

From Barriers to Bridges: The Role of Community-Based Preparatory Institutions as Pathways to Higher Education

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Abstract

Educational participation is shaped by social factors, impacting access and mobility (Chanana, 1993; Filmer et al., 1998; Hasan & Mehta, 2006). Multiple interventions have addressed this, including enabling easier access and providing added support within institutions, among others. This paper particularly looks at how identity and community-based preparatory institutions support higher education access for marginalised students along class and caste lines. Preparatory institutions broadly have been overlooked (Bray, 1999; Stevenson & Baker, 1992) despite being part of India's higher education sector, and further they can also worsen social inequalities by serving only those who can afford them (Majumdar, 2014). However, some of these institutions have enabled access for students with fewer resources and from marginalised groups, by leveraging their community and identity ties. The study aims to examine how such select preparatory spaces shape its students' experiences, and everyday emergent practices, and how such practice intersects with identity negotiations. In our paper, we will highlight some interesting patterns that emerged and the preliminary insights we are working with. They include 1) The interplay of formality and informality within preparatory centres. 2) How stakeholders' everyday practice shapes their understanding of margins and marginalities. 3) And how the thread paying back to society underlies all strategic intent and emergent practices. These emerging patterns lead us to think about preparatory spaces as an integral part of the learning trajectories of marginalised students - not only supporting the understanding of subject areas but also supporting the intangible parts of educational trajectories like the sense of belonging, campus climate and the claim to spaces.

Keywords: Access to Education, Preparatory Spaces, Marginalisation, Informality, Higher Education

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Introduction

Literature has long affirmed that educational access and involvement are shaped by social contexts (Chanana, 1993; Filmer et al., 1998; Hasan & Mehta, 2006). As the higher education system in India continues to expand, equitable access becomes an important consideration. Studies have looked at structured exclusions in Indian higher education focusing on exclusions based on gender, caste and class (Chanana, 2011; Deshpande, 2006; Gautam, 2015; Tierney, Sabharwal & Malish, 2019). Data indicates (NSS, 75th round¹) that some sections are more likely to undertake certain types of higher education while some are likely to be left out of it, usually marked along lines of caste, class, gender and other markers of difference.

Post-liberalisation the purpose of education turned more market-oriented, shifting from being a public good to a mode of servicing the global economy with emphasis on 'return on investment' (Armove, 2003; Kamat, 2011; Slaughter & Rhoads, 2000), as education became privatized. Only those who can self-fund their education affords it while people from lower economic backgrounds, who are more often than not also members of lower social groups, stay away from them (Shah & Lewis, 2010). The promise of opportunities and broader social mobility the education system held for disenfranchised populations—the reservation system for instance, dwindled (Benjamin, 2008).

The desire to attain higher education has led to a rise of preparatory extra-institutional spaces like training centres (Aurini, 2013; Azam, 2016; Ørberg, 2017, Punjabi, 2019), that help students gain access to reputed institutions like IITs and NITs. Gaining access to these institutions is their gateway to upward social mobility, and into the "New India" (Kaur, 2012). Preparatory spaces have also to some extent tried to bridge the gap by claiming to make quality education available to many, something most formal education spaces lack (Jha, 2011). Experiences in these spaces are as formative as experiences in the higher education institutions they prepare their students for (Ørberg, 2017). However, the financial and temporal demands of such institutions leave them available for only the higher-income groups. Aspiring students from underrepresented communities are often short-changed while accessing expanding higher education opportunities, based on their class and caste positions. Community-based preparatory spaces provide a bridge for such students. These spaces pivot singularly on the community and identity-based affiliation, with an embedded understanding that aspiring learners from such spaces are inherently less likely to be able to access formal higher education.

Our paper examines how higher education access is enabled for students coming from traditionally disenfranchised populations – along class and caste dimensions, through identity and community-based preparatory institutions.

The Phenomenon of Preparatory Spaces

Preparatory institutions are extra-institutional spaces that help students gain access to reputed higher education institutions, both within the country and abroad. A subset of these spaces focuses on entrance exams, enabling a trajectory into a world of work. These preparatory

¹ National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) is a government nodal agency responsible for conducting large scale sample surveys, the National Sample Surveys (NSS), in various fields at the national level through nation-wide household surveys. The survey period of the 75th round lasted from July 2017 to June 2018, covering the subject of Household Consumer Expenditure.

institutions play a pivotal role in a learner's educational trajectory and upward social mobility. There is also a particular subset of preparatory spaces that pivot on community and identity-based affiliations, which have played an important role in enabling access for aspiring students who come with fewer resources and from historically oppressed sections of society. The study explores student and stakeholder² experiences in select preparatory spaces using qualitative methodologies, including narrative inquiry and reflexive methodology, to uncover both experience and everyday practice. Further, it examines everyday practice and negotiations of identity and belongingness against the backdrop of access to higher education and professional spaces, and their promise of social mobility and emancipation.

Community and identity-based preparatory spaces then provide opportunity and social mobility and are essentially figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998). The proposed study aims to understand the various dynamics inherent to extra-institutional preparatory spaces and imagined (aspirational) trajectories. This is particularly relevant as in the Indian context, class and caste, and their various intersections can work as critical pivots on which identities entangle in everyday emergent practice.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, the proposed study is situated at the intersection of equitable access, epistemic justice and identity negotiation. Fricker (2007) explains epistemic injustice as "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower". She identifies two varieties of it, testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2008). In preparatory spaces, the idea of epistemic injustice provides direction on how to make the voices of diverse knowers heard. It also allows us to keep in check the unjust conditions for creating, distributing, and accessing knowledge (Fricker, 2007).

In terms of equitable access, Raftery and Hout (1993) while articulating Maximally Maintained Inequality (MMI) argue that educational expansion does not usually reduce educational inequality between social strata, till the higher social strata reach educational achievement saturation; and Lucas (2001) adds that even within saturated levels of attainment, disparities are created by socio-structural inequalities, Effectively Maintaining Inequality (EMI). Lucas' (2001) work further refines this emphasising that inequality can be "*effectively maintained*" through increased differentiation (Weis, 2010). Our paper draws on this learning to understand the phenomenon of expansion and unequal benefits in the Indian context and the ways in which community and identity-based preparatory spaces disrupt or add to this understanding of both MMI and EMI.

The proposed study also engages with identity and its various negotiations. The key parameters of inquiry in the proposed project include questions of identity, experiences within sites as influences on identity, and everyday practice and self-reflexive engagement. Over here we draw the work of Stuart Hall (1996a), and identity construction. Identity is fluid and is fixed (sutured) only in the choices made by the subject in specific times and spaces, (Hall, 1996a) and is constructed only concerning an 'Other', its constitutive outside' (Hall, 1996b, p. 4). Building on this, Fine and Weis (2005) suggest that identities are constructed in relation to constructed identities of others, as well as dialectically in relation to the broader economy and culture (p. 68). Holland and colleagues (1998) articulated the concept of

² Stakeholders in our study encompasses everyone in the ecosystem of preparatory spaces, barring the learners (the students). They include people who have founded these spaces, who mentor the learners, who run the administrative tasks, who ensure funding and outreach, and who train new mentors, among others.

“Figured Worlds”, to explain and understand the construction of identity and self, and the essaying of practice.

Methodology

We made use of a combination of methods to get a holistic view, including interviews, and focus group discussions. Our study aimed to situate, not only the data collected but also the process of such data collection, in socio-cultural, historical and political contexts relevant to such an examination (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The project uses principles of *narrative inquiry* for informal and formal articulations of experiences (Webster & Mertova, 2007), framing a method that excavates experience, intending to understand how identities are constructed and everyday practice articulated.

The identified sites of intervention are community and identity-based preparatory spaces located in Maharashtra, New Delhi and Tamil Nadu. These spaces encompass a range of strategies, and a history of work, aimed at enabling higher education access for students from disenfranchised groups.

Insights and Discussion

The study is still in progress, but some interesting patterns have emerged from the initial data analysis. Some of the rudimentary insights we discuss in this paper centre around:

1. Formality and informality - *What does formalisation mean to these spaces? When does someone become formal?*
2. Margins and marginality - *What are the practice-based definitions of what the boundary for marginalisation is for these spaces?*
3. Stakeholder strategies - *What strategies make their practice possible?*
4. Pay Back To Society - *What is the ideological thread that runs through everyone's practice?*

Formality and Informality

A key theme that emerged in our work is the interplay of formality and informality. These happen at multiple scales covering individuals, organisations and networks. More often than not the preparatory centres are nebulous spaces with a loose collection of individuals who come together intending to help students gain access to higher education spaces. While in some cases these organisations are more formalised. This has implications for how the practice of mentorship and support plays out in the every day.

In exploring the relationship between formal and informal practices, it is important to recognise that being formal isn't the only way to engage in this space. There is also a significant amount of grey area between the two. Recognition plays a key role; being recognised allows individuals to access certain opportunities, while non-recognition—often linked to informal practices—opens up other avenues. This highlights the importance of community in these practices.

For example, one of our site's recognised status shaped its teaching methods, leading to structured initiatives like the “100 hours of practice”. In contrast, another site represented a more informal approach, relying on word-of-mouth and emphasising lived experiences over traditional content. Similarly, a third site focuses not on formal pedagogy but on providing

practical support for admissions, such as writing Statements of Purpose (SoPs), getting letters of recommendation etc.

The selected quote from our transcript below, that address the topic of formality and informality in practice³:

“So, we started in 2021, actually, we worked informally in different spaces and in 2021 we brought it into a formal legal setup. I always thought that I will run a movement, but I realized movements don’t survive. You need to have this legal entity. The government wants to see how much money is coming in, how we are doing, that we are doing good. So, then the government will not let us work. So, we got ourselves registered.”

The following excerpt explains their reliance on non-physical modes of communication to enable informal practice:

“We don’t have any office space or we don’t have any physical infrastructure. Whatever we work (is) mostly based on virtual or non-physical sort of modes of communication. [...] Post Covid, things are quite important because we have access to those virtual networks like GoogleMeett or Zoom or any sort of, like- So, I think in our initiative, I would say we have access, I mean, students approaching through social media. So, like, we have - we tried to be visible at (on) all sorts of social media, like LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, everywhere! Because I think this is one of the emerging modes of communication and connection.”

Margins and Marginalities

Stakeholders while defining and executing their everyday practice—whether emphasising soft skills or language proficiency—shape their understanding of margins and marginalities. For several organisations, the challenge has been in defining what is the practice of emancipation and social mobilities for the marginalised. Several stakeholder groups we spoke to are engaging with thinking about empowering trajectories for their learners. In Maharashtra, where most of our fieldwork so far has been conducted, balancing aspirations for higher education and government jobs poses a challenge, and stakeholders guide students through this complex process.

This emergent practice of mentorship and support then begins to define what *margins and marginalities* are. As these stakeholders define and execute their everyday practice, there are key understandings of marginalities that they work with. Some stakeholders emphasize the skills - particularly soft skills and some others on language. For one particular group mentorship and support is a collaborative endeavour with higher education institutions leading to the development of a curriculum which includes 100 hours of training. For several others, the challenge has been in defining what is the practice of emancipation and social mobilities for the marginalised.

³ (N.B.) The text in normal orientation were spoken verbatim by our respondents. Thoses in italics have been translate from a vernacular language. Marathi and hindi were the vernacular languages spoken by our respondents and the members of the research team were fluent in them. This applies for all the excerpts from transcripts shared here.

Several stakeholder groups we spoke to are engaging with thinking about empowering trajectories for their learners. In the state of Maharashtra, where most of our fieldwork so far has been conducted, balancing aspirations for higher education and government jobs poses a challenge, and stakeholders guide students through this complex process. In many ways, these two are pitted against each other and the stakeholders help learners navigate this process.

The following section from our transcript speaks to this:

“So, you have, on one end, people who mostly need just the technical help, but that’s a very small group of mentees, I must say. A vast majority lie on the other side of the spectrum. Primarily people who have- like this is a space that they aspire to be in, but they don’t know how to be in this space. So, you have to motivate them, you have to- once again, role modelling, affinity-based mentorship helps quite a lot there. But you also have to help them with the most basic queries. You know, sometimes you would feel like, ‘I mean, you could have googled this’, is what you could feel. But then at every point, you have to think that maybe this is the first time this student is even exploring these things on Google and, you know, Google throws millions and millions of tips of information at you and even the most straightforward thing will feel like, ‘Oh, one website is saying the deadline is in June, the other website is saying in May. I don’t know what the official website is.’”

The following quote outlines the details of one stakeholder’s college-to-career program:

“So, now we run two programs, three programs, actually. One is, we call it a college-to-career program. What is a college-to-career program? The college-to-career program is a 100-hour program. Any student who wants mentoring has to register for the college to career. It includes academic writing, critical thinking, English speaking, you meet some people who are admitted to good universities, there is a piece related to mentoring and scholarship, you complete that and 100 hours are complete. [...] We want to take it ahead, but can we work with an audience where we can start helping children make informed career decisions.”

The quote below emphasises one stakeholder’s efforts in facilitating student transitions and legal documentation:

“What we call it [is] enabling students to make school to college, college to career transition, unlocking the scholarship and legally documenting the undocumented. Now, with some of the students out of these, we can only do this work. We get them legally documented and our intervention is done. For some children, we unlock scholarships and our intervention is done. We try to do all of it together, but it doesn’t necessarily happen that way.”

Stakeholder Strategies

This brings us to understanding stakeholder strategies. As mentioned earlier, the idea of margins and marginalisations can be constructed through emergent practice. It is also useful here to then break down some interesting emerging cases on stakeholder strategies that make this practice possible. On the field, we also noticed cases of stakeholder strategies that make this practice possible. Focus on institutional partnerships; leveraging online presence and

networks; and prioritising employment pathways; are some of the many strategies we witnessed.

One of our sites focuses on institutional partnerships, while others rely on online presence and networks, and another's strategic focus is on employment. One specific organisation we looked at emerges and works through a strategic partnership (sometimes strained) with the Buddhist religious foundations. Community centres like Buddha Viharas and libraries have a very important strategic space in this endeavour. Such spaces help in creating a community of learners that are otherwise absent in the lives of students. A shared experience allows students to articulate a trajectory emerging as a coproduction of the meaning of the spaces of higher education themselves.

Online spaces, on the other hand, while creating a community, also rely on access to technologies that may not be present in other students' lives. There is a level of stratification that becomes visible here - highlighting the fact that the condition of being disenfranchised is not homogenous in itself.

This section from our transcript reflects this idea:

“So, we had a lot of discussions over this at the initial level that if we put the word Buddhist, then people will say that these are the Babasaheb people. Basically, we did not keep it with that thought, we kept Buddhism from a very broader perspective. When we say Buddhist, we mean apart from caste. So, we got this concept only with time. So, then we, if we want to do this, then to break caste, we will have to bring caste together. So, to break the caste barrier, we started reaching out to other communities as well. But we kept one context the same, which was education.”

The following quote explains how they conduct outreach sessions for universities:

“So, the one one-on-one [mentoring] and all of this mostly happens online. [...] Wherever possible, we did a few in-person outreach sessions as well, but we did specific online outreach sessions for these universities. We told them, you know, on this day we are going to do an outreach session. It would be great if you could share it with your students, etc. And then we also worked with some, you know, on-the-ground organizations, like community initiatives.”

Pay Back to Society

However, across all these strategic intent and emergent practices, the one underlying thread that emerges is that of paying back to society. A lot of the practice that we are talking about and seeing in the field is very reliant on the practice of giving back. Stakeholders and learners alike attribute this ethos to Buddhist and Ambedkarite thought. More than just an ideological position, we found that this aspect is central to the continued existence of many of the mentorship and support systems.

Some ways in which this manifested was through sharing of mentors among different such spaces; student movement between preparatory spaces where students from one space would go to the other; and past students coming back to mentor or coming to one/two day camps.

The following passage from our transcript provides insight into this theme:

“If you look at the so-called identified preparatory classes or in terms of very commercial sense, like coaching classes, the tutorial classes, most of the students who are coming from marginal background, either it’s the caste or class or gender (or) religion. So, probably they are not able to afford those (that) fees because it’s really, really quite expensive. Like, if you want to prepare for NET, JRF or if you want to prepare for any sort of intense examination. So, these coaching institutions are quite expensive and it’s mostly students from the economically and socially deprived backgrounds. They can’t access those institutions. [...] So, these non-academic institutions become quite inaccessible for the socially or economically unprivileged students, so they can’t afford.”

Here, the stakeholders and mentors talk about the achievements of their students and their role as future mentors:

“So, it’s (been) almost five years of running this initiative and we have mentored, I think, more than 100 of students, we have sent to the Ph.D. and M. Phil. admissions, including IIHS. Like, every year, two, three students are going to (the) Urban Fellows Program. And when they came (come) back after completion and all, they are the new mentors, they are the new trainer(s), they are the new leader(s). So, this is the way, I think the principle where you pay back to your society, pay back to your community, what Dr. Ambedkar used to say.”

This quote identifies the challenges faced by the stakeholders in providing information about fellowships:

“And there was one challenge, that there was no information about [fellowships] on the website. place for preparation from where the students could get the preparation. happening, you are preparing for the UPSC such as the interview is like UPSC only but there selection process is different. More about your personal achievements and challenges, struggle and everything then they got selected. So this is the gap we see and none of the community is doing this we started doing this. So mostly our focus was on tier 2 and tier 3 cities.”

Challenges and Opportunities

The site itself presented us with many challenges and opportunities that made us rethink our own research practice in terms of enabling the co-production of knowledge. The design of the study intended to look at higher education as a space of emancipation, and preparatory sites as formal centres that help in this overall process.

But, our initial attempts at entry into the site troubled both of those notions. The design of the study, we found, was not adequate to grasp the nature of emancipation, empowerment and mobility. Higher Education was not even the primary option for learners, as we found, and some of the work that networks and stakeholders were doing, was to introduce higher education as an alternative to government jobs.

Secondly, the informal nature of networks and the underlying ethos of giving back was ironically leading to a practice and space that was both ephemeral in some senses, but durable. These learnings led us to redirect our inquiry at the conceptual level to understanding different dimensions of mobility. We began rethinking who our respondents

would be (moving from formal institutions to informal sites of practice) and also our conceptions of access to that of mobility.

A key aspect to emphasise here is that as primary researchers investigating phenomena, we relied a lot on extant literature. Mid-way through the project we had two interns joining us who themselves had been through preparatory spaces. This change in the research team helped change the nature of insider/outsider negotiations, across multiple dimensions including language.

As we began rethinking who our respondents would be (moving from formal institutions to informal sites of practice) and also rethought our conceptions of access to that of mobility, we were able to then gain entry into such spaces. A key aspect to emphasize here is that as primary researchers investigating phenomena, we relied a lot on extant literature. Mid-way through the project we had three interns joining us who themselves had been through preparatory spaces. This change in the research team helped change the nature of insider/outsider negotiations, across multiple dimensions including language.

Conclusion

The fundamental nature of this enquiry was based on social mobility, the promise of higher education in enabling social mobility and the role of preparatory spaces. We were interested in the trajectories of learners, mentors/teachers, and other stakeholders in such spaces. Looking at trajectories and the strategies of our participants, a key insight for us was to try and understand the various types of distances covered. These distances sometimes were simply spatial - travelling to coaching centres, or universities abroad; and sometimes were structurally constrained - negotiating the distance between formal and informal for example; or were deeply experiential - language differences, online and offline spaces, distance from opportunity (for instance, not knowing the possibilities of higher education, and only that of government jobs).

We conclude this paper with what is emerging as the key insight for this in-progress study. Learners and mentors/teachers in this ecosystem of community-based preparatory spaces have engaged in the co-creation of a figured world with specific strategies shaping their practice. These strategies are informed by their conditions of being (in the larger society), the barriers they face, and the strategic negotiation opportunities that being part of communities of practice allows them.

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