Chapter 6

Mommy Knows?
A Critical Study of “Mom-Schools” and Formal Education in Kolkata

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ABSTRACT

Globalization and its imminent effect on education have received attention in recent years. Less widely acknowledged is the discussion of the role of middle-class mothers who are stuck amidst the changes in their children’s education and future. With the aid of in-depth face-to-face interviews and extensive participant observation in Kolkata, this chapter examines how middle-class mothers resort to commercial solutions to help manage their crisis in a neoliberal India. The crisis managers in the form of “mom-schooling” agencies support and coach mothers to negotiate with the changing education system and parenting methods that have become highly Americanized. In this chapter, the author uses Bourdieu’s theory of conversion of capital to argue that mothers in Kolkata are acting as “converters” of capital with the help of commercial mom-schools by converting economic capital to a distinct form of cultural capital that they transfer to their children for the latter’s success in a global economy.

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on globalization has rendered its attention on education to a large extent. In the light of evaluating globalization’s effect on education the focus has been on schools and various other institutions. Rarely have researchers focused

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on the mother’s role in the changing terrain of globalized education. The rise of a specific brand of private schools in urban India has put mothers in a crisis, where they are unable to navigate the education system. Private schooling in urban India is not only a marker of upward social mobility and prestige but these schools also guarantee success in the globalized Indian economy. Among the 1.5 million schools in India, private constitute 23% of the overall schools with over 40% of students (Majumdar, 2018). The admission process in these schools is difficult and parents, mothers in particular are grilled by school administration. Therefore, the mothers are increasingly experiencing a crisis to deal with the changing patterns of education and parenting in India. Keeping in mind the altering climate in schooling and parenting in this paper I aim to seek answers to the following questions that will shed light on the changing patterns of education in a neoliberal global India. Firstly, why do middle-class mothers in India, experience a distinct parenting crisis in the light of formal schooling? Secondly, what are the strategies they adopt to overcome the crisis? Finally, what does this reveal about middle-class parenting and formal school education of children in a global era?

I argue that the changing pattern of education in India is a direct response to the globalization and neoliberalization of the Indian economy. The neoliberal wave that was an outcome of the New Economic Policy of 1991 in India, not only impacted Indian consumption patterns and resulted in the growth of multinational corporations in the country, but also affected the schooling system and intimate family practices like parenting. Parents, mothers in particular had very little knowledge of the rapidly growing changes in the education system. The lack of knowledge had therefore resulted in a distinct crisis among mothers in urban India. In my study I focused on middle-class mothers in Kolkata, a city that represents the growing cosmopolitan climate of urban India and render attention on methods these mothers adopted to embrace the changes in education and parenting.

Mothers in my research sought help from commercial “mom-schooling” agencies that coached mothers to navigate the altering schooling system and child-rearing trends. These mom-schooling agencies in exchange for money coached mothers to develop strategies of getting their children admitted to reputed private schools in the city. Using Bourdieu’s analysis of conversion of capital where he argues that all forms of capital can be derived from economic capital, I argue that mothers in Kolkata were acting as “converters” of capital converting their economic capital to gain a distinct form of cultural capital that would guarantee success for their children in the globalized economy and job market. Importantly, mothers were not acting as “converters” independently rather they collaborated with commercialized mom-schooling agencies that helped them convert capital.

The mom-schooling agencies not only coached mothers to crack the entry level admission tests of reputed private schools but also trained them parenting strategies.
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