

Aspirations and politics of education

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Abstract:

This paper explores the concept of 'aspirations' as a construct deeply embedded within the politics of education. It engages with the aspirations of young people situated in contexts of marginalization, specifically examining how aspirational discourses diverge across class boundaries. The study investigates the dialectical relationship between the aspirations of women students and the institutional frameworks of education, exploring how those at the social margins navigate these spaces. Furthermore, it analyzes the convergence of community expectations and institutional biases, which frequently compel marginalized students to perform a 'double labor' of academic achievement and cultural negotiation. Ultimately, this paper addresses how experiences and expectations within educational environments are positioned within intersectional dynamics that sustain social inequities.

Keywords: Aspiration, Politics of Education, Intersectionality, Marginalization, Cultural Capital, Social Reproduction.

Introduction:

This paper explores the concept of 'aspirations' and how it is embedded within the politics of education. This paper is divided into three sections which address a) what is understood by aspiration and how it is articulated within the literature; the second section discusses why it is important to engage with young people's aspirations in the context of marginalization and how the discourse differs across class boundaries; the third section focuses on the aspiration for and from education amongst the those in margins of society and how does the experience of and expectation from educational spaces gets situated within an intersectional space that reproduces social inequalities.

Aspirations are often bound and determined by an assessment of what choices we can possibly act on, and the negotiation between abstract choices and structures that mediate our chances of exercising these choices shape much of an individual's lived experience as well as their worldviews (Sen 1988). Within a rapidly evolving political economy, changes in aspirations, particularly in the developing world, have engendered the creation of new needs, but even the 'capacity to aspire' is not evenly distributed across groups. Nathan (2005, p.36) argues:

"The capacity to aspire depends on existing capabilities and practices. While these are decided, among other things, by set traditions and modes of group interaction and development, aspirations can be modified through conscious interventions in the shape of education, communication and a greater exposure to the wider world."

Amartya Sen's work points towards (1993) complex capabilities, like agency or the ability to decide and act amidst externally set constraints defines and reflect people's ability to choose and aspire to live different kinds of lives and this aspiration for overcoming the external constraint is something which motivates people, gives them confidence to complete their goals and provides direction towards goals (Walker, 2018). Arjun Appadurai (2004) also talks about the 'capacity to aspire' which is unevenly distributed amongst groups. The gendered division of social responsibilities, cultural and religious expectations from women from different class locations mediates what choices are considered 'natural', 'doable' and often inevitable for women. Stahl et al. also note that often the concept of aspiration gets discussed in a narrow sense in the literature and does not go beyond the binaries of 'success' and 'failure' (Sellar and Gale, 2011; Stahl, 2015, as cited in Stahl et al., 2019, p. 1). On the other hand, it can be argued that the capacity to aspire for and the actual aspiration for women is not something which solely defines their success, or achievements in their life, but it needs to be viewed as a tool which has a potential to provide confidence and autonomy over their own life choices and decisions. For many women, aspiration could also be about building an empathetic relationship with people, family and society where they feel heard and considered as respected individuals. It is also something which gives them the agency to think about their own self, their social relationship with the other self, reflect upon their choices and recognize their subjectivities.

The Concept of Aspiration:

It is important to talk about aspiration because aspiration is the process of development of humans in relation to society and economy, “because it is a manifestation of the freedom to aspire which is valuable for human flourishing in its own right” (Hart, 2016, p. 336). It is defined as “the hope or ambition of achieving a goal or setting oneself on a particular pathway” (Stahl et al., 2019, p. 1). Further, Hart (2016) points out that there are challenges related to the “development and protection of the freedom to aspire, the challenge of supporting the transformation of aspirations into capabilities, the dilemmas related to the judgment of feasibility and the roles of aspiring in relation to both capability and functioning” (Hart, 2016, p. 337). Cultivation and nurturing of aspiration amongst the youth entails nurturing it as an expression of freedom, agency, and autonomy. Walker and Unterhalter (2007) talk about the importance of equalizing equal opportunities and resources to all individuals so that they can develop their capabilities, in the absence of which individuals experience what is essentially a state of ‘unfreedom’ inability to act on their choices. They argue that it is important to observe functioning to evaluate capability because while each person’s capabilities might vary, their actual functioning provides insight into how these capabilities are being utilized. In order to assess functioning, it's important to consider both choices and how well an individual can actually exercise freedom in acting on these choices. In order to maximize people's potential, one must assess people's freedom to make decisions they value and work to remove obstacles in their way (Sen, 1993). In addition, Sen (1993) emphasizes that freedom and agency are the most important and significant components of the capability approach. It is significant to talk about aspiration because individuals’ aspirations are located in a certain social, economic, cultural and political contexts. For instance, a woman’s decision to perform work outside the domestic space can be viewed as a decision to overcome financial constraints but it could equally be about overcoming the routine psychological subjugation that takes place inside the home, not having agency to exercise financial decisions and life choices due to patriarchal structures and norms.

Hart (2016, p. 326) argues that “aspirations are future-oriented, driven by conscious and unconscious motivations and they are indicative of an individual or group’s commitments towards a particular trajectory or stand point”. So there are different types of aspirations and one could understand aspirations in varied forms. For instance, aspiration could be educational aspiration, occupational aspiration, aspirations related to attainment purposes, etc. Baars (2014)

has argued that occupational aspiration is that which can have some potential to a good paid job with security and material well-being. Hart (2016) suggests that it is important to view aspirations as multi-dimensional, varying in importance and time scale. Aspiration may be latent and can surface or emerge slowly, they may be institutional, political, and legal. Aspirations may even relate to home, school, and work, national or international life. Whilst aspirations are future- oriented they may also pertain to the continuity of a present state of being (Hart 2016, p. 326). Sinclair et al. (2010) classify aspirations in three ways, the first one is high aspiration which indicates 'Go to University', 'Start your own Business', the second is intermediate aspiration- 'Go to College', 'Get a Job', 'Joining Training Scheme', 'Get an apprenticeship', and the third is low aspiration, which indicates limited goals, ambitions, and expectations for their future. These may also be bound in an intricate mesh of ethics and social prejudices, as Mathew (2018, p.72) points out "aspiring is a practice of ethics that marginalized mothers mobilize to negotiate memories of deprivation and yearnings for good futures, in the present. Meanwhile, educators' specific shaming of non-elite aspirations for English schooling reveals their anxieties concerning disrupted local hierarchies, symbolized by non-elite English schooling." This renders the context and location from which aspirations are viewed bound by the lens of power and inequality.

Placing aspiration in the context of marginalization:

Why is it important to understand aspirations with reference to marginalization? What does aspiration mean in the context of marginalized identities? These become relevant questions as one recognises the deeply political nature of the realm of dreams and aspirations across the zone of deprivation. Mathew (2018) talks about migrant groups and their deprived conditions which alienate them from the elite culture of English language education and the opportunities which they can possibly aspire to. Moreover, she explains how individuals from non-English medium backgrounds face cultural alienation and academic marginalization due to the cultural dominance of English language education. Mathew (2018) refers to 'practices of ethics' which creates many challenges and excludes these individuals from accessing opportunities and benefits that accrue from English language. Aspiration of the marginalized groups becomes an important element to discuss because structural disadvantages need to be

recognized for human growth and equal rights to live a dignified life, or have equal representation in the society.

Here it is not only important to discuss aspiration in reference to marginalization but also to be conscious about their existence, contribution and equal representation. It is also relevant in terms of values, choice and capability which Sen discussed. If we talk about aspirations, it is important to understand how habitus and social location of caste, class, gender play a significant role in the context of marginalization and the efforts to overcome it. It becomes relevant to discuss how aspiration could be low and higher or average, if we talk about in reference to marginalization. Sinclair et al (2010) say that aspiration is always thought of as a term which has individual attributes to it, that aspiring is essentially individualistic in nature and therefore one has an 'open choice'. However, aspirations and its narrative are social in nature as it tells about the society in general, not about an individual. Having low aspiration means that the capacity to fulfill something is lesser in localities which are structurally disadvantaged. It is argued that there are internal blockages which keep certain people away from what can be called 'aspirations' i.e. channels of upward social mobility (Sinclair et al, 2010). The policy intervention in this area, the authors describe, links low aspirations with low achievement, people from poorer backgrounds or structurally disadvantaged positions have deprived aspirations which in the end affects their job prospects. Nevertheless, raising these aspirations can help in breaking the cycle and would lead youth from deprived backgrounds to improve their socio-economic status. It is reflecting that aspiration is not individual but it is shaped by family, neighborhood surrounding, friends, teachers etc. But it is also important to note that people's aspirations emerge and are bound by structured inequality tied to their caste, class, race and gender locations. These locations that engender systemic inequality reflect how aspirations vary and affect the marginalised communities by inevitably shaping their 'low' or 'high' aspirations. How does a woman or a dalit or a middle class or an upper caste individual, or disabled person make sense of their aspiration? These questions therefore become worthwhile to examine. For instance, how aspiration works in the context of the middle-class individual or even as a collective, in terms of defining the contours of their low/high aspiration would be different from how aspiration works in the context of the individual from a socio-economically disadvantaged group. This complex dynamic helps to understand how aspirations intersect with social location of individuals and communities, in which some enjoy privileges

and some live with disadvantages and deprivation normalised. Fernandes & Heller (2006) argue that these processes are very much a part of the formation of the identity of the class group-what it means to belong to the middle class. They highlight the critical role that cultural and educational capital plays in strengthening the social-economic location and hegemony of the middle class, as “ it actively engages in hoarding and leveraging its accumulated privileges and in reproducing social distinction, educational and sociocultural inequalities and identities (such as those based on caste and language) are an integral part of the process of middle-class formation” (Fernandes & Heller, 2006, p. 496-497).

Intersection of aspiration, education and politics:

Marginalized people make sense of their aspirational decisions on the basis of resources which are available or which are not available and their “choices are also deeply shaped by the structure of opportunities available to them so that a disadvantaged group comes to accept its status within the hierarchy as correct even when it involves a denial of opportunities” (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 6). That is why it becomes relevant to understand how aspiration works within the economy of distribution of resources. The questions of resources are related to the questions of politics because politics is concerned with access and denial of, and distribution of resources and thus they play a significant role in shaping aspiration or in terms of aspiring towards something. Resources—cultural, economic, academic, often influence the extent to which social actors are able to envision and fulfill their aspirations. Individuals and groups who do not have such resources also by the same token fail to aspire or acquire the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004) for mobility or social positions due to constraints of economic resources, as much as absence of social capital reflected in weak and limited social and friendship networks. What kind of school different individuals attend, what type of environment and surroundings they live in, what social location they come from, what kind of educational knowledge their parents already have or have not etc, they all play a significant role in deciding access to/ denial of resources and social networks in achieving their aspirations. As Sen (1993) also emphasizes, equalizing the ownership of resources may not equalize the substantive freedoms enjoyed by different persons, since there can be significant variations in the conversion of resources and primary goods into freedoms. Moreover, Sen argues that what we should equalize is not

resources, but emphasizes on equalizing human capabilities, that is what people are able to be and to do (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 3).

When we talk about resources here it is also significantly important to understand that aspiration works in relation to education. For example, what is the women's aspiration for higher education and why do women aspire for higher education—is a question that cannot be addressed simply from the lens of gender and patriarchy but is closely bound in an intersectional framework. Even as India has reached gender parity in access to higher education, the potential of converting the capabilities acquired through higher education into real choices and 'freedoms' to choose to act and be are closely tied to the zone of aspiration or the capacity to aspire that women students bring with them to the higher education space. Access to higher education and its outcomes/returns are thus closely tied to and interdependent on an individual's aspirations in terms of agency, autonomy and freedom of expression and equality that the social actors/young people experience from within their gendered, linguistic, class and caste locations.

"By considering agency, we must determine if different students are acknowledged on a social and academic level as having equal claims to resources and opportunities. A key component of the capacity approach is education. Human freedoms are increased when people have access to education and obtain educational skills. It plays an empowering and distributive role in making it easier for the disadvantaged, underprivileged, and excluded to form political organisations' (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p.8).

In this context, receiving a low-quality education therefore can introduce drawbacks and deprivations that can last a lifetime. Our decisions and how we navigate our lives get influenced by the positive and negative formal education experiences one gets in schools, colleges, and universities (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p.11). Mathew (2018) also pointed out that in the context of migrant populations in her study, people who don't have financial stability to send their children to English medium school, raise concerns related to the equality of education and how the cultural dominance of a particular language within the educational institutions affect these children's eventual career pathways. This Mathew (2018) argues, can also be seen as the aspiration shaming which tells about the nature of aspiration, the way it is embedded

structurally and the social construction of human capability in the absence of equal opportunities and equal access to resources.

Discussion:

Aspiration is a deeply political construct as it is embedded under the system of controls, power and systemic inequality within which locations of domination are structured that exercise control over the extent to which people can experience autonomy, agency, freedom and mobility. Education can be seen to play an important role in enhancing capabilities of individuals in exercising their agency, freedom and in facilitating mobility. Stout, Tallerico & Scribner (2003) observe that questions of access, quality, equality are the questions of politics and education, which intersect with aspiration. Access to education is shaped by different social structures. The question of access to education and access to resources is also constructed under the system, which itself is the question of who is deciding what and who has privilege and power to have control over education and system? Shaping of aspirations itself becomes a political process as it gets constituted within a system of advantages and disadvantages located within the geography of caste, class and gender and embedded within it, the question becomes significant as to how aspirations emerge or get suppressed in relation to the system. Aspiration is concerned with making choices but these choices are also influenced by larger social, economic, cultural and political structures of society. These structures play a crucial role in deciding who gets what and constructs social identities of people.

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