what this study finds by using the ethnographic method.

The relationship between education and acquiring capabilities when examined across various sections in a village setting is quite complex and may turn out to be quite revealing. It is here that the author first clarifies the complexities of poverty in the context of economic deprivation and social exclusion covering the marginalised sections, such as the

The Social Construction of Capabilities in a Tamil Village by L N Venkataraman, *Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2021; pp 190, ₹595.*

Scheduled Castes (scs) and Scheduled Tribes (sts) (pp 17–29). School education, in general, has been influenced by various government policies because of which the conditions of the government schools have deteriorated. Simultaneously, the private schools have come up in a big way. The result is the growing perception among the people that private schools impart better education.

Government Schools

Further, the financial support to government schools has come down and the rule that no student should fail has led to the decline in the standards as the teachers have lost motivation to teach and the bright students are no more interested in serious study to do well. It is quite clear from the data on the enrolment of students from 1990 to 2018 that the enrolment of children in the local school (up to Class 8) has progressively declined in the case of all the castes, namely the Brahmins, the Other Backward Classes (obcs), and the scs (pp 41–42). However, the data offers certain interesting insights on those attending the local school. The Brahmins are almost missing, the obcs follow among those not going, and the number of sc students has progressively declined, but they still make a substantial presence. Interestingly, girls are still there in the school but their number is also declining.

One of the major aspects of getting education is employability and it is here that students getting education from the government schools fail to develop the requisite capability to be employed. The author refers to the case of an idealist schoolteacher who sent his daughter to a government school, but later on, she suffered even after getting good education while getting employment, owing to

poor education at the local school; her father was disappointed in her interpretive skills and spoken English (p 48). There is an interesting paradox in the education process in Tamil Nadu. While the government schools have lower standards than the private ones, the government institutions of higher learning have better standards than the private ones. The result is that when the students compete for admissions in government institutions, those from the private schools perform better.

The relationship between poverty and education in Sripuram is one of reinforcing the process of deprivation. There is an orphanage in the village that was opened by the school and the children there receive low-quality education like other low class and caste children (pp 62–68). In general, the caste begins to play an important role in the case of both men and women. The Brahmin youth would tend to learn some skill after the school/college to raise their chances of getting employment (p 78). In the case of the poor, the everyday life of the unemployed young women as well as unmarried women is to prepare to be married by learning cooking. The uselessness of the education system is revealed through the everyday life of the young individuals.

Unemployed and Underemployed

However, the major issue that comes to the fore is why this has happened. The work reveals that there are many forces that affect the employment patterns of the young people by turning them into two related and distinct categories, namely the unemployed and the underemployed. The intersectional approach engaging caste, class, and gender provides significant insights into the dynamics of education and employment. In other words, the labour market for the educated does not offer uniform opportunities to them. In addition to the quality of education that is directly associated to the social capabilities of the youth, there is caste, class, and gender operating on the capability to secure a job.

So far as the underemployed women are concerned, their economic exclusion could also be understood in terms of the role of patriarchy (p 85). Caste also plays its role in terms of how the jobs are

secured even in the informal economy. While the lower-caste underemployed, such as the Pallars, do not get the job, but

given their perceived social status, if a Brahmin applies for similar job where youth from other castes have applied, the former's chances of getting the position are higher in the informal economies, mostly due to the image they have cultivated through their vegetarianism or teetotalism. (p 85)

To add to this, apart from the District Employment Office hardly performing its duties, there are certain forces that influence the job market. First, the government jobs are shrinking by the day. Second, the globalisation process has resulted in the withdrawal of the government from playing its role in what the author refers to as the "school-to-work" transition by leaving it to the private market. This process has left the lower class and caste youth at the mercy of the market where they are incapable of negotiating due to the faulty government education system. Third, as a corollary to the second aspect, the quality of educational institutions becomes the parameter of success, and the poor and socially disadvantaged sections remain deprived. And, finally, the role of money and (political) connections are crucial in a system marked by corruption.

Human Capital and Value

Several years ago, the Government of India decided to rechristen the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Human Resource Development, whereby the humans were regarded as a resource linked with the creation of value. It was an objectification of the notion of human being, but the logic was that with better education the human resource becomes more valuable. Karl Marx (1975) had already pointed out that it is the labour expended into the production of commodity which determines its value. However, the mention of human capital assumes an objectified subject suitable to the modern market demands. For us it may be important to know the linkage between education, capability, and the capital generation of human agency. People may not see education as relevant beyond the formal employment with a salary, but it is crucial to make sense of a society in which human agency with same capability acquired

through education generates differential capital due to the division of society into class, caste, and gender.

Changing Dynamics

As I mentioned in the beginning of the review, this book is based on the study of the village, which Beteille studied 50 years ago. The first indication of change is always the population growth of the village. The author has shown that within 50 years (that is, 1960 when Beteille studied this village and 2010 when the present study was conducted) there is an increase in population, but with an interesting trend—the population of the Brahmins has declined. It is ascribed to their movement to the cities. Residential segregation according to castes has been effected by changes in class positions where the middle castes have taken up residences in the exclusive locality of the Brahmins as many of them have vacated their houses for good. The caste rigidity is declining in many ways due to the economic changes among various castes. The Brahmins no longer enjoy exclusive patronage over the local temples. However, endogamy persists and the migration of the Brahmins from the village is largely due to better education and employment opportunities in the cities.

Conclusions

The book makes for an interesting read, though it has extensively offered myriad concepts and perspectives. In other words,

when one begins to read the book, one expects that there are two major concepts—"social construction" and "capability" with an intersectional approach. However, as one continues reading, the number of concepts, such as poverty, including the culture of poverty, social capital begin to occupy major spaces. The strength of the book lies in its offering a "social construction of capabilities" approach, as a result of which the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender provides us with rich insights into the dynamics of the Indian society. It also demolishes the myth that education brings about development. Rather, it argues that the social scientists should take stock of the quality of education in terms of whether it provides capabilities for competition in the labour market. Hence, it turns into a critique of the government-provided education at the school level. I should also point out that the conclusion of this ethnographic study is applicable to most of the Indian society. In the absence of dense terminology, the book would have been an interesting reading for the students of sociology.

Paramjit S Judge (*Paramjit.judge@gmail.com*) was a professor of sociology at the Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar.

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