

Serena's Story: A Bourdieusian Analysis of a Student's Experience in Higher Education

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Abstract

The paper draws from a case study of a University of Delhi student, originating from Assam, and analyses her discourse using Bourdieu's notion of habitus and field. The analysis revealed that unfamiliarity of fields leads to transformation of habitus. The data suggests that the challenge of the unfamiliar causes one to constantly fashion and re-fashion oneself, creating myriad ways to adapt and bringing about multiple ways of responding to emergent situations. A constant attempt to fit in within unfamiliar contexts does not however mean complete transformation of self. The data shows that affinity with ones regional self and ethnic background is not only maintained but also valued while dealing with the complexities of the unfamiliar. The paper further explores the difficulties, anxieties and psychic costs that one negotiates while dealing with the unfamiliar contexts of higher education in Delhi. Evidence shows that self-fashioning is consciously undertaken to not only fit in unfamiliar fields but also maximize academic gains that are offered within the University of Delhi. The paper shows that the student negotiates between multiple identities within different fields only to arrive at what is most appropriate, through re-evaluating decisions and contexts.

Introduction

This article draws upon a case study of a Bodo student at the University of a Delhi, which is a central university located in Delhi. It seeks to understand the complexities of identities in flux through Bourdieu's notion of habitus and field. Bourdieu (1990a) points out that when an individual encounters an unfamiliar field, habitus is transformed. He also writes of how the movement of habitus across new, unfamiliar fields results in 'a habitus divided against itself' (Bourdieu 1999a). The data provides an understanding in which entry in to the unfamiliar results in a range of challenges, innovative adaptation and myriad responses to encounter these. The Bodo student displays dispositions of self scrutiny and self enhancement-

almost 'a constants fashioning and refashioning of self' but one that still maintains key valued aspects of a regional self. However, there are tensions and conflicts, and the article explores these, as well as the academic gains for the tribal student in an urban university for higher education.

The Bodos are earliest indigenous inhabitants of Brahmaputra valley, one of the dominant tribal groups in Assam. They are descendents of the Mongoloid race and have their distinct religion, culture and language. Post-independence, the Bodos have clashed with Adivasi tea tribes, the Muslim settlers and even the Bengali Hindus. The Bodos are a minority group constituting 30 per cent of the population against non-Bodos who constitute 70 per cent population in the area.

The tribal student belongs to a section known as Bodo Kacharies, who have not benefitted much from socio-economic and educational advancement. She is a second generation learner. She belongs to the district of Kokrajahr which has seen several ethnic killings in the past. In the struggle for identity and the creation of Bodoland, ethnic fission leading to curfew and riots is a part of everyday lives of inhabitants in Kokrajahr.

Methodology

The paper tells a story of a student from the Bodo community trying to adapt to a higher education institution in Delhi, along with trying to maintain ties with one's peers and family back home. Pressurized by the demands of several contrasting fields, the paper explores the subjective meanings that the actor constructs for negotiating with emergent situations. Therefore, in depth interviews were conducted with one student, Serena (name changed). The interviews were conducted four times which lasted for two and a half hours each time. Her life back home, how she spent time, whether she felt a sense of belonging in the present context, what dilemmas did she face, how did she deal with challenges, how did she identify herself, were some of the questions asked. Many times the interview transformed into informal conversations within the field. Frequent prompts were given to elicit responses and the data was recorded and transcribed. After each interview the data was analyzed, this set the design for the subsequent interviews. Thus, each interview built on evidence emerging from previous interviews. The findings of the study were shared with the respondent for validation.

Data Analysis

Student Habitus in local field

Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of habitus and field, the paper explores the tension and unease experienced by the Bodo student in her local field. Bourdieu conceptualizes the notion of cultural

capital. There are three types of capital: economic, cultural and social- and, for Bourdieu (1986: 242), the distribution of capitals among individuals determines the chances of success for practices. Although cultural capital may be acquired it follows from habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 94), which Bourdieu define as a complex interplay between past and present. He points that habitus 'refers to something historical, it is linked to individual history' (1993: 86). Hence understanding an individual's past is crucial to understanding the concept of habitus.

Moreover habituses are permeable and responsive to what is going on around them (Reay, 2004). Given situations are not just there to be acted upon, but are internalized and become another layer to add to those from previous socializations (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 134).

Habitus is formed particularly due to socialization within the family and in general due to early childhood experiences, however it is continuously modified by individual's exposure to the outside world.

While habitus refers to subjective dispositions, field refers to the context. Individual's self is created through an interaction between the two.

...Social reality exists, so to speak, twice in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': It does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127).

However, when habitus encounters a field which is new, the resulting mismatch can generate not only change and transformation, but also confusion, insecurity and uncertainty (Reay, 2005)

The report of early childhood experience of the Bodo student reveals a sense of being a 'Fish out of water' among the dominant Assamese and Bengali communities in her home town.

Serena says:

Ethnic conflict is a common feature in Assam. Once when I was around seven years old, riots began between Bodo people and Adivasis in Assam. Although riots usually take place in remote areas, the fact that our people are being killed was scary. Any moment tension can magnify and lives can be threatened. One can never be sure of what is going to happen next.

Reports on early experiences of the Bodo student reveals a sense of discomfort in one's immediate habitus. This shows that in one's original habitus, violence and ethnic tension puts an individual out of pre-reflexive ease that one usually experiences in familiar fields. Doubts and insecurity about one's future remains deeply internalized even when one is not directly affected by tension and violence. Experiences therefore are not merely physical but are also social and cognitive. Although an individual remains directly unrelated to an incident, it is nevertheless internalized and becomes a part of an individual's self structure.

Schooling can act to provide a general disposition, a turn toward what Bourdieu terms 'a cultural habitus' (1967: 344). This process of educational socialization proved particularly effective for Serena. Despite studying in a school lacking dominant cultural capital, she has performed well throughout school and higher education

Serena says:

All My education has been in institutions functioning under the state boards. Teaching here takes place in vernacular language unlike the school functioning under Central Board of Secondary Education and Missionary schools.

Students in school under the state boards lack additional exposure and language fluency present among students in the latter. Even in my schools, Bodos were a minority group, the Assamese and Bengalis being the dominant community. Teachers are mainly Bengalis and Bengali students were favored. Non Bodo students and teachers always bonded well.

On asking her if she could narrate any specific instance she said:

We would see other students talking freely to teachers outside classrooms. They often discussed issues not directly related to academics with them. We were hesitant to approach them. I always felt that they did not encourage Bodo students much.

Serena also spoke of school failure and adult unemployment common in the area that she grew up in. She spoke of lack of connectivity in the area and problems that arose, therefore.

There is no metro and it is difficult to go from one place to another. One has to wait for hours for the internet. In these circumstances one has to work extremely hard in order to fend for oneself. Even for me to do well in school was not easy. I was one of the good students in the school. I was facilitated by the Bodo organization as well as the state government for doing well in school and junior college. This helped me to get admission into one of the best universities in Assam. You know, very few Bodo-students manage to get there.

The data shows evidence of resilience and ability to cope with adversity which marks one's academic success. We can see the disjuncture between the feel for the game and the game itself (Bourdieu, 1990b). Irrespective of adverse conditions in her habitat and the experiences of bias felt during schooling, academic success is not only desired but also valued by the Bodo –student. Tensions and difficulties in her environment do not lead to

bowing down to one's circumstances. Rather the data shows a strong desire for learning and doing well in academics. Doing well, inspite of being a Bodo, is something that was rare. Moreover being resilient cannot be simply seen as making the best of a bad situation. Standing out was an accomplishment for the Bodo student and it was her hard work which had helped her to achieve the same. This she felt was difficult for many others like her. Interestingly such qualities become productive resources for the Bodo- students in the urban context she has moved into, - it helps in dealing with the unknown and the unfamiliar.

The Process of Negotiating Access in Higher Education

There was virtually no support or encouragement given by the Bodo-student's family and in fact migration to a city for higher education was resisted. The choice of college for the Bodo student was largely based on the availability of a course she was interested in and a perceived belief in better quality of education and greater opportunities to learn through access to learning materials and resources in central universities. While Serena knew by the time she entered sixth that she wanted to go to Delhi for higher studies, the choice of Delhi University was sudden and unexpected. The encouragement for applying to Delhi University did not come from the family; rather it was the suggestion of a friend who had earlier moved to Delhi for higher education. We can thus see how the distribution of social capital among groups determines the chances of success in practices (Bourdieu, 1986). Social networks are crucial in determining access to a particular place or position. Secondary socialization places an individual within webs of social relations and members of these groups act as important determinants of one's life chances. In case of Serena, her friend from school helped her to apply to the University of Delhi for higher education

Serena said:

I always wanted to go to Delhi for higher studies. My friend in Assam who moved to Delhi for higher education became smarter and confident once she came back. When I told my parents, they refused outright. My mother was concerned about my safety, she still is. No one in my family had moved out for education. Moreover, Delhi has always been unsafe for women. They refused to allow me.

The data shows a lack of fit between the local environment and her already evolving habitus. Words like 'smartness' and 'confidence' associated with places other than where one belongs shows a feeling of lack associated with one's original habitus. However, irrespective of notions of safety and security, moving into the unfamiliar is a need intensely felt whereby an individual acts against her original habitus to venture into the unknown.

Going to Delhi was never an option for me according to my parents. However, there were no such restrictions on my brother. So after completing class twelfth he moved to Chennai for pursuing engineering. I was told to stay back as studying in Delhi is expensive. They can afford, but it would be difficult for my father. For my brother, life has been simpler. He went to a better school and had all the encouragement for going out for further studies. I, being a girl child, probably my parents didn't care much.

Serena further said '*but when I spoke to my friends in Delhi I always felt I was missing something.*'

Hence it is evident that although the willingness to move to Delhi appeared early in her academic life, the non-availability of adequate means prevented fulfillment of aspirations related to higher education in an urban space. Moreover due to availability of limited –resources, preference was given to her brother. According to Serena, lack of awareness and indifference on the part of her parents about what is best in terms of their daughter's career along

with concerns for her safety acted as impediments towards moving to Delhi for higher education. However, conflicting ideologies and insufficient means failed to restrict the Bodo student's quest to venture into the unfamiliar.

Irrespective of the lack of support and encouragement from family members and no prior planning regarding the choice of university in Delhi for higher education, a further interesting finding was that the Bodo student reported that she knew during her schooling what she wanted to be in terms of occupation, even though no one in their immediate family or social circle worked in a similar profession.

Since class tenth, I knew I wanted to teach. So I joined a school after masters. However I was totally unsatisfied as the salary was too less. I spoke to my friends from Assam, studying in Delhi and she suggested me to apply to the education department in Delhi University. She also told me about the scholarship program. Once I cleared the entrance exam my parents had to agree. At first I didn't believe myself. Finally my dream came true.

For Serena, habitus within her family and the institutional habitus of the school played a minor role in encouraging migration to a city for higher education; rather it was the support or effort of friends in school and college.

For many students already studying in University of Delhi, it has been a future almost present. In contrast, for the Bodo-student moving to Delhi was a project existing as a dream and enrolment in University of Delhi was a chance event, late during her middle – age when she suddenly came to realize that higher-education in Delhi was a possibility.

Student Outside her Traditional Habitus

On arriving at University of Delhi, the Bodo student had what seems an 'out of –field' experience. Although Bourdieu (1977: 97) argues that for much

of the time, the principles embodied in the habitus are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness and hence cannot be touched by voluntary deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit, he also recognizes that there are occasion when habitué's change and adapt (2005).

For students already familiar with the field of higher education in the city habitus beyond the graph of consciousness worked well. But for the tribal –student it made little sense in the presence of challenges faced due to unfamiliarity within the field. The Bodo-student on the other hand engaged in conscious deliberation and awareness in order to fit into the reality of the field.

Serena says:

On arriving at Delhi, I was very happy. When I came to Delhi University, I realized everyone is different. No one is a minority here because everyone is different. Finally I was where I always wanted to be.

It is evident that the Bodo-student is engaged into continuous acts of discovery and re-discovery by continuously fashioning and re-fashioning one's own self in order to make dreams come true. Also the disjunction between field and habitus meant that nothing could be taken for granted

Serena says:

Initially when I came to the university, everything was new to me. The language here was a major problem; people didn't understand what I tried to say. I didn't know if it was appropriate to approach anyone for help, I knew I had to be careful.

Hence, one can see the constant tension and unease experienced in unfamiliar fields wherein habitus continuous to be 'restructured, transformed in its make up by the pressure of the objectives structures' (Bourdieu, 2005: 47)



The disjuncture between dispositions of the habitus and the demands of the field create tension and discomfort. An anecdote narrated by the Bodo-student clarifies this.

Once I went to a shop and I heard two men talking to each other. The shopkeeper (one of them) said, "Look at these girls from north-east; they come to Delhi to take away our seats and jobs. They have a lot of money so why don't they study in their own state. The other man was probably more aware. He said, "No No they don't have any money, it is people in Delhi who have all the money. Moreover they don't have good schools and teachers to guide them, then how can you say so."

On the question of reservation Serena points the disadvantage faced by students from the north – east.

I know people feel that students like me could never get here without reservations. But tell me one thing, how can we ever get through when we don't study the same things that students here do. We don't have the same books in our libraries. The curriculum there is so different. One has to wait for hours for the internet.

One unexpected finding was apart from fitting in socially, the Bodo-student faced greater problems of fitting in academically.

I have started liking this place a little now. Earlier I felt I don't deserve to be here. Initially I was not able to follow the kind of discussion we had in class. In Assam, studies were easier. Here there is more stress on application and not information. You need to work throughout the year and still it is difficult. You are expected to know everything. For someone who is reading Freud for the first time, it gets a little difficult. In Assam I never felt this kind of mental pressure.

Academic problems thus can be seen as a major concern for the tribal student. Positive learner

identity in her original habitus did not suffice to encounter the self-doubt and insecurity that she experienced in the new field of higher education in the city.

Serena says:

I was terribly home-sick. I was probably one of the weakest students in the class. I didn't have a clue of what was going on. Everyone knew what was to be done except me. I felt I should have chosen something simpler, something that I could manage on my own. I used to wait for vacations. Once I went back home, I felt a huge-weight just goes. I feel I am back to my normal life. It feels a bit wired here.

There are elements of ambivalence and insecurity experienced by the tribal-student due to the lack of overlap between one's habitual dispositions and the corresponding field. Also, there is evidence of refashioning of oneself through making self one's own project and working on it continuously to reduce the gap between what is unknown and what is known. The Bodo student at the urban-university talks in terms of 'compartmentalizing different parts of the self, keeping them separate but allowing them to co-exist' (Aries and Seider, 2005: 435).

She says

In my home town everyone is extremely happy to see me. When I went to my school my teachers they just couldn't believe that I had managed to crack the entrance at Delhi University. My parents are proud of me as no girl from my family has ever managed to achieve what I have. But I don't talk too much about Delhi at home. Suddenly I have started using more English words when I speak. I consciously try not to speak too much in English and so I prefer staying quiet. I don't want my friends to feel that I have changed. Sometimes I really want to share what is going on but I don't think they will identify with me.

Far from losing connections and old ties due to moving into a new field, the Bodo student retains key-values of tribal-self along with gaining new ones. Hence the tribal students is engaged in what is called a constant fashioning and refashioning of the self (Bourdieu, 1990b), but her habitus still appears to retain depositions of tribal self.

In the face of continuously modified habitus due to existence within multiple fields, the tribal –student remains determined to hold on the former aspects of self while gaining new ones.

Serena says:

Thankfully, we have a Bodo-association in Delhi. When we get together, I feel I am back home. I get to speak my language and participate in cultural events similar to the ones in Assam. I am fond of dancing and I used to initially miss our traditional dances and songs. All the Bodo people living in Delhi come together and for some time you feel that life is a little different from the usual.

Although there are instances of stress and anxiety due to one's experience of moving in and out of multiple worlds, such movements are not devoid of attempts to maintain normatively and balance through reconnection. Interestingly the thought of leaving is dealt with work on oneself and greater resilience, qualities known and cherished by her during previous academic experiences.

Serena says:

I wait for holidays. Everyone here is so well-read and competitive. Sometimes I fail to understand what is going on. Sometimes I feel like leaving this place. Had I not insisted on coming here, I would have certainly left by now. So I keep on telling myself that you have come to struggle so now you struggle. It is difficult to survive this place but I don't know if I should quit.

There is no talk of doing exceptionally well in the

urban-university. She says "I just want to complete this somehow." On the other hand there are complaints about the excessive competitiveness and the strangeness of some academically brilliant peers.

Some students in class are a bit wired. Even after such a long time, I don't think I have spoken to them. I don't know what to talk to them about. Once I thought of asking her something related to my assignment but then I decided to keep quiet as I didn't know how I might end up sounding. Everyone is so intelligent and you don't want to sound stupid.

Serena also makes a distinction between the private world and the academic world:

Here there is too much to do throughout the day. People structure their day and strictly follow routines. No one really needs a break. I am a different person. I like quiet places. When I go back home, it feels like I am on a holiday. At least you don't have to remain on your toes all the time. I can sit back and relax only when I am with family and friends. Once I am out of this place I am at peace as I can be myself.

Serena shows how self is demarcated into what can be termed as private life and public life. Academic space for Serena means tension and unease as fitting into the objective structures of the unfamiliar field brings pain due to disequilibrium and dislocation. Challenges and strangeness of demands of the unknown field and its lack of fit with the individual's subjectivity results in need for greater reflexivity in order to deal with the unfamiliar. Hence, there is a constant refashioning due to work on oneself as benefits gained due to studying in the urban university is not only acknowledged but also valued.

Throughout my stay in the university I have learnt a lot. In Assam the curriculum is simpler. I mean there is not much to learn. You understand only

when you learn to apply.

Over here you can learn a lot. There is no strict hierarchy between teachers and students. I cannot think of teachers and students talking so freely to each other in universities in Assam. It is due to motivation by the teachers, I have managed to learn. I always liked reading but being exposed to texts by Michael Apple and Paulo Freire was only possible due to them. It is for their efforts that I can now understand Sudhir Kakar. I don't know if I have been able to write well in the examination, but I can understand.

This shows that the academic gains due to admission in University of Delhi cannot be undermined. The Bodo-student talks about myriad opportunities to learn at the university. She said "I want to learn as much as I can." Interestingly in place of developing a critical stance there is a sense of achievement due to academic gains she has received by studying in the university. I got a strong sense of confidence in Serena's words when she spoke of moving to her home-town with the added advantage of studying in Delhi University.

I am waiting to finish this course so that I can go home. I plan to do my PhD from Guwahati. I want to work there as I want to be with family and friends. Life is really uncertain, I want be with my family now.

Serena's account shows that she is negotiating within the field not through doxic submission (Bourdieu, 1997: 177) but through critical evaluation that helps her to adjust in a better way to the objective conditions. Negotiations and adjustments within the field takes place in two ways: by putting in as much efforts as one can and also by reevaluating the field (Reay et.al. 2009).

I must go back home as it is my duty to serve my people. I can certainly provide better facilities to my family if I work here but I think it's my

responsibility to contribute to Bodos through my research and education. So I want to research on educational problems of the Bodos. I want to work in my home town and my added knowledge can benefit many others who cannot afford to come to Delhi.

Serena hence shows a strong sense of commitment towards education of children from the Bodo community. She wants to encourage others like her to apply to universities in the city as opportunities to learn are much greater than those available in her home town.

Discussion

The data reveals interesting interlinkages between the individual's prior habitus and the turmoil that unfolds due to exposure to new contexts. Interestingly some dispositions acquired due to experiences in one's original habitus become valuable resources for dealing with the strange and unfamiliar world of higher education within the urban space whereas some dispositions become redundant in the face of new challenges. However, instead of submitting fully to the demands of the new field, linkages with the old are maintained through regular interaction and by deliberately connecting with one's culture both within the urban space as well as in one's home space. The individual thus develops the capacity to successfully move in and out of multiple worlds. In this way, the Bodo-student through working on oneself is able to refashion and restructure identities in accordance to the demands of the field. Venturing into the unknown creates tensions and insecurities along with opportunities to learn from discomfort generated due to experience of the unfamiliar. The Bodo-student hence not only restructures her habitus but also reevaluates her field in order to cope with the ensuing dilemmas.

Students from the tribal communities benefit immensely from studying in colleges functioning under the University of Delhi in the current

educational context. Movements to urban spaces cannot be simply seen as unthinking submission to what is called 'development.' Rather such movements arise due to the need for greater opportunities to learn as was seen in the case of the Bodo student, which helped her to flourish as learner both academically and socially. Moreover along with growing confident as a learner the sense of loyalty to family and home background was consciously retained irrespective of pressure generated by the unfamiliar field of the urban university.

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