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Culture Shock at Universities: Suburban Students and their Experience of Marginality

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Marginality is a condition of disadvantaged individuals and communities that arises due to unfavourable environmental, cultural, social, political and economic factors. The vulnerable situation that they confront can be either societal or spatial, very often, both. This paper seeks to understand predicaments and vulnerabilities of students coming to universities in metropolitan Kolkata from the margins of the city, more often referred to as the "suburbs".

The study is an attempt to relook marginality in the face of globalisation and dissect the context of regionalism in this light. The study has gathered strength from case studies of students coming to universities from these regions and an account of their conditions and sense of discrimination has been recorded. Their sense of marginality finds manifestation in difference of language, more precisely their speech and diction, fashion and most importantly lifestyle. Tracing the origin of the concept of marginality back to the one who coined it, Robert Ezra Park (1928), young students were found placed between multiple cultures and their negotiations give rise to a "hybrid" personality or the marginal man. Students from suburbs might not necessarily have pronounced class differences with the local residential students, but their possession of "cultural capital" and further access to it in the universities often become a ripe condition for furthering marginalization. Finally, the paper engages in addressing the vital question – whether to uphold "affirmative action" and support the marginal status, or create a collective of poorly privileged?

Keywords: marginality, suburbs, cultural capital, culture shock, affirmative action, hybrid personality.

Introduction

Marginalisation of a certain section of the society can be perceived as a natural social process following the changing dynamics of socio-cultural situations. Marginality experienced in modern times can be traced back to several historical factors such as caste, class, ethnicity and gender. Sometimes these factors work individually and sometimes in combination.

In the globalised world, however, marginalisation has come to redefine itself, thanks to the changing hierarchy in the established social ladder of a hitherto-stratified society. Subtle yet strong differences in the form of fashion, language, speech, everyday habits and knowledge distribution have come to the fore like never before.

Universities, as they bring youths together, try to dilute the old boundaries between the urban and the rural, and, in the process, resurrect new ones - between the mainstream and the marginalised. Students from the fringes of the society, mostly suburban, seem to be culturally attacked by the dominant urban culture particularly in the areas of habits and lifestyle.

However, the attack is as real as it is perceived by the victims and the so called "attackers". The suburban students' sense of stigmatization is varied and partially influenced by the information cascading upon them from past experiences of others. The attacker's role is also marked with a lot of fluidity, with many having a different story to tell; there are stories of self-subjugation and sense of inferiority among the suburban in contrast to the much-popularized tales of domination and discrimination.

Marginality is generally seen as a condition of disadvantage, arising out of unfavourable environmental, cultural, social, political and economic conditions. The vulnerabilities that the marginalised students confront can be defined either as societal or spatial. The "societal" elaborates dimensions such as religion, culture, caste, class, ethnicity, gender and economic condition. The "spatial", though not exclusive of the societal disparity, is usually about geographical remoteness of an area from mainstream development (Brodwin 2001; Müller-Böker, et al. 2004). However, social and spatial marginality occurs everywhere and often overlap.

The idea of "stranger" and "marginal man"

While discussing modernity, one surely cannot miss out on the logic of social exclusion at the level of social and spatial. And talking of this spatial and social exclusion, we need to reflect upon the Simmelian (1858) idea of space and the idea of "proximity and remoteness" that defines the social group.

Simmel's sociology of space emphasizes that the "social" emerges with a lot of distance and movements within spatial boundaries, wherein the social life is merely not influenced by static structures. Hence, it follows that "sociation", as a pattern of interaction, fills the space: 'Social interaction among human beings is – apart from everything else it is – also experienced as a realization of space' (Simmel 1908/2009c: 545).

In the context of the sociology of space and Simmel's work called 'Metropolis and Mental life' (1903) he claims that the city is not just a locus of social differentiation or complex social interaction, but also subsumes endless number of collectives. Its inherent openness and opportunities draws close different social groups and, at the same time, separates them. Simmel upholds spatial relations to show how social distinctions arise and continue. According to him, distances are both spatial and social, as they are bodily and symbolic, real and constructed. Hence, Simmel observes, the "stranger" comes to exist and his position is quite relational, or, to be more specific, transitional in the group he establishes contact with.

Influenced by Simmel, American sociologist Robert K. Park (1928) introduced the concept "marginal man". For him, the marginal man is the one who bears in himself the cultural conflict emerging from intermingling of various groups, cultures, communities. The outcast develops a personality that belongs to his native and not organic of the host culture. Here Park's marginal man is identified with the stranger as a social type. However, the marginal man is remarkably different, in terms of concept, from the stranger, as the former forms a cultural hybrid, who doesn't have equal membership in a new group although he might be consciously asking for it. But, Simmel's "stranger" consciously seeks no assimilation and lies like a wanderer, coming in and going out of the group. Park's scholarship and subsequent analogies have been heavily influenced by the social circumstances experienced

by the immigrants in the United States – a person between the “old” and “new” cultures (Allen 2000). But Simmel’s understanding of the stranger was quite independent of any particular ethnographic account and thereby illustrates how engagement in interactions produces a personality that is spatially close to the other yet socially distant.

Personification of both the “stranger” and the “marginalized man” is common in any marginalized social condition. The university campus is an amalgamation of students with diverse cultures and confronting ideals, if not in a state of complete antagonism. The struggle and bargains of the ones retreating to the margins because of the cultural hegemony of the widely accepted gives birth to the intermediary or the cultural hybrids. The relative “proximity of space and social remoteness” is very well maintained so that they retain an identity distinct from the mainstream.

Culture shock and stigma

The concept of social distance and spatial proximity opens up the narrative of symbolic culture and its material references. The newcomer confronts contradicting experiences between his original and host culture. Such contradiction often precipitates into a sense of anxiety, often a state of shock, as one fails to find common symbols and beliefs in the new social intercourse.

The suburban youth, needless to say, are taken over by a feeling of inferiority. In response, they either withdraw or blame the other for looking down upon them and criticizing their way of life, as they are far from the mainstream. The idea of “stigma” (Goffman 1963) gradually seeps in at this phase; the stigmatized begins anticipating attributes that are deeply “discrediting” and fear those that could be “discreditable” in their social setting. But it is often the language of relationships, not attributes, which transpires to build this state of discrimination and defines the status of the marginal. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself (Goffman 1963: 4-10).

The exchange of symbols in our everyday life ranges from habits to language: the clothes we wear, the type of food we eat, the

time and space of our eating, the gestures we deploy in communication and their significance, and so forth. Physical proximity to the strange environment is mostly met with ethnocentrism initially or more precisely "culture shock" (Oberg 1960). The newcomer or stranger in the university campus rejects everything he or she encounters, as all the beliefs and cues of symbolic interaction are foreign and discomforting to him, more so because of his "anticipated" sense of usual and conceived sense of discrimination.

There are cases where response of every individual to such cultural import - and at times perceived imposition - isn't the same. The youth at the university often experiences a sense of "euphoria" (honeymoon phase) with the new surroundings and finds everything quite enchanting. Unlike the ones displaying ethnocentrism, the ones in the euphoric state can grappled with the sense of marginality less.

In fact, the sense of alienation defines the marginalised condition of those who reject the new beliefs, ideas and the ways they are exposed to. The marginalised enter into a "regression stage" whereby they begin to glorify the culture they had been born into and begin "stereotyping" the other.

In *Practical Anthropology* (1960) Oberg divides culture shock into four stages and says that it's the reactionary attitude that makes the group experience cultural shock to design "stereotypes" about the host culture, and to romanticize one's own. Finally, as a sense of "resignation" sets in among the university students, the marginal comes to term with their social and spatial contrast and develop various coping mechanisms, at times ideological and often political.

Case studies from the campus

In order to illustrate of some of the observations outlined above, which are essentially conceptual in nature, I have done some case studies of students from different university campuses in Kolkata. The narratives presented below are based on experiences of the newcomers to the university from the suburban locales.

These go on to build a foundational position of difference and association between the suburban and urban students, as perceived by the former. The university as a new space of social interaction for the youth has been revisited through their ideas of and agency. Several ethnographic details echoed similar understanding of the plight of a marginal identity, while some did reflect variation in response.

A girl from Hooghly district said: 'We are considered the *geyon bhoots* (the uncouth and uncivilized coming straight from the villages.' She recalled how initially everyone made fun of her diction as she stressed on the *shh* syllable, which is so common to the sub-urban and rural Bengalis, making her sound funny to others. Her experience made her unlearn her native diction and correct her speech. On doing so, she says, she felt less humiliated and her ideas got relatively better attention. However, the acceptance of the marginalized that we see here does not speak of a change in the definition of the normal. Rather it's more of an acknowledgement of the "transformed self", trying to get into the mainstream.

One boy from Cooch Behar shared a slightly different experience. He said: 'From the very first day everyone was quite interested in my stories about the princely zamindar of the place I belonged to, though I am not very adept in speaking English fluently.' But he also mentioned that he faced scornful remarks from his urban counterparts when he showed displeasure about girls smoking on the campus. His understanding of gender rights and equality was heavily questioned. So, his acceptance and rejection became a negotiating point, where, on one hand he celebrated his originality and on the other, prepared himself for the adoption of an unknown culture like a "hybrid".

One of his close friends from the city, when asked about his interactions with the boy, said: 'They live with clichés and often do not like to experiment.' He also added that their attempt to abandon old ways and adopt the urban style often make them look like "wannabes". Some elaborated the idea of wannabes as the 'ones with disastrous fashion sense and who do everything in excess, such as smoking, drinking and speaking on topics that they seem to know nothing about.' Such and many more

“stereotypes” surfaced over several interviews with the respondents.

It has been noted that the cultural hybrid flourishes most in terms of fashion. A girl revealed how she felt ostracized because of the supposedly old-fashioned clothes that she wore on the university campus: ‘I was asked if I wore my mother’s clothes from her younger days’. Presumed ideas about what is normal made her copy everything blindly that would give her a modern look. At the same time, several urban students elucidated on how they celebrated the look that is otherwise widely unacceptable to the people outside the campus. Thus, we see how the concept of “ideal look” varies from one group to the other and is dependent on the position they occupy in the scale of power.

Further, participant observation aided in gathering common terms and phrases specific to this space and ones that symbolically represent the practices and politics of marginality % such as “bourgeois canteen”, referring to expensive eateries; or “café culture”, meaning intellectual exchanges during leisure time – from which the participation of the suburban youth is mostly discounted.

Forms of marginality

1. Language, speech and diction

Language defines one’s identity, and while the knowledge of language is one thing, diction is quite another. Diction makes all the difference, even though universities and higher educational institutes develop a “standard” language ideology – the belief in a common, “correct” medium of communication for the educated individuals (Lippi-Green 1997, 2012; Milroy 2001). This standardisation of language permeates beyond the classroom into the “more social” spaces shared by the students during their leisure time, but students from the suburbs who attended municipality and government schools because of the subsidized fee structure remain skeptical about the use of a single uniform language, that is English. Students from the departments like Bengali and Sanskrit also experience heavy dependence on English language for social communication while their medium of instruction and study, both, do not require the same. Suburban students see this as a cultural

"fad" adopted by the urban students. It generally seems true that members of a social category may strongly support a standard of judgment that they, as a collective, feel more inclined to agree upon, even when it does not apply to them directly. It often helps them redefine themselves in relation to the one negated and that opens up a new debate around marginality.

Bourdieu (1991) has suggested that educational institutions propagate standard language ideology, which raises doubt among certain speakers regarding the correctness of their speech and diction. They not only start considering their medium of communication as less prestigious than the so-called "standard" promoted by the dominant urban class but also begin to question the meaningfulness of one's ideas and stock of knowledge. Thus, students with stigmatized speech and diction often suffer from insecurity of rejection on the grounds of being considered less educated or intelligent (Lippi-Green 1997: 2012). Since language and identity are inextricably related, rejection of a person's language or stigmatization of a particular diction in a sense manifests xenophobia. Many students feel a tension between their speech back home and that expected at the university; therefore, they try unlearning and associate the pain of leaving the comfort zone as a tool of discrimination. Scott has observed: 'language is a critical issue for scholars and practitioners in educational leadership for social justice because it is such a powerful vehicle of culture' (2008: 59). Hence such homogenization into a single uniform speech threatens students' smooth interaction on the campus. A sense of marginalization creeps in leading to stereotyping of the host culture as close-minded and discriminating.

2. Knowledge exchange and cultural capital

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984) Bourdieu explored the concept of cultural capital and mentioned about the conventional hierarchies of the arts and cultural activities (visiting art galleries, reading or listening to the classics, going to the theatre or to art cinema etc.) He mentioned that education system patronizes participation in legitimate culture and continues to serve as a marker of social distinction. Such culture reflects the choices of the dominant class and plays a

significant role in the selection and assessment practices of the university systems. Cultural capital is a scarce resource that the young borrows from the family and educational institutes. This over-the-years accumulation helps further acquisition of knowledge, skills, and a sense of the rules-of-the-game in the educational system, which is recognized as the yardstick for success by the institutional gatekeepers and peers.

It has been observed that the students from the urban background are more privileged, as they belong to more economically affluent families and consequently have better access to cultural and social capital. Although, it cannot be concluded that the urban students always belong to higher class and students from the suburban represent the middle or lower class and thereby lack requisite cultural capital. There have been several cases where respondents of this study have mentioned about their regional knowledge and experiences finding wide acceptance in the mainstream academic structure. However, these voices though absorbed and celebrated are done so with a fair recognition of their marginality. Hence anticipation of attributes of any stranger plays a strong role in defining him and his scholarship - be it mainstream or marginal.

Rich in cultural capital back at home, urban students at the universities often have an advantage of replicating the same capital for academic pursuits and scholarly engagements. In fact, the suburban students have expressed their lack of social contacts in the cities and thereby a deficit of requisite stock knowledge for initiating further exchange. In contrast, the urban students enter the classrooms with much preparedness for academic interaction, use of the institutional facilities (such as library facility) and accumulation of knowledge. It is here and beyond the classroom, during their leisure time and interaction with peers that the suburban students miss a level ground to initiate an equal exchange. Certain kind of knowledge hierarchy exists in the interactions between the urban and suburban students and that moulds the conceptualization of "the other" (by the urban) as less powerful and less informed. There have been experiences where students of both groups -urban and suburban - have designated an assigned seating position to each other. Famously, "the first bench" is marked out as an area for the more interactive urban and hence avoided by the suburban students. This

acceptance of the hierarchy in everyday discourse and action speak aloud of their lack of self-confidence and a sense of alienation based on their preconceived notions of reality.

Besides, the suburban students predominantly come from families, which can be bracketed as "salaried, middle income group", guiding them into a similar career choice for early economic benefits. Hence, knowledge exchange also becomes quite structured and oriented towards a purposive end. On the contrary, their urban counterparts often do not have such limiting forces working against them. This contrast in value orientation also marks them separate from each other and pushes them to a state of group solidarity based on similar interests and goals of livelihood. However, it has also been observed that often some suburban students gain impetus from their contact with the urban and show ambitions of transcending their marginal modalities and engaging in a career that is outside the defined periphery of the so-called marginal. But the struggle of defining the marginal and living those traits, handed down over time, remains.

3. Fashion and habits

Fashioning a style and setting trend is predominant among the university students, particularly in urban space. Fashion, in broad sense, refers, among other things, to dress, appearance and style, which give a material foundation to identity formation. The youth often associates and asserts themselves through their clothing and styling of their bodies and hair. It produces a significant material culture and acts as a symbolic system to transmit an identity, which both, aligns to a particular group and states its distinctiveness. According to Simmel (1858), fashion can be seen as a non-cumulative change in cultural features, emerging from a tension between the social and individual existence of man. On one hand, students at the campus try to imitate the predominant clothing standards maintained at the university, mostly helping them recreate their identities as a loyal member of the group. On the other, there is a strong tendency to distinguish one from others. Hence, one must not mistake this imitation as an attempt at building any sort of uniformity because individual deviations are plenty. Undoubtedly, some tend more towards imitation (and thus

to conformism) while others tend to distinction (and thus to eccentricity and dissidence). In short, Simmel argues that an individual tends to imitate those whom they admire and distinguish themselves from people they are indifferent to or despise.

Fashioning of clothes, mannerisms and styles, ranging from haircuts, body art, tattoo, clothes, to smoking and eating habits, by the students at the campus, reflect imitation of the global trends, which is guided by their ownership of requisite cultural capital. Urban students' sense of fashion reflects more experimentation, westernization and, at times, is more eclectic. There can be no doubt that a certain class hierarchy is embedded in their styles and habits. For instance, the brands that they wear and the kind of food they eat at the canteen definitely reflect higher price margins. However, imitation of the popular style is also prevalent among the suburban students. Since the sense of marginality descends upon them with the greatest force in terms of their clothing, food habits and gestures; the eagerness to transform is also maximum. Whereby, they engage into heavy smoking, drinking and other "infamously famous", attributes that are assigned to the popular urban by the suburban themselves. The popular and dominant style that initially shocked the suburban youth, primarily due to its distinctiveness and secondly, its deviance from the values and standards of their original cultural symbols, now becomes a part of them. Thereby the concept of "normal" or "usualness" becomes a mere perception allowing one to switch positions between the idea of marginal and the mainstream. Hence, distinction is often diverted into a discrimination discourse due to the assumed sense of alienation among the suburban and the claimed sense of superiority of style and lifestyle of the urban youth.

4. Activism for solidarity and action for strengthening boundaries

While discussing youth activism in the universities, one has to acknowledge the close link between activism and xenophobia and anti-xenophobia. Anti-xenophobic activism often tries to play against the discrimination and silent ostracization. Student activism lies as much outside the premise of political affiliation as much within it. Student political organisations in the universities

display vote bank politics similar to their national counterparts, making a clear demarcation between the urban and suburban student voters. There is a tendency among the students from the suburban to carry their familial political lineages into the universities and cast their votes accordingly. This trend often assures affiliation to a party that has prominent state presence, ensuring group solidarity among suburban students by drawing them under one political umbrella.

On the other hand, urban students explore their political rights and tend to remain outside the ambit of any political activity that has linkages to or sponsorship of state level parties. Hence, youth activists try to tap this xenophobic character of political participation at universities and split their voters on the basis of urban and suburban residents. This, in turn, widens the gap between the two but helps develop solidarity within the group based on the principles of conflict. In fact, the marginality politics subtly creeps in to ensure further estrangement.

My case studies and other ethnographic accounts have unravelled several cross cutting factors of discrimination which are at play against the suburban students. These students in most cases suffer a minority status too in terms of class, ethnicity or caste and enjoy "selective system bias" (Jencks 1998) through affirmative action programmes. Thus, the burden of discrimination is doubled, impacting them socially as well as culturally. They feel doubly disadvantaged, as the protective policies aggravate their sense of marginality with regular contact with the urban students on the campus. Thus, an unintended consequence of affirmative action is experienced in the form of reverse discrimination that further heightens intergroup tension (Lynch 1992).

Conclusion

Marginality has its roots in the older structures of social divisions. Culture shock, stigmatization and stereotyping find explanation in the older forms of caste, class and ethnic conflicts that still survive in the present social order. The apparently egalitarian structure of the university remains infested with a sense of discrimination and marginality simply because of the denial of better life chances to many sections of students. But the persisting question: is the

sense of alienation gripping the non-mainstream students that makes them accept the status of being marginalized, or is the dominant "culture of power" that is pushing them to the margin? While arguing the predominance of one over the other, one cannot dismiss the struggle against social dissociation by those at the margins, especially in a higher education institution. Also important is the question whether the other struggle to deliberately remain a "stranger" to the dominant culture. The truth is that when students at universities feel marginalized, they find themselves misfit and begin to wonder if they "matter" (Schlossberg 1989: 9) and this feeling often defeats the whole purpose of academic learning and personal growth. Thus, the social disparities and maladjustments at the level of larger structure are often negotiated at the expense of the suffering agency.

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