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'Labour class' children in Indian classrooms: theorizing urban poverty and schooling

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Abstract

This paper challenges (inter)national development narratives that propose schooling as a way out of poverty in the global South by interrogating poor children’s experience of pedagogic and disciplinary processes in an Indian classroom. It also develops a theoretical framework to interrogate the relationship between urban poverty and classroom processes which attends to wider class and caste relations in the contemporary context of economic liberalism and ‘political and social illiberalism’. Drawing upon parent interviews and ethnographic fieldnotes from a classroom in a state school it unpacks the term, ‘labour class’, used by teachers to refer to pupils’ social background. Further, deploying the notion of ‘deficit view’ it shows how pedagogic practice, physical and verbal aggression experienced by pupils, and pupils’ struggles to engage with classroom teaching are shaped by realities of deeply stratified schooling, inadequate infrastructure in state schools, and the relationship between ‘labour class’ communities and middle-class teachers.

Keywords

Poverty, ‘labour class’, informal worker, classroom processes, deficit view, caste.

Introduction

Poverty emerged as one of the ‘top priorities’ of the World Bank’s development programmes in the 1990s even as education began to be circulated as ‘critical’ for improving growth rates and reducing poverty (Shain 2013). Since then, the Bank and liberalizing states in the global South have increasingly been concerned about ‘poor’ children’s schooling, but scholars have long argued that this concern needs to be scrutinised with reference to the Bank’s more fundamental commitment to aid ‘global capitalist accumulation’ and poor individuals’ ‘incorporation into and subjection to competitive labour markets’ (Cammack 2004, 190). It is within this framework and with the ultimate objective of

increasing 'the productivity of labour' that the Bank and the post-liberalization Indian state have focused on promoting limited social security for the working poor on the one hand, and limited public-funded schooling for their children, on the other (Pappu 2002; Shain 2013).

International aid programmes have continued to view poverty and educational marginalisation as 'societal' and individual problems (WDR 2018) and are not invested in challenging the broader development model or its interplay with historically specific economic inequalities (Shain 2013). Significantly, and in part owing to aid conditionalities (Cammack 2004; Sarangapani 2010), the Indian state has also systematically shifted from the ideals of 'equality of educational opportunity' (Velaskar 2010, 64) and a 'public education system of uniform quality' (ibid, 65) to a policy approach that intensifies stratification of schooling and advocates fragmented, limited and targeted benefits ostensibly to compensate for historical exclusion, but no longer talks of equality (Velaskar 2010). Today, the Indian state guarantees free and compulsory education only for eight years, from Class I till Class VIII. Despite a highly differentiated and deeply stratified school system within which access and experience are shaped by pupils' socioeconomic locations (Kamat 2015; Tukdeo 2019; Vasavi 2003) policy has focused on expansion and ignored educational processes and experiences, thus, encouraging inequality in and through schooling (Batra 2015; Vasavi 2003). The Bank has also tended to offer technocratic solutions to the question of pedagogic processes and relations, reducing it to that of learning outcomes and measuring 'quality' (Cammack 2004; Sarangapani 2010; WDR 2018) and ignoring the historically specific social and economic realities that shape pupil experience and classroom processes.

Whilst expansion and international pressure on the developmental state have meant that an unprecedented number of children from the most marginalized groups are now participating in education, stratification of the school system has resulted in poor children being concentrated in government schools and 'budget' private schools (Kamat 2015). Thus, when (inter)national policy talks about public-funded schooling it is precisely poor children's schooling that is under discussion

(Sarangapani 2010); but there is no longer any policy concern around unacceptable inequalities in educational experience, levels or outcomes. India also continues to have high rates of poverty as well as high absolute numbers of poor as neither the slow growth and planned development of post-independence decades, nor the higher growth of the last four decades of liberalization have brought down poverty adequately (Kohli et al. 2003). Moreover, historical disparities based on gender, religion and caste continue to shape economic inequalities, and in some cases, have intensified post-liberalization (Jaffrelot et al. 2019).

Significantly, the discipline of Sociology of Education was a 'latecomer' to India. It, then, developed slowly and remained peripheral to research concerns in Sociology departments owing to early sociologists' view of education as an 'applied and normative' discipline rather than a 'theoretical and empirical' one; moreover, research funding has largely remained tied to policy requirements of national and international organisations (Nambissan and Rao 2013, 13). Reviews of existing literature (Batra 2015; Bhatty 1998a, 1998b; Nambissan 2013, 2014; Velaskar 2013) show that detailed ethnographic accounts and systematic analyses of classroom processes and social relations remain rare; and are only beginning to emerge in the urban context. Most importantly, scholarship has tended to view poverty only as a barrier to schooling and not as a factor crucially shaping educational processes (Batra 2015). As Velaskar (2013, 122) summarises, despite long-standing preoccupation with inequalities of access and experience, accounts of poor pupils' schooling have largely remained descriptive and rarely grapple with poverty 'as a structural condition emanating out of class and caste relations.'

The central contribution of this paper is that it begins to develop a theoretical framework to interrogate the relationship between poverty and classroom processes which also accounts for wider class and caste relations[i]. This paper is part of a larger project which offers a rare theoretical engagement with the relationship between educational and socioeconomic marginalisation in urban India, especially how intersections of gender, class and caste shape classroom processes and poor pupils' classroom

experience.[ii] The project draws upon parent and pupil interviews and a classroom ethnography undertaken in a state school in the central Indian city of Indore. This paper locates classroom discourse and processes within historical class-caste based inequalities and their interplay with liberalization. It unpacks the term 'labour class' used by teachers to refer to pupils' social background in the context of broader patterns of economic inequality and informalisation, and financial and physical hardships faced by parents. It further shows how pedagogic and disciplinary processes in the classroom are shaped by historical and post-liberalisation social and educational stratification.

The theoretical framework developed in the paper draws upon scholarship in political economy, sociology of education and economic sociology in order to systematically 1)'caste' (labour) class; 2)'class' teachers' expectations and 'deficit view' of poor pupils and parents; and 3)unpack how teachers' views and school stratification shape teacher-pupil relations and pedagogic and disciplinary processes in the classroom. Unravelling the relationship between caste, labour, poverty and school stratification, it, thus, simultaneously castes and classes pupils' classroom experience in the urban Indian context.

Understanding contemporary poverty and implications for classroom processes and relations[iii]

Literature review

Of the substantial body of research on school stratification, unequal access, and experiences of poor pupils only a limited body of work offers thick descriptions of classroom processes and social relations (Nambissan 2013; 2014) or unpacks how these are shaped by the wider socio-material context, especially in urban settings. Majority of the scholarship discussing poverty looks at access and rates of retention, child labour, and economic, demographic and other benefits of schooling, primarily in rural areas. Scholarship on poverty and teacher-pupil interaction has typically been based on surveys, interviews and focus-group discussions rather than school or classroom ethnographies and limits itself

to describing teachers' attitudes towards their work and pupils from marginalised caste and class groups, and some pedagogic and disciplinary practices.

Notable exceptions engaging with classroom processes and discourse include Manjrekar (2007), Iyer (2013), Majumdar and Mooij (2011), and Pappu and Vasanta (2010). Of these, only Majumdar and Mooij and Pappu and Vasanta offer some insights into the larger class relations inscribing classroom discourse. Other literature locating classrooms systematically within local socioeconomic context, especially in urban settings, includes Talib (2003), Balagopalan and Subrahmanian (2003), Goswami (2019) and Manjrekar (2019), though these do not offer ethnographic details of classroom processes. More generally, recent literature on urban education looks at middle-class groups' decision-making and aspirations around schooling, spatial and institutional exclusion, privatisation and low-cost schooling. It is, however, yet to offer a theoretical engagement with informal work, historical and contemporary economic inequalities, or caste-class intersections.

Pappu and Vasanta (2010) describe poor children's experience of labour and schooling and teachers' attitudes in the context of stratified schooling in Hyderabad, but do not discuss how wider economic logic shapes classroom processes. Talib (2003) problematizes the exclusion of the world of labour from curriculum in a classroom full of the children of quarry workers in Delhi and foregrounds the class relationships at stake in teaching and learning in a state school. While he describes the marginalised caste groups quarry workers belong to, he fails to account for its historical intertwining with class, or how that impinges upon classroom discourse. Manjrekar's (2019) research with poor Muslim communities, and Balagopalan and Subrahmanian's (2003) research with poor SC and ST pupils link teacher-pupil relations and classroom experience more systematically with local social relations and economic exclusion.

Existing literature shows that owing to long histories of class and caste based economic and educational exclusion, the majority of teachers, especially regular full-time ones, belong to the upper castes and middle classes. Therefore, first-generation learners tend to be seen as

'uneducable'/'unteachable' even as their parents are considered to be disinterested in children's learning (Balagopalan & Subrahmanian 2003; Talib 2003; Nambissan 2009; Vasavi 2003). Research also shows that though some teachers, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds tend to be more supportive of learners from marginalised backgrounds teacher-pupil relations are also shaped by systemic issues and institutionalization of class and caste-based biases (Balagopalan and Subrahmanian 2003; Nambissan 2009). Most importantly, the colonial morphing of teachers into 'state functionaries' and as such, 'key agents' of the post-independence developmental state not only burdens them with non-teaching responsibilities but also continues to complicate their relationship with marginal communities (Balagopalan and Subrahmanian 2003; Kumar 2013).

Building a framework for interrogating poverty and classroom processes

Extending this body of work on schooling in the context of urban poverty, I develop and demonstrate a theoretical framework for interrogating the relationship between the structural underpinnings and lived realities of poverty, and classroom social relations and processes. To this end, I draw upon analyses of economic informality, and the evolving relationship between caste and economic inequality. This approach avoids essentialised understandings of economic inequality and blaming teachers as individuals or a community of professionals; instead, it foregrounds their class-caste locations. I also draw upon Lipman's (1998) analysis of how teachers' 'deficit view' of pupils from low-income families shapes classroom relations and processes. This view is based on a 'negative and degrading cultural model' of low-income families (ibid, 82) and links their 'economic and social conditions' with 'social and moral pathologies' (ibid, 75). Such a conceptualisation enables a nuanced account of teachers' views and practices and the relationship between the two.

Since a majority of the parents in my study were informally employed, attending to their working conditions became central to my analysis of their children's schooling. Indeed, the majority of workers

in India have always been informally employed and despite claims to the contrary, informal employment has expanded substantially more than formal employment post-liberalization (Srija and Shirke 2014). Thirty-eight percent of the non-agricultural labour force in India comprises 'casual/contract workers and regular workers in informal enterprises' and forty-five percent, 'micro-entrepreneurs or self-employed' (Agarwala 2013). Throughout my work I use the definition favoured by Rina Agarwala who has done pioneering work on informal workers' identities and politics in India:

> The informal sector consists of economic units that produce goods and services legally, but engage in operations that are not registered or regulated by fiscal, labor, health, and tax laws. Informal workers include the self-employed, who own and run a business in the informal sector with few or no employees, as well as casual labor, who work through subcontractors either for an informal or a formal sector enterprise. The primary difference between informal and formal workers is that the latter are protected and regulated under state law while the former are not. (Portes et al. 1989 cited in Agarwala 2006, 420-421)

Drawing upon analyses of informal work and its relationship with caste and patterns of poverty allows us to understand how caste and class combine with austerity and economic informality to shape contemporary urban poverty. Firstly, even among informal workers, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women have historically faced greater exploitation (Breman 1996; Agarwala 2013). Secondly, post-liberalization economic growth has further entrenched caste-based exclusion and hierarchies; and SC, ST and OBC groups continue to face greater exclusion in regular salaried work as compared to Others (CES 2018-19; Deshpande 2011; Jodhka 2018; Unni 2006). Data from the last two decades indicates that being located lower down in the caste hierarchy increases the likelihood of being informally employed, and thus, having lower incomes (UNDP 2004; NSS 2014). Caste also continues to shape patterns of land-ownership, business ownership and employment and thus, incomes and status in contemporary urban economy despite recent political, educational and economic success of historically non-dominant castes (Jodhka 2018; Deshpande 2011). Further, challenges to upper caste,

middleclass domination since the 1970s-80s have also resulted in these groups' support for liberalisation and opposition to caste-based reservation and the welfare state (Menon and Nigam 2007; Fernandes and Heller 2006) despite 'massive poverty' (Kohli 2019).

Research context and methods[iv]

Indore is the commercial capital of Madhya Pradesh, a 'laggard' state in terms of growth and human development. But since the early twentieth century Indore has been a significant hub of manufacturing, trade and commerce for central and western India. Since the 1990s it has also gained tremendous significance in IT and financial services. While Madhya Pradesh state has very high SC and ST populations and these children are most likely to go to government schools (Nambissan 2009), it actually has 'significantly higher' poverty than the national averages (UNDP 2004), has consistently paid the lowest minimum wages o informal workers (ILO 2018) and incurs the least per capita expenditure on education (Save the Children 2014).

This paper draws upon an eight-month long classroom ethnography conducted in Class VIII of a coeducational, Hindi-medium Middle School in Indore in 2014-15. The eight-strong staff at the school consisted of: the Head Master, Manish Tiwari (UC); three women Upper Divisional Teachers (UDTs), Jyoti Gupta (UC), Prabha Shinde (UC), Usha Pandey (UC); and two men UDTs, Pramod Bhargav (UC), and ML Vishwakarma (OBC) who constituted permanent full-time staff. A woman Guest Teacher, Preeti Mali (OBC)[v], and a woman Midday-Meal Helper, Ganga Devi (SC) constituted the contractual staff. Of the seventy-nine students enrolled (13-16yo) thirty-eight were boys and forty-one girls. twenty-one were SC, ten ST, thirty-one OBC and seventeen Others[vi].

Of the ninety-two parents who were working, nineteen (17.59%) were self-employed (47.36% OBC, 26.31% SC, 3.7% ST, 5.26% Others), sixty-seven (62.04%) were informal workers (44.77% OBC, 32.83% SC, 14.92% ST, 7.46% Others); and six (5.55%) were formally employed (16.66% SC, 83.33%

Others); the formal workers had social cover like health insurance and in two cases, housing as well. Many parents were construction labourers while a smaller number worked in various manufacturing units. Among the mothers, self-employment consisted of domestic work, while among the fathers it consisted of a wide range of occupations: tailoring; garage-ownership; managing wedding bands, running maintenance services like whitewashing, carpentry, plumbing and electrical-repair; auto rickshaw driving; and vending vegetables and street food. Individual monthly wages ranged from £30.00 to £150.00 and net family incomes from £70,00 to £200.00, and could vary substantially from one month to the next.

During fieldwork I spent my day with Class VIII pupils beginning with the morning assembly and attending all classroom activities till the end of the school-day. Using participant and non-participant observation I collected data on teacher-pupil relations, peer interaction, teaching and learning practices and other classroom processes. I spent time with pupils in the playground and divided my lunch breaks between pupils and teachers. I also observed interactions and processes during examinations and school functions. I supplemented this ethnographic data with parent and pupil interviews, and visits to pupils' neighbourhoods and homes. I systematically interviewed the sixty-odd pupils who attended school more regularly; in semi-structured individual and group interviews I discussed the financial and academic problems they faced, disciplinary and pedagogic practices, their relationship with teachers, life at home and how it affected their ability to meet demands at school. In addition to collecting data on families' social and financial background via questionnaires and pupil interviews, I visited homes and interviewed a representative (based on caste, employment and incomes, type of household, i.e., joint/nuclear/single-parent, and years lived in Indore) set of nineteen parents. Here I draw upon two of the interviews that represent two socioeconomically non-dominant caste categories, OBC and SC, and which covered most of the themes that came up across conversations with parents: migration and search for work in Indore, working conditions, concern over money and children's schooling and futures.

Drawing upon this data and the scholarship outlined in the previous section I have developed a theoretical framework that helps understand the relationship between poor pupils' experience of pedagogic and disciplinary processes, class and caste-based economic inequality, and school stratification. As I show in succeeding sections, this framework enables a three- dimensional analysis: 'caste-ing' (labour) class in the urban context; unpacking the classed nature of teachers' expectations and practices as well as parents' struggles; and the effects of liberalisation, historical educational stratification, and teachers' 'deficit view' on classroom processes.

I used manual coding as my field notes were largely in English, and interviews in Hindi. Initially I used a combination of Descriptive, In vivo, Holistic and Provisional coding to analyse field-notes and interviews. This initial analysis of fieldnotes generated codes like: teachers' views, poor parents/pupils, parental irresponsibility, administrative demands, private coaching, corporal punishment, welfare benefits and identity/eligibility, bad infrastructure, non-teaching work, freebies. My initial analysis of interview data generated these codes: worry, 'there's no money', working conditions, physical hardship, migration, 'they're not doing us a favour', school related expenses, aspirations for children, lack of infrastructure, 'I don't feel like staying at home', comparing government/private, pride/self-respect, views on teachers, awareness of poverty. Further analysis in the light of existing work on schooling, caste, informal work and neoliberal reforms resulted in categories like: teachers' view of poor/'labour class' parents and pupils; parents' view of schooling and teachers; conditions of informal workers; how teachers' views shape pedagogic and disciplinary practices; effects of liberalisation on informal workers and classroom processes. Analysing and synthesising these categories then gave me the three dimensions of my analysis listed above.

Caste, economic equality and the 'labour class'

The term most widely used by teachers to refer to their pupils' backgrounds and socioeconomic

location was the English term, 'labour class'. I argue that this frequently used marker captures the intersections of caste and class that shape teacher-pupil relations in urban classrooms. Ample evidence exists that teachers in government schools see schooling as a process of moral improvement for poor pupils (Iyer 2013; Vasavi 2003). My purpose is to locate these attitudes and assumptions in the material relations in wider society, and offer a historically specific and critical account of classroom relations and processes.

> Usha Pandey said, 'You know what, these children are from the labour class; managing [them] is very difficult.'

Apart from considering poor and lower caste pupils, 'unteachable', teachers also tended to view their parents as irresponsible and uninterested in children's schooling. While Usha Pandey's comment does not reference caste explicitly the term 'labour class' reflects a complex mix of caste- and class-based realities and worldviews. Firstly, in Indore 'labour' is used to refer to manual labourers in Indore. Secondly, I suggest that upper caste teachers' preference for the language of class rather than caste (Sriprakash 2012, Nambissan 2009) is rooted in dominant nationalist discourses in (post)colonial India. These discourses saw 'class' as a 'secular' and 'modern' category, but avoided 'caste' which was seen as a term that carried 'pre-modern' baggage of ascribed status and inequality (Jodhka 2018). Pandian (2002, 1735) argues that this resulted in 'transcoding' of caste, which allowed upper caste elites to 'talk of caste by other means', thus 'acknowledging and disavowing caste at once.' Similarly, here, the use of the word, 'class', obscures the caste connotations of 'labour class', while recording the 'contempt for the labouring classes and for labour as such' (Kothari 1994, 1591).

Moreover, as discussed earlier social class is always already *casted* (cf. CES 2018-19, Jodhka 2018, Deshpande 2011). Upper castes have traditionally been over-represented in regular, salaried jobs in the formal sector including in white-collar jobs (Fernandes and Heller 2006) while belonging to other castes increases the chances of one's being engaged in casual labour (Unni 2006). Secondly, claims of a 'secular' market notwithstanding caste-based networks and economic relations continue to shape

access to segments within the labour market and 'exploitation' of workers by employers (Harris-White and Gooptu 2001, Unni 2006). While Dalits are registering their presence as self-employed workers (Jodhka 2018), they largely represent 'bottom-of-the-ladder, low productivity, survival activities' with 'lower rate of growth' (Deshpande and Sharma 2013, 22). Lastly, whether they are self-employed, contractually employed or regular wage-earners, SC and ST groups have fared worse than OBCs in getting into the middle classes; whereas upper castes are concentrated in the upper and middle-class (Unni 2006).

If broader patterns of economic inequality offer insights into structural underpinnings of poverty then parents' stories offer insights into the lived realities of deprivation and hardship. Attending to these stories is crucial in order to problematize classroom processes and teacher-pupil relations. The primary reason for most parents to have migrated to Indore was lack of livelihoods in their native villages. Secondary reasons related to conflicts within joint families, and in a few cases, children's schooling; either because schools were not good, or because the overall atmosphere did not encourage children to engage. Several parents related stories of farming having become unviable and state compensation falling short, other rural crafts and arts like weaving dying away, and casual work in agriculture and associated activities bringing in very low wages. Even land-owning Rajput families could not subsist on incomes from farming while two of the landless SC families reported having had to migrate to escape caste-based oppression and exploitation. The work all these parents found in Indore was exhausting, demanding and insecure while expenses, especially rents, were much higher. Except a handful of families all others lived in one-room houses which varied widely in quality and size while deadlines for paying their rents were typically non-negotiable. At least one SC and one ST family had to often prioritize rent over food. Healthcare expenses were also an enormous drain on incomes.

Neetu's (OBC) parents' experiences are representative of several parents' stories. Sadhna and Deepak had migrated from rural Madhya Pradesh to Indore to look for work a year ago. Deepak had worked as a *beedi*[vii] contractor in their village and used to hire labourers to till his family's land, but after

incurring heavy farming losses due to excessive rainfall he now worked as a casual labourer in Indore. After working in a plastic manufacturing unit where he developed respiratory health issues he had settled for lower paid work in a unit manufacturing steel vessels. In order to improve their net earnings Sadhna had also found work outside her home for the first time. With the help of an aunt by marriage she had begun working in a snack manufacturing unit where she rolled dough into balls and packed these into containers. Her work also paid little and her wages fluctuated since the supervisor often miscounted the containers and refused to pay overtime. She made around £1.00 a day working six days a week, between eight and nine hours everyday. She also bore much physical discomfort at work:

> [We] have to sit for long hours and my legs start hurting... four hundred items go into one crate... work is okay, but [the supervisor] keeps saying, 'you are not working properly, six crates should be filled everyday.' Now I am new, haven't even finished one month. I said, 'it will take time to pick up speed'. He said, 'if you don't fill six crates, this will be your last month'. I said, 'okay, I will quit before you sack me!' So now I am looking for another 'company' for myself... you know, if you make these things, hands get bruised, (indicating the insides of her thumbs and index fingers) fingers get bruised.

Her neck, shoulders and back were constantly painful because of the work. Yet, she hardly got any leave except on Sundays; nor could she afford to report for work even five minutes late, as that cost her half a day's wages. But she often had to stay and work beyond her stipulated hours: 'if I am late, they say all kinds of things, [but] if they make me stay for longer, then [that's] nothing!' , Sadhna did not possess any identity card as a worker, and thus, could not access any benefits available to informal workers. The couple had also been unable to obtain the documents required to access free ration and cooking gas at discounted rates and had to spend substantial part of their incomes on food. In any case, neoliberal reforms have increasingly limited available social cover for workers like them (Agarwala 2013).

An even more thankless struggle was being waged by Raviraj's (SC) parents. His father, Mahesh, had

lived in Indore almost all his life, having migrated as a teenager and his mother, Lakshmi, had moved to the city a couple of years after their marriage. However, the family continued to struggle both financially due to low wages and in obtaining documentary evidence of identity and address despite having been forced to bribe local authorities on multiple occasions. Mahesh was a supervisor in a local oil manufacturing unit and Lakshmi had recently become a construction worker. Mahesh had tried working as a vendor but the negligible income forced him to join the mill as an informal labourer. Since he was able to continue working in the same place for a few years he had risen to the position of Supervisor, though still without a contract or social protection and earning a low £75.00 per month. He and other workers had tried striking for a raise but owing to availability of large pool of available workers willing to work for even lower wages, they had had to withdraw their strike when threatened with the loss of their jobs. The couple also acted as security guards for the building in which they lived. Their family of four occupied a single room with a tin roof on the top floor of a building which housed many small manufacturing units.

Teachers, however, failed to recognise hardships faced by labour class parents and their roots in past and present socioeconomic inequalities; instead, their deficit model allowed them to blame 'low academic performance' (Lipman 1998, 71) on pupils' and parents' perceived disinclination to expend resources and effort on academic success. For instance, the Head-Master Manish Tiwari argued that parents who send their children to private schools think that:

> 'If I am paying thousand [rupees] for school, let me pay another five hundred [rupees] to the tutor as well'.

The implication was that people who had to pay for education tried harder to ensure their children's success and therefore, readily paid for additional private coaching, whereas, parents whose children received free state education did not care how their children did at school. In his view, the *willingness* – not the *ability* – to spend and ensure that one's children succeeded, distinguished parents of students in private schools from those of children in government schools. However, parents like Lakshmi

approached children's schooling differently:

> 'Now see, my Raviraj studies in [a] government [school] but I pay for tuition too... let me spend, so that my child would learn something.'

Here, Lakshmi is saying that just because she did not have to pay fees for Raviraj's schooling it did not mean that she was loath to spend on her son's education. Indeed, like some other labour class parents she and Mahesh had also enrolled their younger son in a private school as private schooling at primary level is more affordable than that at higher levels. Secondly, since it took parents a few years of stable incomes to be able to afford private schooling, often, only the youngest children could attend private schools. However, teachers failed to empathise with these socioeconomic realities of labour class families, and this failure shaped both their pedagogic and disciplinary practices.

Teaching and disciplining 'labour class' children

Lipman (1998, 82) argues that the deficit model tends to be 'reflected in lower expectations for academic performance, a watered-down curriculum, more rote learning, and an emphasis on controlling behaviour.' I also found this to be true, and in this section, I show how such a deficit model was reflected in verbal and physical aggression by several (but not all) teachers; and their inability to recognise pupils' struggles or efforts to learn and succeed.

Following fieldnotes taken during Prabha Shinde's Sanskrit class capture important aspects of classroom activity and the aggression pupils faced regularly. She was the Class Teacher for Class VIII and was responsible for administrative work relating to examinations, disbursal of welfare benefits and the infrequent cultural activity organised at the school. As a result, despite her efforts she struggled to finish her syllabus in time for the monthly tests.

> Prabha Shinde is being particularly vicious today. She seems terribly frustrated. Shivam (UC) got hit too hard, his head banged against the wall. His twin sister, Shweta, was asked to come

sit in front. Everyone seemed a bit upset and subdued.

Of the teachers, only Usha Pandey gets along without abusing and hitting the kids at all. (Fieldnotes)

That day, once the students settled down Prabha Shinde started on her administrative work. After a few minutes Pramod Bhargav, the Hindi teacher, came in without her permission and begun a round of the classroom, shouting orders at the students without any provocation:

'Sit straight!', 'Look at the board!', 'Take out your book!' He says all this very aggressively… almost like abusing. So much contempt in such simple words. (Fieldnotes)

Throughout Pramod Bhargav's visit and after he left Prabha Shinde continued to work through the list of pupils who still needed to submit caste certificates for caste and income-based scholarships; she alternated between repeating instructions on how to obtain the certificates, and reproving the children.

Prabha Shinde said, 'An order has come from above that everyone's caste certificates must be prepared... you don't have time, your parents don't have time, *we* have a lot of time!' She then listed the names of all the students who were yet to submit their caste certificates. She also hit Raviraj and others, commenting: 'No matter how much you are hit, scolded, it doesn't make a difference!' She then recapitulated the sources and processes for obtaining a caste certificate. (fieldnotes)

While she was still in the classroom the Manish Tiwari, also came in to announce instructions for the annual, state-wide standardised test, *Pratibha Parv* ('Talent Fest'). The *Pratibha Parv* required students to take tests in a multiple-choice format in all subjects, participate in co-curricular activity on the day and have all their notebooks and project files inspected by state officials. In a system centred on textbooks (Kumar 1988) and constrained by inadequate resources (Jha 2005), standardised testing encouraged further bureaucratisation and rigidity in terms of content, pedagogy, and the order and time in which lessons were done. Thus, teachers' objectives were limited to explaining lesson content and

ensuring that all pupils had 'completed' their notebooks, i.e., neatly written down answers to all questions at the end of each lesson in the textbook. Some teachers followed this process diligently whilst others rarely did any of it, instead, distributing 'guides'[1] and directing students to copy answers from these. Pramod Bhargav fell in the latter category. Later that day, during the Hindi period, I observed the following:

> Pramod Bhargav just entered the classroom and he is doing a round. He often steps on the ends of children's clothes and their stationery – doesn't take care not to do that. Sometimes other teachers also do this. He is asking several students to show him their 'completed' notebooks: 'take out your notebook!', 'sit straight!', 'Show me your notebook! How much have you completed?' He has never shown interest in the status of their work so far – but now the *Pratibha Parv* is approaching. He shouted at Sandeep (SC), 'Who will write the rest? Your grandfather? Will he come from above and finish this?' He then threw the boy's notebook down and threatened, 'I will show this to Sir' referring to Manish Tiwari. He also shouted at Shivam (UC) and asked him to leave the class. He held up Bindu's (OBC) notebook as an example of good work… spent entire period looking at notebooks. (Fieldnotes)

Throughout fieldwork I observed this pattern of humiliation, undignified treatment and stress on mindless copying and memorising of answers to questions in the textbooks. This frequency and intensity of physical and verbal aggression was possible in state schools precisely because these were labour class children and not middle-class ones. For example, Prabha Shinde and Pramod Bhargav frequently addressed their pupils as '*jaanwar*' (animal), a practice that would not be countenanced by middle-class parents.

Teachers also expressed explicit resentment at the time and effort spent in welfare disbursal because they saw these as 'freebies' being wasted on 'undeserving' pupils and designed originally to inveigle

1 Books that offer summaries of lessons and answers to questions in school textbooks. These are available for all levels of education and all kinds of syllabi in Indian markets.

'greedy' parents into sending children to school. Prabha Shinde and Jyoti Gupta often made comments like the following:

> Prabha Shinde to Raviraj (SC) and Ashok (SC): 'Why don't you get new school uniforms stitched? [You] keep showing up in torn clothes! Government has given you the money, hasn't it?' (Fieldnotes)

Teachers failed to appreciate that the money provided by the state was inadequate for two sets of uniforms, and school-related expenses, like notebooks, bags and shoes exhausted the meagre incomes of parents like Lakshmi. Such comments also capture teachers' classed and casted 'illiberalism' (Fernandes and Heller 2006). Since liberalization offered the largely upper caste middle class the promise of greater upward mobility they have failed to see how it worsened informal workers' working conditions; why welfare benefits are crucial to the latter's survival, or how informal workers have fought for these benefits from the state, asserting rights as citizens when employers refuse to grant fair wages and social security (Agarwala 2013).

Teachers' also felt frustrated with welfare administration because it took up time and effort that should have been spent teaching. Usha Pandey, who avoided doing any of her administrative work in the classroom, regretted that this work had not allowed her to focus on "weaker" students at the beginning of the academic year thus affecting those students' performance all year. This was also because state schools, despite being a crucial link between labour class children and the welfare state, lacked support staff and adequate infrastructure. An old computer had been donated by a local bank, but there was no internet, landline phone, or printer at the school. Teachers had occasionally also had to pay for expenses out of their pockets: e.g., electricity bills, photocopying official documents, remunerating the casually employed and low-paid Midday Meal Helper for additional work. India's school system has always been stratified and post-liberalisation privatisation has intensified even as state spending on school education has reduced or stagnated (Jha 2005). Thus, whilst the large mass of Indians continues to rely on state schools, this category of schools operates with much fewer resources compared to elite

private and government schools (ibid, Nambissan and Batra 1989). Significantly, it was under the (post)colonial state that teachers turned into 'important local functionaries of the government bureaucracy'; if this led to manifold increase in teachers' administrative burden it also compounded their authority, viz. a viz. labour class communities as they began to mediate the latter's relationship with the modern state (Balagopalan and Subrahmanian 2003, 52).

I suggest that lack of infrastructure and stratified schooling shape middle-class teachers' relationships with labour class pupils and pedagogic and disciplinary processes in the classroom. I found Prabha Shinde acting differently in the classroom sometimes when she was free of administrative work. For example, one afternoon she had to cover for Usha Pandey. Even though Science was not her subject, Prabha Shinde made students read out passages from the ongoing science lesson, explained meanings of difficult words to the pupils, and showed uncharacteristic patience with Taruna (SC) who was considered a 'weak' student and was nervous about reading out loud. Though rare, these instances of kindness and patience show that given the right kind of support teachers and classrooms could be quite different.

Such instances also had the potential to motivate pupils. In the weeks leading to the *Pratibha Parv* Manish Tiwari spent all his spare time revising mathematical concepts with Class VIII pupils and thus, supplementing regular teaching by Preeti Mali. The test largely required only basic knowledge of most subjects and revising concepts from lower grades was useful in preparing for it. This proved to be quite useful for pupils since many of them struggled with concepts from Classes VI and VII. During one such revision class Manish Tiwari asked pupils to recite multiplication tables and invited Taruna to the front:

> Taruna tried to speak twice and then Manish Tiwari asked her to write. He praised her for her courage and confidence in speaking before three teachers (including me) and the whole class…. [He is] very warm and supportive today. Got people to clap for her after multiplication tables of 9 and 12. (Fieldnotes)

In the weeks following this episode I found Taruna making impressive efforts to engage in class and prepare for examinations; this was striking given her previous disengagement. She even began to tackle Math problems on her own. That Manish Tiwari's efforts and praise were responsible was evident from the fact that during her regular Math class, taught by Preeti Mali, Taruna still refused to copy anything from the blackboard.

> I've asked Taruna in interviews why she does not write anything during classes and she often shrugs or laughs at the question because she, perhaps, thinks that I've no right to ask. Today during Math class she snapped back at me: 'What good will it be to write?' Just before that waving her hand at the blackboard full of sums Preeti Mali had solved, she demanded, 'you have written so much, explain what it is too!' (Fieldnotes)

Taruna's efforts and remarks capture the centrality of teachers' efforts to pupils' learning and motivation. But even teachers who taught sincerely failed to see that their efforts motivated pupils to try harder to engage. I found that even pupils who were regularly scolded by Prabha Shinde, Manish Tiwari and Usha Pandey tried to follow their instructions and engage with their teaching. However, ignorant of such efforts, all three teachers despaired of any improvement in their pupils' levels of motivation or achievement. They did not find the overwhelming reliance on rote-learning, which required regular support at home, problematic. They did not seem to appreciate that 'first generation learners' may have a specific set of pedagogic needs (Ramachandran 2004); or that an unsympathetic and aggressive atmosphere could prevent students from approaching them for help. Except Usha Pandey, who wanted a proper library and smaller class-size, no teacher expressed any inclination to examine teaching methods, textbook content, or their view of their pupils. They only saw that labour class pupils' achievements fell below required levels, which they blamed on pupils' and parents' perceived lack of effort. They 'believed that student deficiencies, rooted in social conditions beyond the school, posed an insurmountable obstacle.' (Lipman 1998, p.81) This view prevented them from noticing Taruna's excitement at her smallest conceptual advancement, her struggle to build on it, or

from offering appropriate support.

Conclusion

This paper challenges (inter)national development discourses around the relationship between schooling and poverty in the global South by interrogating classroom processes and teacher-pupil relations in an urban Indian state school in the light of poor pupils' socioeconomic locations and wider economic logics. It makes important empirical and theoretical contributions to sociological analyses of schooling by developing and demonstrating a theoretical framework that brings together political economy perspectives, sociological analyses of economic inequality and the notion of 'deficit view' to explain how class and caste relations inscribe teacher-pupil interaction and relations. It shows the economic and physical hardships faced by poor parents and how economic constraints shape their efforts to support their children's schooling. While poverty restricts labour class families' options to state schools with inadequate infrastructure, parents' inability to cope with academic demands of schooling also makes their children's classroom lives harder. Poverty also forces parents to rely on welfare while their working conditions prevent them from meeting bureaucratic demands relating to welfare disbursal at school, especially, submitting documents proving eligibility.

Teachers' failure to recognise these struggles further strengthens their perception of labour class children as unteachable and unmanageable; whilst this deficit view renders children's struggles and efforts to learn invisible for teachers, it also keeps the focus on disciplining pupils rather than supporting their learning. The deficit model is reflected not only in classroom practice but in policy as well; it leaves state schools ill-provisioned when these are the only schools accessible to poor pupils whose parents cannot summon the educational and financial capital that middle class parents can. Thus, socioeconomic and educational stratification combine to produce both, 'labour class' pupils as well as their specific experiences of struggle and marginalisation in the classroom. Clearly, the questions of

poverty and poor pupils' schooling are complex economic and political ones, not individual or societal ones, and need to be addressed in conjunction with each other.

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i I discuss the intersections of gender with caste and class-based exclusion elsewhere (Author 2020).

ii I have discussed urban children's (un)waged work elsewhere (Author 2018, 2020).

iii In this paper I follow India's official classification: 'Others' are upper caste (UC) Hindus and everyone else who does not fall into the other three categories; 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC) are located between upper castes and 'Scheduled Castes' (SC) who are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and the ex-'untouchable' castes. Scheduled Tribes (ST) are not considered part of the caste system and economic discrimination faced by the socioeconomically and educationally marginalised STs is beyond the scope of this paper. I have used following short-forms throughout: UC, OBC, SC, ST.

iv Pseudonyms used throughout.

v She will be replaced later in the academic year by Geeta Sisodiya (UC).

vi OBC and Others include Muslim pupils as well but economic discrimination based on religion was beyond the scope of my project.

vii Indigenous equivalent of cigarette, made from roll *tendu* leaves.