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BETWEEN STUDENT AND EMPLOYEE: THE SOCIAL IDENTITY OF "PREPARATION" AMONG YOUNG INDIANS RETHINKING THE "ASPIRANT" AS A LIMINAL STRUCTURAL CLASS IN THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF COMPETITIVE EXAMINATIONS

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Abstract—Millions of educated young Indians spend years cycling through education, competitive-examination preparation, failure or waiting, and re-preparation, long after formal schooling has ended and well before, if ever, formal employment begins. This paper argues that "preparation" for competitive examinations — for the civil services, banking, teaching, defence and state public-service commissions — has ceased to be a temporary, functional job-seeking activity and has instead hardened into a distinct social identity and structural position: that of the "aspirant." Drawing on secondary data — Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) reports, Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) statistics, and industry analyses of India's coaching economy — read through the theoretical lenses of Victor Turner's liminality, Erik Erikson's psychosocial moratorium, Craig Jeffrey's concept of waithood, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital and habitus, and Michael Sandel's critique of meritocracy, the paper builds a composite conceptual model of the "aspirant class." It further examines how this liminal identity is inflected by gender, caste and class, and by the commercial infrastructure of the coaching industry that profits from prolonged waiting. The paper concludes by outlining the policy and conceptual stakes of recognising aspiranthood as a legitimate object of sociological analysis rather than a residual or transitional category.

Keywords—aspirant class; liminality; waithood; competitive examinations; youth unemployment; coaching industry; India

I. INTRODUCTION

The trajectory that educated Indian youth are expected to follow is, in principle, linear: education completed, employment secured, adulthood attained. In practice, for a very large number of young people who aim at government service through competitive examinations, this

trajectory folds into a loop — education completed, preparation undertaken, an examination attempted, failure or waiting, re-preparation, another attempt — that can extend across five, seven, or even ten years of early adulthood. The question this paper asks is deceptively simple: when does "preparation" cease to be a temporary activity undertaken en route to a job, and become instead a social identity in its own right?

The conventional sociological vocabulary available to describe this population is inadequate. "Student" implies enrolment in a course of instruction leading to a credential; "unemployed" implies an involuntary absence from a labour market one is actively and immediately available to join; "employed" requires no elaboration. None of these terms captures the aspirant: a person who is neither enrolled nor idle, who works longer hours than most salaried employees yet draws no salary, who is not "waiting" in the passive sense but is engaged in an intensive, disciplined, often institutionally organised activity whose sole purpose is to convert itself into employment at some indeterminate future date. This paper's central argument is that the aspirant occupies a liminal social position, structurally located between studenthood and employment, and that this position has become, for a significant cohort of Indian youth, not a brief passage but a prolonged and sometimes permanent structural class.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section II conceptualises the aspirant as a category distinct from student, employee and "unemployed." Section III assembles a theoretical framework drawing on liminality, psychosocial moratorium, waithood, and Bourdieusian capital and habitus, read alongside Sandel's critique of meritocracy. Section IV uses secondary quantitative data — on graduate unemployment, examination funnels, and the coaching economy — to establish the empirical scale of aspiranthood in contemporary India. Sections V and VI examine how gender, caste and class differentiate the experience and duration of waiting. Section VII turns to the narrative strategies aspirants use to preserve self-worth, Section VIII discusses the conceptual and policy stakes of naming aspiranthood as a structural class, and Section IX concludes.

II. CONCEPTUALISING THE "ASPIRANT"

A student is defined by enrolment: a formal, time-bound relationship to an educational institution oriented toward a credential. An employee is defined by a formal, ongoing relationship to a labour market, marked by wages, contract and workplace. The aspirant fits neither definition. He or she has typically completed formal education — often a graduate or postgraduate degree — and stands outside any institution's enrolment rolls, yet is engaged in

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sustained, structured, full-time preparatory labour: attending coaching classes or self-study sessions of eight to twelve hours a day, sitting periodic mock examinations, tracking syllabi and notifications, and participating in dense peer networks organised around a shared, singular goal.

In the ideal-typical account of educational and occupational transition, the sequence runs student → aspirant → employee, with the aspirant phase understood as a brief bridge. For a substantial number of Indian youth pursuing competitive examinations, however, the empirical sequence is closer to student → aspirant → aspirant → aspirant, repeating across several examination cycles. It is out of this repetition that a distinct aspirant identity is constructed and defended. The phrase aspirants themselves use — "I am not unemployed, I am preparing" — is not merely descriptive; it performs social work. It confers legitimacy on a period that would otherwise read, to family and community, as failure or idleness, while simultaneously anchoring the person to an open-ended and structurally uncertain waiting position. Aspiranthood is thus best understood not as a residual category left over once "student" and "employee" are exhausted, but as a positive, self-sustaining social identity with its own vocabulary, spaces, temporal rhythms and moral economy.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

No single existing theoretical vocabulary was built with the Indian competitive-examination aspirant in mind. This paper therefore assembles a composite framework from five bodies of theory, each of which illuminates a different facet of aspiranthood: its structural position (liminality), its developmental time (moratorium), its lived temporality (waithood), its embodied and social dimensions (capital and habitus), and its ideological justification (meritocracy).

A. LIMINALITY: BETWIXT AND BETWEEN

Victor Turner's concept of liminality, developed from the analysis of rites of passage, describes a phase in which a subject has been detached from an earlier fixed point in the social structure but has not yet been incorporated into a new one — a state of being "betwixt and between" recognised social positions [1]. The aspirant fits this description closely: detached from the status of "student" yet not incorporated into the status of "employee" or "citizen-professional." In classical liminality, however, the in-between phase is bounded and ritually managed, with a known endpoint and a community that recognises its temporariness. The central theoretical move this paper makes is to argue that competitive-examination preparation in India produces an unbounded or prolonged liminality: a threshold state stretched, by repeated attempts, across years, without the ritual

guarantee of eventual passage. This is liminality decoupled from its traditional function of orderly transition, and reorganised instead as a durable social location.

B. PSYCHOSOCIAL MORATORIUM

Erik Erikson's notion of the psychosocial moratorium describes a socially sanctioned delay in the assumption of adult commitments — career, marriage, full economic independence — during which the young person explores identity options before committing to one [2]. Examination preparation can be read as precisely such a moratorium: career is postponed, marriage is often postponed, financial independence is deferred, and family responsibilities are held in abeyance. But where Erikson's moratorium presumes exploration followed by resolution, the aspirant's moratorium is narrowed to a single, repeatedly re-attempted channel, and resolution is contingent on an examination result over which the individual has only partial control. Repeated failure does not end the moratorium; it extends it, producing what might be termed an extended or recursive moratorium in which the developmental function of exploration is replaced by the disciplinary function of endurance.

C. WAITHOOD AND TIMEPASS

Craig Jeffrey's ethnographic work on unemployed and underemployed young men in Meerut, western Uttar Pradesh, developed the concept of "timepass" to describe how educated youth experience and narrate the empty time produced by blocked mobility, and situates this within a broader literature on "waithood" — a prolonged, socially structured period of waiting for adulthood that has become characteristic of youth transitions across much of the Global South [3]. Applied to the competitive-examination aspirant, waithood must be qualified in one important respect: unlike Jeffrey's more diffuse timepass, the aspirant's waiting is highly structured and intensively active — organised around syllabi, mock tests, coaching schedules, and disciplined daily routines. This paper therefore proposes the term structured waithood: a form of waiting that is not empty time but a demanding, self-disciplining activity that nonetheless leaves the underlying structural position — neither student nor employee — unresolved, often for years.

D. CAPITAL, HABITUS, AND THE ASPIRANT FIELD

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus help explain how aspiranthood is sustained as a social world with its own internal logic [4]. As formal educational credentials have become widely held and correspondingly devalued as signals of merit, examination rank has emerged as the more decisive form of institutionalised cultural capital. Social capital operates through the dense peer networks of

coaching hubs — shared accommodation, study groups, and, increasingly, digital networks for exchanging notes and previous years' question papers. Out of sustained immersion in this world emerges a distinctive aspirant habitus: a shared vocabulary ("attempt," "mains," "cut-off," "drop year"), a common bodily discipline of long study hours, and a communal geography of reading rooms, libraries and coaching-hub neighbourhoods — areas such as Delhi's Mukherjee Nagar and Old Rajinder Nagar, Prayagraj (Allahabad), Patna and Kota — that function as recognisable fields in the Bourdieusian sense, with their own hierarchies, stakes and shared anxieties.

E. THE IDEOLOGY OF MERIT

Finally, Michael Sandel's critique of meritocracy is useful for situating the moral weight aspirants attach to examination success [5]. Competitive examinations are widely understood, by aspirants and their families, as a fair and impersonal mechanism through which ability and effort are rewarded irrespective of background — a belief that lends the years of preparation their moral seriousness. Read critically, however, this framing also obscures the very unequal starting conditions — financial cushioning, geographic access to coaching hubs, prior educational quality, gendered household expectations — that determine who can sustain a multi-year attempt at all. The meritocratic frame therefore does double work: it legitimises the aspirant's prolonged liminality as a worthwhile investment, while simultaneously masking the structural inequalities that shape whose liminality can be prolonged and whose cannot.

IV. THE SCALE OF ASPIRANTHOOD: A SECONDARY-DATA OVERVIEW

This paper does not rest on new fieldwork; its empirical claims are built from secondary sources — government labour-force data, examination-conducting-body statistics, and industry market research — that, read together, indicate the scale and shape of the aspirant population, even where no single official source enumerates "aspirants" as a category.

A. THE EXAMINATION FUNNEL

The civil services examination conducted annually by the UPSC offers the starkest illustration of the ratio between aspiration and absorption. Recent cycles have drawn on the order of ten to fifteen lakh applicants competing for roughly seven hundred to twelve hundred final vacancies [6] — a selection ratio conventionally estimated at well under one per cent, and by some calculations closer to one in a thousand once attrition between application and appearance is accounted for. Comparable funnel dynamics recur across state public-service commissions, banking recruitment examinations, teaching-eligibility tests, and defence and railway

recruitment — examinations that, unlike the UPSC, do not impose a strict cap on the number of attempts, and so permit, and in practice generate, an indefinitely extended aspirant population.

B. GRADUATE AND YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

The 2025 round of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), conducted by the National Statistical Office, reported an overall unemployment rate of 3.1 per cent, but an unemployment rate among graduates of roughly one in nine to one in five depending on the specific measure used, several times the all-population figure, with an estimated 1.1 crore unemployed graduates nationally out of a graduate population of 6.3 crore [7], [8]. Youth unemployment (ages 15–29) stood at 9.9 per cent in 2025 [7], and unemployment among the educated urban youth remains substantially higher still, with some sub-groups — including educated young women — recording rates in excess of one in three. This is the labour-market backdrop against which competitive-examination preparation functions as a partially institutionalised holding strategy: a socially sanctioned activity that converts open unemployment into the more legitimate status of "preparing."

C. THE COACHING ECONOMY

The scale of aspiranthood is also visible in the commercial infrastructure built around it. India's coaching-institute market was estimated at approximately USD 7.2 billion in 2025 and is projected by industry analysts to grow to around USD 17–18 billion by the early 2030s [9]; a parallel analysis by Redseer Strategy Consultants projects the broader competitive-examination test-preparation market to reach USD 23–26 billion by FY30 [10], driven by an expanding aspirant base and rising household spending per candidate. Engineering and medical entrance aspirants (JEE and NEET) alone are estimated to account for close to seventy per cent of the undergraduate entrance-preparation market, with reported admission success rates around one per cent for the most sought-after engineering seats and three per cent for preferred government medical seats [11] — figures that indicate the majority of aspirants in even the most heavily invested segments of this economy do not, in the end, secure the outcome they trained for. This is the political economy within which aspiranthood is sustained: a multi-billion-dollar industry whose institutes, hostels, test-series platforms and online-coaching arms derive continuing revenue from the extension, not the resolution, of the waiting period.

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V. GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF ASPIRANTHOOD

Preparation is not experienced identically by young men and women. For many young men, prolonged preparation collides directly with the expectation of economic breadwinning: a multi-year "drop" or repeated attempt cycle is read by family and community as a delay in the assumption of the primary male provider role, and is often accompanied by intensified pressure, and in some cases stigma, particularly once peers of the same age have secured salaried employment or married. For many young women, by contrast, preparation can function ambivalently: on one hand, as in Jeffrey's and related accounts of educated unemployment [3], it can extend a period of relative autonomy and legitimate purpose that delays an early, family-arranged marriage; on the other, it typically operates on a much shorter familial clock, with parents imposing an implicit or explicit deadline — often tied to a preferred marriageable age — after which continued preparation is withdrawn as a legitimate option regardless of examination outcome. PLFS data showing markedly higher unemployment among educated young women than among educated young men [7] is consistent with this asymmetry: women's aspiranthood is more likely to be curtailed by family timelines than by labour-market outcomes alone, while men's aspiranthood is more likely to be prolonged by the absence of an equivalent socially sanctioned exit.

VI. CASTE, CLASS, AND DIFFERENTIAL WAITING

The capacity to sustain a multi-year preparation cycle is not evenly distributed. Financial cushioning — parental income, land or property that can be drawn upon, remittances from a working sibling — allows upper- and middle-class, and typically upper- and dominant-caste, aspirants to absorb the cost of coaching fees, urban accommodation near a coaching hub, and repeated examination attempts over several years without immediate economic consequence. Aspirants from lower-income or marginalised-caste backgrounds face a materially different calculus: the opportunity cost of continued preparation is higher relative to household income, the geographic and financial access to elite coaching hubs is more constrained, and the threshold at which a family withdraws support and redirects the aspirant toward any available employment is correspondingly shorter. Reservation policy complicates this picture further, since it structures both the odds of eventual success and the social meaning attached to preparation for Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Class and Economically Weaker Section candidates in ways that a purely meritocratic account, of the kind Sandel critiques [5], tends to obscure. The result is a stratified

aspirant population in which the ability to remain liminal — to keep waiting — is itself a form of privilege, even as the experience of waiting is narrated, across class and caste lines, in a broadly similar vocabulary of discipline, sacrifice and merit.

VII. NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND THE RATIONALISATION OF FAILURE

Repeated examination failure poses a direct threat to self-worth and social standing, and aspirants develop identifiable narrative strategies to manage this threat. The most consistent of these is the reframing already noted — "I am not unemployed, I am preparing" — which substitutes a legitimate, ongoing project for a discrediting, static status. This is typically accompanied by a vocabulary that treats each failed attempt as data rather than verdict ("this time the cut-off was high," "I need one more attempt"), by comparison with a reference group of similarly situated aspirants rather than with peers who have already secured employment, and by deferral of the moment of reckoning to a specific, always-future attempt. These strategies are not simply individual psychology; they are sustained collectively, within reading rooms, coaching hubs and online aspirant communities that share and reinforce a common script for narrating extended failure as ongoing striving. The durability of the aspirant identity depends in part on the durability of this shared narrative infrastructure.

VIII. DISCUSSION: TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF THE ASPIRANT CLASS

Read together, the theoretical and empirical material assembled above supports a central conceptual claim: that the population conventionally described, when described at all, as "competitive-exam aspirants" constitutes something closer to a structural class than a transitional category. Its members share a distinctive relationship to time (structured waithood), a distinctive social position (prolonged liminality), a distinctive material infrastructure (the coaching economy), and a distinctive narrative repertoire for managing the moral stakes of repeated failure. This class is internally differentiated by gender, caste and class in ways that shape both the experience of waiting and its likely duration, but it is held together by a common structural location: detached from studenthood, not yet incorporated into employment, and sustained — commercially, psychologically and socially — in that in-between position for years at a stretch.

Naming this population as an aspirant class carries analytical and policy stakes. Analytically, it shifts the object of study away from individual examination outcomes and toward the social structure that produces, sustains and profits from mass, prolonged preparation. Policy-relevant

implications that follow from this reframing include: closer scrutiny of the coaching industry's regulatory and consumer-protection environment; consideration of attempt limits, age limits and syllabus stability as instruments that could shorten unviably prolonged waiting periods without foreclosing genuine second or third chances; and mental-health and family-counselling support explicitly designed for the aspirant population rather than folded into generic youth or student services. More broadly, the persistence of a large aspirant class is itself a symptom of the mismatch between the supply of educated youth and the supply of secure, salaried employment documented in the PLFS graduate-unemployment data [7] — a mismatch that no reform of examination administration alone can resolve.

IX. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that "preparation" for competitive examinations in India has, for a significant and growing number of educated young people, ceased to function as a brief functional bridge between education and employment and has instead become a durable social identity and structural position — the aspirant class. Assembling liminality, psychosocial moratorium, waithood, Bourdieusian capital and habitus, and the critique of meritocracy into a single composite framework, and reading that framework against secondary data on the examination funnel, graduate unemployment, and the scale of the coaching economy, the paper has shown that aspiranthood is best understood not as an absence — of a job, of a settled status — but as a positive, structured, commercially sustained and unevenly distributed social world in its own right. Future research building on this secondary-data foundation, particularly in-depth interviews and spatial ethnography in coaching hubs across different attempt stages, would allow the conceptual model proposed here to be tested, refined and extended.

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