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Engineering Respectability: The Politics of Aspiration in an Engineering College

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Abstract:

In this paper, I trace subjectivities under neoliberalism in a private engineering college in Tamil Nadu, especially those relating to employment prospects. Part of a larger ethnographic study on caste, gender and sexuality among youth in Tamil Nadu, this paper combines ethnographic description with film, policy and discourse analysis to explore the concerns of upward social mobility in the neoliberal context of a private engineering college. In doing so, I consider the affective connections between higher education, employment and strategies of upward social mobility used by middle-caste groups in semi-urban and rural Tamil Nadu. Rather than paint an image of the neoliberal college as being oriented towards supplying a 'docile' workforce for multi-national corporations, I suggest that such a model of aspiration exists along a continuum that values respectability at the local level above all else.

Keywords: Neoliberalisation, education, Tamil Nadu, middle castes, upward social mobility, private colleges, gender, ethnography, information technology, software, exposure, respectability, discipline.

Introduction

> "*Interview-la vanthu parunga nalu vartha sentha mari English pesa evlo kasta patrenu, vela kedaikala, vela kedaikalana epdi kidaiku?"* (Come to the interview and see how difficult it is to join four sentences together in English and respond. You are all saying that I am not getting a job, but how will I?)
>
> -- Raguvaran, unemployed engineer,
>
> in the movie *Velleyilla Pattadari* (VIP)
>
> (The Unemployed Graduate, 2014)

In the year 2014, when cinemas across Tamil Nadu (TN) were resounding with the above dialogue, the air at my field site was thick with its echoes. In what should have been the recruitment season at Chinna College of Technology[1] (henceforth referred to as CCT), disappointed and angry students clashed with the college management about who held the onus of ensuring jobs. In a college which had little to no organised student political activity otherwise, students surrounded the principal, and demanded that the college ensure better recruitment. The principal, a former professor at Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Madras, told them that despite doing what they could, recruitment had dried up and companies were not responding to invitations to recruit on campus. "It is because of the quality of the students here, they are unemployable," he counter-charged. Angry students put up status updates on social media, "How can the management blame the quality of students that they themselves have trained?" and "They promised 100 per cent recruitment!"

Needless to say, the film *VIP* was a runaway hit on my field site, and the ten months spent conducting participant observation research at the college in Salem district[2] (western Tamil Nadu) were replete with references to it. Like the protagonist in the film, the students of the college were dealing with the prospect of unemployment despite being qualified engineers, who had enrolled in college either by securing very high marks, or by paying high 'management fees' (euphemism for capitation fees). The college was one of more than 500 self-financed engineering colleges in the State, most of which advertise widely promising jobs at the end of the course.

The problem assumes greater poignancy while considering how an engineering degree is used by several upwardly-mobile families to climb up the social ladder, and many sell an acre or two of their agricultural land, or take a loan to afford a seat in an engineering college. Strategising for this is usually not done individually by the person concerned, but with the whole family's deliberation and savings. Some of the students in these colleges are also beneficiaries of TN Government schemes such as the First Graduate scheme and Free Education schemes meant to bring members of disadvantaged groups into higher education and enable social transformation. Similar schemes exist in (undivided) Andhra Pradesh (Upadhya 2016). Tamil Nadu and

[1] All names in the paper have been changed to protect identities, including names of institutions.

[2] As part of my ethnographic study, I stayed in the hostel, met students, teachers, and members of the administration/management. I also audited classes with the students, participated in everyday life and special occasions/cultural festivals such as College Day, Sports Day, Women's Day, etc. Even though the college was a co-educational institute, my paper predominantly discusses the narratives of many young women because I had better access; both, because I was staying in their hostel and the gender segregation between the sexes, partly produced by the college, made it difficult for me to spend much time with young men.

(undivided) Andhra Pradesh contribute about 40 per cent of the country's graduates, although many of them are considered 'unskilled' by industry standards, and therefore 'unemployable' (Jain 2015). Moreover, the growth of employment opportunities in the private sector has not been able to keep up with the growth in number of engineering colleges; even the Information Technology (IT) industry (the fastest growing private sector) grows only about 15 per cent a year (Jain 2015). Carol Upadhya and AR Vasavi, based on their in-depth study of the IT industry, suggest that such conditions of inadequate training and certain social backgrounds[3] among students from "Category C"[4] colleges (like my field site) "appear to have created a docile and submissive workforce" (2006: 36) for companies.

In this context, I explore the neoliberal subjectivities on campus, particularly those related to employment prospects and the conditions under which 'employable' subjectivities are produced in self-financed colleges. To do so, I combine ethnographic description with discourse analyses, and explore the concerns of upward social mobility in the neoliberal context of a private engineering college. I consider the connections drawn between higher education, employment and strategies of upward social mobility used by middle-caste groups in semi-urban and rural Tamil Nadu. I argue that, in the narratives of my respondents and in Tamil popular culture, there emerges an apprehension about entering private sector jobs among engineering students, despite four years of intense training to become 'employable' in the IT sector. Their reasons include employment prospects (or lack thereof), the communication skills needed, gendered concerns of safety, besides critiques of 'westernised' workplace culture.

Instead, respondents voiced a preference for employment opportunities that are considered respectable locally, which depend on existing social capital, equating success to hard work. Such aspirations are in sync with the older generation's toil for upward mobility (Chari 2004a, 2004b)[5] and their own careful plans for their children as the following narrative shows.

[3]Without homogenising the student body, most students in the college were from "rurban" backgrounds, often the first graduates in the family and from lower middle class backgrounds. The students comprised children of a wide range of parents: prosperous groundnut and sago cultivators, poultry farmers, textile business owners/employees, construction business owner/employee, casual labourers, grocers, blue-collar government employees, teachers, college professors and even the daughter of a wealthy mall owner in Salem.

[4]Category A and B colleges include Indian Institutions of Technology, the state-run institutions such as the National Institute of Technology, College of Engineering Anna University, etc.

[5] As Sharad Chari (2004a, 2004b) explains in his ethnographic account of the textile Gounders in Tiruppur, toil does not translate only as hard work; but cleaver land use, exploitation of caste and gendered structures of labour, as well as the use of fraternal capital to start businesses.

'Employable' Subjectivities

Smitha joined the college as part of the management quota to pursue an engineering degree in the IT stream; her father had paid three lakh rupees as 'management fees' to admit her in CCT. She came from a community of Devangas,[6] and community elders[7] had already reproached her father for sending their daughter to study engineering in a college. She described how, in her family and community, young women did not often have access to higher education or employment, no matter what their circumstances. To explain this, she cited how her cousin (*periamma ponnu*/ mother's sister's daughter), a BBA (Bachelors in Business Administration) graduate, had to fight with her father to seek employment at a Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) office even after he had suffered major losses in his Kanchipuram silk business and could not support the family anymore. The cousin had started earning Rs. 12,000 but the father did not touch the money and stopped speaking to his daughter. He considered it dishonourable for a man to run his household on his daughter's income. The family continued to suffer and the daughter had to look for strategies in order to help her family: she bought the school books for her younger brother, passed on groceries to her mother surreptitiously, etc.

However, her father was not like *Periyappa* (mother's sister's husband), Smitha said. Despite being advised not to send his daughter to college, her father had made higher education for his children a priority. Their lives had not been easy. There was a time when Smitha's parents could not even afford a primary education, but her parents had successfully overcome those hardships by returning to their caste occupation of weaving from formal employment in a factory, and now ran a successful spinning mill. In later years, they sent Smitha and her brother to a boarding school in a neighbouring district where students were even taught to ride horses as an extra-curricular activity. Fluent in English, she had scored good marks in her Class 10 and 12 board exams. But her father had not waited to see what would happen at the state-level counselling and had got her directly admitted to CCT, which had a good reputation in the area, by paying the requisite management fee. Her mother had also seconded this decision because it meant that she

[6]Devangas are traditionally weavers, classified as Sudra in the Hindu Varna system and an artisan class. Even though many, including women and children, still engage in the caste occupation of weaving, there are a few administrators, engineers and doctors among them today. However, they are generally educated only up to school level, with many of them dropping out of school due to poverty (Singh 1997, 379-386)

[7] The Devanga have a traditional caste council that is hereditary and homogenous, headed by a kula guru. Under the guru are *pattagaras* in charge of *sthalas*. Under each *pattagaru* are several *chettigaras* who head 10-12 families each. The *chettigara* plays an important role in social and religious activities. The council organises religious festivals and social functions. The council has the authority to impose cash fines or excommunicate the guilty in cases of rape, adultery and intercaste marriage. They also have regional and local associations to safeguard their interests (Singh 1994: 118).

would be nearby; they would visit her every weekend. She was not allowed to take the bus to come home instead, just an hour away in Erode.

In addition to worries about lack of campus placement opportunities, Smitha, who was in the fourth year and standing at the threshold of the recruitment season, had to critically assess what course she should take in life. By her own assessment, continuing her studies by enrolling in an MBA or MTech programme would be more acceptable to the community elders who had cautioned her father against sending her to an engineering college. It was what her mother also wanted her to do. She would remain dependent on her father; he would not acquire the dishonour of tainting his hands with a daughter's earnings. A job in the IT industry would further complicate her marriage prospects: once she had earned some money and was working, her parents would have to find her a groom of higher or at least equal education qualifications to achieve a balance in status. She told me that grooms' families today were also being wary of brides with IT jobs, especially their workspaces in cities such as Bengaluru and Chennai, where teams of men and women often worked together late into the night, or travelled abroad. It was often heard that divorce rates were very high among IT professionals (also see, Upadhya and Vasavi 2006: 138). Moreover, if she took an IT job, she would no longer be living at home or hostel but probably in a rented accommodation or as a paying guest somewhere; all of which raised questions on the kind of lifestyles led by single young women in metropolitan cities.[8] But she did not know yet what her father would like her to do. Having witnessed her parents' toil, however, Smitha wanted to do something for her family by getting job, and supplementing the family income.

A few days later, my phone buzzed in the middle of the night. It was Smitha calling from her home with happy news. She had been recruited by a well-known Indian IT company. I congratulated her and asked her how her parents had reacted to the news. "It is my parents' marriage anniversary today, and they said I have given them the best gift," she replied cheerfully. "They are so happy, Nandini. They have allowed me to go to Bangalore." As for the extended family and community members, Smitha's father would stand up to them, just as he had resisted them when it came to her higher studies.

[8] I have discussed the vulnerabilities associated with living elsewhere. See my article, "The murder of two women techies reveals in Chennai reveals the deadly side of politics." *Daily News and Analysis* (online), 30 April, 2014. Available from: http://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column-the-murder-of-two-women-techies-in-chennai-reveal-the-deadly-side-of-gender-politics-1983401 [Accessed: 30 April, 2014]

Placement – Contents and Discontents

Job prospects were not as easily reconciled for many of Smitha's batch mates. After the clash mentioned above, the college brought in a host of recruiters for jobs that did not necessarily need an engineering education: banks, call centres and coaching centres, among others. In the case of CCT, which had been accustomed to having well-known Indian IT companies coming in to recruit, this was unprecedented. Students were in shock. Many, who had been able to afford education in the college only because of student loans, had no option but to appear for the recruitment process by receiving offer letters to come and work at coaching centres, or clerks at banks, at a fraction of their expected salaries.

Sadly, their woes did not end there: several companies did not honour their offer letters,[9] and the joy of at least receiving an offer letter quickly dissolved to disappointment again. A chagrined Rathna, a student of the Electronics and Communications (ECE) stream, who had received an offer letter from a bank, told me that her recruitment was fake. She fully believed that the whole recruitment process had been staged in order to tide over the crisis at the college, and money had exchanged hands in order to do so. The company had come and recruited against zero vacancies, she alleged. She has been waiting for her appointment letter, unsure of how to proceed further: should she wait or look for another job? For many educated unemployed youth such as Rathna, the route to enter the workforce would be long and arduous, spent gaining numerous additional certifications, and odd jobs in the informal sector (Nisbett 2009, 2013; Jeffery 2010). Perhaps ironically, such jobs also included visiting colleges to train engineering students to become employable.

In CCT, this training module was called Professional Advancement and Career Enhancement (PACE), which students, irrespective of discipline, had to compulsorily take in addition to their technical subjects. It consisted of one compulsory year of classes in English, two years of learning to solve logical and quantitative problems, and a year of Engineering Ethics. These were meant to craft them into 'employable' engineering graduates who were not just technically skilled, but also demonstrated a basic ability to solve problems, had good English communication skills, with a sense of etiquette and ethics. It was tailor-made to help students crack placement tests set by IT companies visiting to hire engineers who could successfully run

[9]Upadhya and Vasavi detail in their study that companies also play a 'futures' game by recruiting students in the third year of the four year course interviews. This system of advance recruitment has created problems in the past, such as during the downturn of 2001-02 when several companies did not honour the offer letters issued earlier, and fresh graduates were neither able to take up other jobs nor join the companies that had recruited them (2006: 31)

'offshore' operations (Vasavi and Upadhya 2007). As students approached the recruitment season, these sessions became more intensive as they were considered very important.

In fact, English teachers in the college explicitly stated in one of their published works that "students who are the future employees have to deal more with soft skills than with actual knowledge about particular situation because customers appreciate an employee who is willing to help and listen to the complaint… Hence, training the students in soft skills has become the main agenda in colleges." [10]

However, rather than producing a docile workforce full of enterprising potential employees (cf. Upadhya and Vasavi 2006), the training sessions left students confused and bewildered. For instance, in English classes in the first year, in order to prepare students to handle offshore operations with foreign clients, they were asked to role play situations. This included engaging in a phone conversation in English, relaying a message received through phone, etc. This was meant to combine teaching social niceties with a grammar lesson in changing direct to indirect speech, converting a written statement to a verbal statement, etc. These situations were highly uncomfortable for the students, who were called to act out these situations in front of a class of 50-60 people, making them break into a sweat or appear paralysed by fear.

After one such session, I asked Bhuvana, a Dalit student, who travelled to Salem from the neighbouring town of Omalur, and in her own words "did not speak a word of English", whether the class had helped her. She replied, quite upset at my question, "*Enda kelavi idhu? Neenge sollunu. English indha mathiri learn panna mudiyuma? Friends kitte, classmates kitte pesittu learn pannunnu."* (What kind of a question are you asking? You should only tell me whether it is possible to learn English like this. We should learn by speaking to friends and classmates naturally. Not like this!)

As several studies of recruitment practices in IT companies show, companies sought an easy and direct communication style in their recruits, more than actual knowledge of vocabulary and grammar (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006: 126). This was a style urban, middle-class candidates were more likely to have than those from lower socio-economic or rural backgrounds.[11] It is important to note that such a style is very different from the mode of communicating that my respondents were used to, which emphasised hierarchy between students and teachers, parents and children,

[10] Citation details not revealed to protect anonymity.

[11] Fuller and Narasimhan (2006) also note that students from traditional families use a submissive style that tends to be more conscious of hierarchy rather than the easy, egalitarian, direct conversation style favoured by software companies.

and seniors from juniors. In fact, teachers in the college drew from a familial idiom of speech, addressing the students as 'child' or even *'Thambi'* (younger brother), and it was common to see students address the teacher with their heads and shoulders bowed down in an image of docility. Therefore, the notion of what constituted ideal employability in the eyes of an IT employer, especially the kind of emotional investment (Hochschild 2003) needed to communicate with a foreign client during offshore operations, was bewildering to many of my respondents.

This was augmented by a sharp gap between existing knowledge and the college's use of American and British resources to teach English: these included reading reports from British and American newspapers, the use of recorded speech in British and American accents in the language labs so students can learn to comprehend accents of future customers, and pop-management bestsellers such as *Who Moved my Cheese* by Spencer Johnson (1998), *You Can Win* by Shiv Khera (1998) *and Discover the Diamond in You* by Arindam Chaudhuri (2009). Movies such as *My Fair Lady* (1964) were also screened; students were asked to repeat songs from these films in order to "get their tongues moving in the English rhythm," as the Head of the Department of English said. "All these resources have been chosen to motivate them," she said, discussing the similarities of the Shaw adaptation and the situation in the classroom.[12]

Such an atmosphere in college, especially the orientation to learning English and importance given to cultural capital, left many students alienated. Such pedagogical emphasis was also markedly different from school, where the learning of Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics, had been stressed upon in order to enter engineering college (Sancho 2013). The dominant view that emerged was that the IT sector did not value technical knowledge as much as it valued communication skills. An impromptu skit performed by my respondents in their first year in college illustrates this awareness more substantively.

The skit was part of a bridge programme for Tamil-medium students in order to ensure their successful integration into the English-medium college. Students were divided into groups and given themes on which they had to enact skits; they were given about 20 minutes to prepare during which the teacher set up a small video camera which would record the happenings on stage. Capturing the skit on video would help them go back and correct mistakes, she said. A group that were assigned the theme of honesty put up the following skit:

[12] Personal interview conducted with Head of the Department of English. 30 Apr, 2014. Name not revealed to protect anonymity.

An English-medium schooled Aravind approaches a classmate schooled in Tamil, Kalaiarasu, for help: "I am an English medium student. I am weak in Maths. Kalai, you are a Tamil medium student, you are good in maths. Will you help me, da?" Kalaiarasu jumps at the opportunity to help his classmate. Soon after, an announcement is made by the English Club about a round of competitions such as 'Just a Minute', essay and debate. Excited and keen to participate, Kalai asks his English-medium-educated classmate whether he would help him, but Aravind turns him down saying these competitions are very tough, and there is no chance that a Tamil-medium student will be able to participate in these competitions. He goes on to be the only participant in the competitions and collects all the prizes. The scene then cuts to the alternative and more desirable scenario: one in which the English-medium student helps the Tamil-medium student to prepare for the competition and they both share the prize offered in the competition.

In the skit, it is interesting to note how the linguistic backgrounds of the two characters plays out in the realm of the ethical. Kalaiarasu's Tamil-medium school origins (with class and rural background connotations) is collapsed with remarkable knowledge of mathematics and helpful nature, indexing his culture and merit, while the English-speaking character emerges in opposition as a self-serving, elite individual who wins because of his language capabilities, and lack of competition from his Tamil-schooled peers. The scenario in which the English-medium student walks away with the prize should be read in the context of the employers' bias for English-speaking students. The teachers had constantly repeated in class that top IT companies such as TCS, CTS, Wipro, Infosys and Accenture recruited only students with good English communication skills, while students only fluent in Tamil would be left in the lurch, looking for jobs in the smaller IT companies or joining the informal sector (based on actual recruitment practices; see Fuller and Narasimhan 2006; Upadhya and Vasavi 2006; Nisbett 2009; 2013).

Perhaps this sense of rejection has also led to a situation where aspiring engineers resist prospects in the IT sector. One of the PACE trainers, Kumaran was a 25-year-old civil engineering graduate, proudly announced during one of his classes that he had not taken an engineering job despite an offer from a well-known Indian IT company. Instead, he had prepared for and cleared every single competitive exam offered in the country, including those that paved the way for banking, revenue and foreign service careers. However, since his dream was to enter the Indian Police Service, he had not followed up on any of the other career paths that had come his way; instead he had taken a day-job in a soft skills' training institute and spent the day going from college to college taking PACE classes for engineering students. Kumaran

emerged as a role model for many of the students for his rejection of the IT sector job, and his determination to become an IPS officer. Many students met with him after class for informal career counselling.

Students were also strongly encouraged to consider higher education; it would relieve the pressure on the college to find a job for them before they graduate.[13] Engineering graduates with a Master's degree (MTech) are easily absorbed as teachers – earning about ₹20,000 a month – in one of the many engineering colleges in the state. My room-mate Chethana (tutor-in-charge of the hostel), whose father did not permit her to take a job soon after obtaining her B.Tech (Computer Science) from CCT, had gone to Chennai to take an MTech degree from another private college, and returned to CCT to teach. She stayed in the hostel, ate in the mess, and went home every weekend to visit her parents and grandmother who lived about 40 km away from Salem city. She seemed happy and content with her job, underlining how her parents were happy with it too, because she was nearby and her safety was assured as she was living in a girls' hostel in gated premises. In fact, she said, "This job is much more suitable for women. I have no respect for men who take up this job. I would never want to marry another teacher in an engineering college because the 'exposure' in such jobs is limited and good only for women like me to work from nine-to-five, teach a little but spend rest of the time gossiping in the staff room. I want a husband who comes home so tired that he cannot keep his eyes open." Chethana's family's preference for a teaching job echoes Smitha's trepidation about disapproval from kin for the alternative – a career in the IT sector. In her role as teacher, Chethana sees an 'appropriate femininity', living close to home, earning a small income, and eventually, finding and supporting a husband who toils hard (cf. Radhakrishnan 2011).

Finally, a real choice in jobs could be strategised mostly by students with pre-existing cultural and social capital: Monika, a young respondent from Andhra Pradesh, was pursuing an engineering

[13] Who was eligible for recruitment was a carefully charted out process: this was done through a form circulated in class asking for students to state their future plans. Students were asked to fill out a form, and one of the following against their names: 'F' for further studies, 'M' for marriage or 'P' for placement. The category 'M' applied to women only; they had to be forthright about marriage plans. If they intended to get on the marriage market as soon as they graduated, they were asked to stay out of the recruitment process as the norms of patrilocality and the perceived husband's right to object to his wife's employed status increased the chance of the woman not taking up the job. "Leave the jobs for the needy," the placement staff reiterated. Companies, too, were known to strategise recruitment based on their understanding of each community's gender ideology that either restricted women's free movement outside the home, earning her own income, or whether she was likely to be get married and quit her job in the next few years. Therefore, the goal of securing 100 pc placement was, in reality, only for those who marked 'P' on the form.

degree in the Mechanical stream. Her choice of the stream had been motivated by the desire to improve her father's factory, a small fabricating unit. Her father's dream was that she take over the unit and turn it into something large scale, she said. She had aimed high and completed her schooling in Hyderabad, at an IIT entrance coaching centre. She had not managed to 'crack' the entrance test, but got admission into a second-rung institute, a State-run technological university. However, when she and her father had visited the campus to pay the fees and complete the enrolment formalities, violent protests for caste-based reservation had broken out, and left her father unconvinced about the suitability of the college for her. He decided to change tack, and on the recommendation of a relative, sought admission at CCT by paying a management fee.

Monika spoke good English and spoke disparagingly of having to move to Salem from a big city like Hyderabad, and study at a college like CCT when she had been aiming for the IITs. It took a long time, but had finally reconciled to her life in CCT after promising herself to do better in her career. During the recruitment process, she too received an offer similar to Rathna's — a clerical position at the same bank, but tapped into her pre-existing social capital to find herself a real engineering job. She contacted a cousin who worked in Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd, Bangalore, to work out an internship in his division during her last semester. When she was in Bangalore, she hunted for other jobs and received an offer from an app-based coaching start-up to work as a Business Development Analyst. She started working there, but continued the job hunt. She contacted an uncle who worked for a large automobile firm in Chennai, and asked him whether she could get a job there. She also posted her resume on numerous websites, hoping to catch a foothold in a core company. When we last spoke, she told me that she had been made an offer by a well-known American automobile company. She would be paid 40 per cent of what she was earning at the coaching centre, but she was definitely going to take up the job, she said. Her future plans included applying for a graduate course in management abroad, mainly due to her family's insistence, to enable a better career. That could help her pump some money into her father's business, she said.

In such cases, even though spurred by perceived success and social mobility through engineering education, graduates' actual trajectories exhibit immobility – often settling for jobs for which they are over-qualified, or not paid well enough to move up the social ladder.

Thus, even as careers in IT have functioned as springboards for upward social mobility such as Smitha's, other career trajectories show disillusionment with engineering jobs in multinational companies. This disillusionment has gone hand in hand with recourse to older models of

increased status such as bureaucratic roles in the government sector, teaching, and increased investment in higher education.

To be or not to be an IT professional

Aware of the precarious situation in employment prospects, CCT's students, many of whose parents had paid a generous sum as management fees, were grappling with the future course of their lives. Although a return on their investments in the form of a lucrative job in the private sector, particularly in the IT industry, was on their minds, it was wrought with other aspirations and dilemmas influenced by caste affiliation, family businesses, marriage prospects, kinship relations, work opportunities, impression of cities, etc., as elaborated in the earlier sections.

The social imaginary of success was no longer synonymous with an IT job (cf. Upadhya's [2016] Andhra study), and engineering graduates were no longer bent on chasing the IT dream (cf. Nisbett 2013, 2009). Instead, students armed with engineering degrees were relying on jobs that could be found locally, such as government service, the education sector, family businesses, and local industries. This ensured the advantage of credentialed cultural capital in the form of an educational degree, and career prospects that were not subject to the vagaries of the globalised IT market but based on contingencies.

Many respondents in Civil, Textile and Mechanical Engineering streams said that they and their parents had based their non-IT education decisions on a critique of the globalised culture of software/IT companies as being 'too Westernised' and 'having moral issues' and voiced a preference for the local. One of my respondents, Sowmya, pursuing the Civil stream, rationalised her preference for non-IT jobs as the "freedom from campus recruitment" for "jobs that would take them to distant cities". Instead, she could rely on local contacts and work while living at home, alongside people who would look out for her rather than the impersonal workspace of an IT office where they had to adapt to another culture. Another respondent from Thiruppur said that she had taken up the Fashion Technology stream because she could go back home and find a job in one of her own relatives' factories. Others such as Premila dreamt of taking over parents' businesses, determined to bring in technological advances to transform it.

Popular culture also reflects this change in social imagination. Posters of the film *Velleyilla Pattadhari* (2014), mentioned at the beginning of the paper, showed a fetishised image of popular actor Dhanush as an engineer, wearing a yellow hard hat, rugged jeans, baring his torso against

the backdrop of rising dust at a construction site. The buzz around the film reached a crescendo during the week after the film's release. Some of my informants claimed to have watched it multiple times in the first week itself, and were excited to discuss their favourite parts of the film. Many of my close respondents changed their profile pictures on social media to stills of the film. Downloaded copies of the film circulated widely on campus, and dialogues were promptly learnt and repeated. Even though several Tamil movies in the past had engineers as protagonists, this was the first time a Tamil film dealt with the unemployment of the educated as its theme, I was told. Comparisons were drawn to the Bollywood film *3 Idiots* (2009) that had advanced a powerful (and popular) critique of the craze for higher education in engineering as being driven by pressure to succeed, rather than genuine passion.

The title of the film refers to the character Raguvaran played by actor Dhanush. The film opens with a portrayal of Raguvaran's state of unemployment: trained in civil engineering, Raghuvaran prefers to stay unemployed for four long years rather than 'sell out' to a job as a software engineer. This is contrasted by the life lead by his younger brother, an IT engineer, who works in one of the top firms in the city, and is already acquiring the trappings of a successful life such as a car, flat, etc. This distinction sets off a clear hierarchy in the home: his father is the primary breadwinner and the authoritarian patriarch. In front of his father, Raguvaran is emasculated, not even able to resist the local thugs who pick a fight with him (even though he is shown roughing them up in the father's absence). His younger brother as the secondary breadwinner supersedes him in status. Although detested by his father for staying unemployed which he interprets as a sign of laziness, Raguvaran is adored by his mother. His unemployed status allows him to spend his entire day with her, helping her with household chores, watching mega serials on TV, gossiping about the neighbours, etc. The film's oedipal portrayal of family dynamics is meant to further accentuate the dismal condition of the unemployed protagonist. Raguvaran is also a member of a social media group of similar educated unemployed youth called VIP; they function as a support group as well as a platform to circulate notices about job opportunities. Raguvaran's daily perusal of this group is ridiculed by his family as a waste of time spent wallowing in self-pity rather than retrieving a keen 'entrepreneurial self' to spend his life productively.

In the second half, through a twist of fate (Raguvaran's mother dies suddenly, and her lungs are donated to a rich, young girl who has worn her lungs out by chain smoking), and in gratitude to the family who donated the lungs that saved his daughter's life, Raguvaran is offered a job by the head of a construction company. Thus employed, he goes from strength to strength as a meticulous civil engineer, vindicating his earlier fastidious preference for a career in civil

engineering. In-charge of a large construction site, Raguvaran has to deal with many ills such as nepotism and corruption that plagues the construction industry. His antagonist is a fair-skinned villain with an upper caste name, Arun Subramaniam; the son of the owner of a corrupt rival firm who will stop at nothing in order to win building contracts. However, Raguvaran gains the upper hand in every situation through sheer talent, hard work and clever mobilisation of unemployed youth through social media.

I read *VIP* as an apt fable for the times. It re-works the notion of the 'entrepreneurial self' of neoliberal times (Gooptu 2013) into the world of the construction industry. However, as an archetype of the educated unemployed subject, Raguvaran openly contests the idea of a 'consumer citizen' subject as successful, preferring to treat his career instead as a knowledge-based vocation. This has become a matter of pride and assertion in Tamil Nadu, where one can sometimes see cars and bikes stamped with 'Civil Engineer' and 'Mechanical Engineer' in a manner similar to such assertions of caste pride. Moreover, in the movie, technological change is not linked to upward social mobility afforded through the IT industry, but the enfranchisement of groups through digital citizenship.

For my respondents though, the most appealing factor was that that their own narratives were embodied in the dialogues. Many described watching one particular scene with goose bumps; in the scene, Raguvaran addresses the antagonist Arun Subramanian thus:

> *If you, who have not worked or studied hard, and are here only because your rich father ensured this seat for you, can have this much arrogance…*
>
> *Then, think of the one who came here, because his parents struggled to just pay the donation for school, who worked hard and passed every year from LKG to class 10,*
>
> *And after class 10, instead of taking the easy groups,*
>
> *Had to take the most difficult group so that he could become an engineer,*
>
> *And enrol in separate tuitions for Physics, separate tuitions for Chemistry,*
>
> *Separate tuitions for Maths, and spent so much time on the road,*
>
> *Going here and there, so did his parents,*
>
> *Who had to pay fees separately for each tuition class,*

The one who had to stay up studying through the night with a flask of tea by his side,

Wake up every morning to the sound of the alarm,

So that he can pass the class 12 exams,

And when he finally passed it, could not even glance at those marks,

By then he had to spend another two months studying for the TNPC Exam,

In which he didn't get enough marks to make the cut off,

And had to go to a college that was paid for by his mother's pawned jewellery,

And flunked every semester till the fourth year,

When he cleared every arrear from first to fourth,

Only to get beaten, as if by slippers, in each job interview he appeared for,

And lived as a disappointment to his father, under the father's roof,

As he cursed him for every grain of rice his son ate,

So he had to tolerate each grain of rice getting stuck his throat,

The pain of each grain of rice going down his throat,

The pain of disappointment.

At that point, one blessed good-hearted man gave him a job!

But he has to deal with you now, keen to snatch his hard-earned job!

But, don't forget the one who stands before you was once an unemployed graduate,

Just think, how much arrogance he ought to have!

Delivered in the style of delivering a monologue as a punch line, which is generally used in Tamil cinema to prop up the hero (Sundaram 2016), this long monologue attempts to suffuse a certain heroism into an engineering student's everyday life, even if it is marked by failure. Arrogance, or rather, pride is centrally constituted in the narrative – in students working hard to pass school and college, parents toiling to pay management fees, staying unemployed, getting a break through a local contact. The lines firmly privilege pride, respectability and staying true to one's core

competence rather than science, rationality or aptitude as qualifications necessary for a good engineer (as in the case of *3 Idiots*). It is also squarely a common subaltern narrative, located firmly in self-financed colleges that run on management fees, where students have arrears, struggle with language, and jobs are not guaranteed – in Tamil Nadu, over 500 of them such as CCT, where students have to adopt multiple strategies to get a job, and the route to success is not as straightforward as imagined.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to explore young people's subjectivities and contingent strategies in a self-financed engineering college, particularly those that relate to employment. Struggling to remain buoyed with the imaginary of engineering education leading to successful private sector jobs, students were put under a strict regimen to emerge "employable". The process of acquiring these traits of cultural capital emerged as a tedious "disciplinary" project as the college attempted to train students into becoming "professional, globalised subjects" who would be comfortable dealing with foreign clients, even if they were struggling to master basic English grammar. Classroom practices and curricular frameworks were designed with an importance on self-management; unduly pressuring students. It was assumed that placement training would not only help them crack placement tests, but teach students to embody a globalised modernity. However, as the narratives show, these strategies left students alienated and resistant to embodying the 'ideal employable subject'.

Further, with the slump in employment in the globalised private sector and employment in the private sector not always resulting in upward social mobility, students voiced a preference for jobs that would ensure respectability at the local level such as in government service, higher education and local industries over westernised workspaces. This is also reflected in popular culture; a possible backlash against the mainstream social imaginary of success as merit-oriented, represented by consumeristic lifestyles. Instead, these narratives attempt to reconstitute self-pride and celebrate hard work as the measure of success.

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