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6. Why They Keep Trying: A Theoretical Analysis of Aspirational Mobility and Reference Group Effects among UPSC Aspirants from Marginalized Backgrounds

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Abstract

Despite an overall success rate of approximately 0.08%—with even lower rates for reserved categories—aspirants from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes backgrounds persistently engage in preparation for India's Union Public Service Commission Civil Services Examination, investing years amid financial hardship and repeated failures. This paper theorizes the puzzle of this "UPSC aspirationality" at the nexus of aspiration and mobility studies.

Integrating Pierre Bourdieu's framework of unequally distributed capitals and habitus, caste mobility theories—such as M.N. Srinivas's Sanskritization through emulation of elite practices and Louis Dumont's purity-pollution hierarchy—and Robert K. Merton's reference group theory, the analysis elucidates how structural immobility funnels aspirations into symbolically potent bureaucratic roles.

Key words: Aspirational Mobility, UPSC Aspirants, Marginalised Communities, Caste and Social Mobility, Bourdieu's Capitals, Reference Group Theory, Sanskritization, Symbolic Capital, Inequality in India, Coaching Culture

Introduction

This paper presents a theoretical and conceptual analysis of "UPSC aspirationality" among aspirants from marginalized backgrounds—specifically those from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes—drawing exclusively on secondary literature and established theoretical frameworks. It is not an empirical field study but a synthesis aimed at elucidating underlying mechanisms through interdisciplinary lenses. The central puzzle it seeks to explain is: Despite an overall UPSC success rate of approximately 0.08%—even lower for reserved categories—and amid significant financial hardship, repeated failures, and structural



barriers, why do these aspirants persistently invest years in preparation? The core research question is: How can theories of aspiration, social mobility, caste dynamics, capitals, habitus, and reference groups account for this enduring pursuit of symbolically potent bureaucratic roles?

Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual-analytical approach entirely based on secondary literature; no primary data were collected. The method relies on systematic literature review, theoretical integration, and conceptual synthesis. It combines social mobility theories (structural vs. exchange), Bourdieu's capitals and habitus, caste frameworks, and Merton's reference group theory to construct an original model of enduring UPSC aspirationality among SC/ST/OBC youth despite ~0.08% success rates.

Theoretical Framework

Social Mobility and Structural Constraints

Social mobility scholarship distinguishes between structural mobility, which arises from shifts in occupational structures enabling broad upward movement, and exchange mobility, driven by individual competition within a fixed distribution of positions (Modai-Snir & Ham, 2018, p. 431; Vicari & Unger, 2020, p. 138). In the Indian context, where intergenerational mobility remains stagnant for marginalized groups amid high inequality, structural mobility is elusive, channeling aspirations into rare avenues of exchange mobility such as competitive examinations. For UPSC aspirants from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes backgrounds, the exam represents a precarious pathway to elite bureaucratic positions, offering individual ascent despite formidable structural barriers.

Bourdieuian Capitals and Habitus

Pierre Bourdieu's framework posits that unequally distributed forms of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—and habitus, as durable dispositions internalized through socialization, profoundly shape social trajectories (Friedman, 2012, p. 473). Dominant groups leverage these resources to reproduce advantages, while marginalized actors confront persistent deficits that hinder accumulation. This lens illuminates UPSC aspirationality: aspirants from disadvantaged backgrounds, lacking embodied cultural capital, pursue the exam as a strategy to acquire symbolic capital through mastery of elite knowledge and perseverance, thereby renegotiating their habitus amid entrenched inequality.

In **Caste Mobility Theories**, Jaffrelot contrasts Sanskritization with ethnicization, positioning bureaucracy as modern status elevation(Jaffrelot, 2000); Jodhka frames UPSC success as dignity disruption(Heering, 2016).

Under **Reference Group Theory**, Jeffrey depicts Dalit/OBC youth pursuing UPSC as "nectar of the gods" for respect amid "timepass" emulation(Jeffrey, 2008, 2010; Jeffrey et al., 2004).

These perspectives ground global theories in empirical caste dynamics

Conceptual Argument: Why UPSC Remains Attractive

While structural mobility—shifts in occupational structures enabling broad upward movement—remains elusive for India's marginalized groups amid stagnant intergenerational progress, UPSC symbolizes a pathway to individual exchange mobility. Success in the exam promises not just a stable job but elite bureaucratic status, conferring authority and respect in a society where caste hierarchies persist. For aspirants from SC, ST, and OBC backgrounds, clearing UPSC transcends economic gain; it achieves symbolic mobility, elevating ritual and social standing akin to modern Sanskritization. A collector or IAS officer from a rural Dalit family disrupts traditional purity-pollution logics, visibly claiming dignity denied by birth.

This allure is profoundly tied to identity and dignity. Marginalized aspirants face daily humiliations—subtle discrimination in villages, urban prejudice, or familial expectations of menial labor. UPSC preparation becomes a redemptive quest, where perseverance signals agency against fatalism. Selection restores self-worth, transforming "backward" identities into emblems of triumph. Families invest savings, enduring debt, because one success rewrites generational narratives: from untouchability to unassailability. In a high-inequality context (Gini 0.35), UPSC offers psychic compensation, affirming that effort can shatter glass ceilings reinforced by unequal capitals.

Aspirational reference groups amplify this pull. UPSC toppers, often from privileged backgrounds yet portrayed as self-made via viral stories and social media reels, serve as glamorous non-membership models. Aspirants internalize their disciplined routines—early mornings, mock tests—through anticipatory socialization, blurring membership boundaries. Relative deprivation from comparing rural realities to toppers' urban poise fuels resolve rather than despair; proximity via coaching centers makes success seem attainable, masking 0.08% odds. These figures embody the "possible self," spurring emulation despite repeated failures.

Caste Mobility Theories (Sanskritization, Purity-Pollution)

In Indian caste sociology, M.N. Srinivas's concept of Sanskritization describes lower castes emulating the rituals, lifestyles, and practices of higher castes (or dominant castes) to claim elevated status, portraying caste as a dynamic rather than rigidly closed hierarchy (Iversen, 2021, p. 357; Iversen et al., 2021, p. 733; "Social Mobility in Developing Countries," 2021, p. 283). Complementing this, Louis Dumont's Homo Hierarchicus frames the caste system around a purity-pollution hierarchy, where ritual status rooted in birth subordinates economic achievement (Bhatt, 2017, p. 97; Bolazzi, 2020, p. 33). These theories underpin UPSC pursuit as contemporary Sanskritization: bureaucratic roles symbolize ritual purity and authority, enabling marginalized aspirants to counter stigma, achieve status consistency, and disrupt traditional hierarchies through visible elite emulation.

Reference Group Theory

Robert K. Merton's reference group theory elucidates how individuals orient their aspirations and behaviors toward membership groups (current affiliations) or non-membership groups (desired affiliations), fostering anticipatory socialization—preemptive adoption of elite norms—and relative deprivation from unfavorable comparisons (Clark & D'Ambrosio, 2014, p. 5; Delhey, 2005, p. 132). Positive non-membership references inspire emulation, while proximity enhances perceived attainability. For UPSC aspirants, privileged toppers serve as glamorous non-membership models, their disciplined routines disseminated via coaching cultures and media prompting anticipatory socialization, sustaining motivation despite low success rates.

Indian Scholarship

Indian scholars illuminate caste-constrained mobility. In *Social Mobility and Structural Constraints*, Deshpande critiques "inclusion versus excellence," with merit discourses masking upper-caste dominance in UPSC-like arenas (Deshpande, 2009); Jaffrelot notes affirmative action's political over socioeconomic gains amid OBC "silent revolution" (Jaffrelot, 2006; Williams & Fisher, 2010); Jodhka underscores enduring caste channeling aspirations to precarious coaching (Heering, 2016).

For **Bourdiesian Capitals and Habitus**, Subramanian reveals IITs' "caste of merit" reproducing inequality via cultural capital mismatches, mirroring UPSC (Subramanian, 2015, 2019).

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