

Education and the Capitalist Myth of Equality of Opportunity

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Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

We commit a big fallacy when we assume that our educational accomplishments are our individual achievements. We like to believe that we are born with a certain innate talent that makes us intellectually superior to all the rest.

But the fact of the matter is that our innate talents aren't all that different. Some people are born with genes that make them grow to being six-feet tall, whereas others are a few inches shorter; these are all minor differences of genetics, nevertheless.

The difference of innate intelligence amongst people belonging to all races is quite similar. It's our environment, family, culture and educational institutions which are primarily responsible for our cognitive abilities and critical faculties.

In this regard, capitalism works like outdated monarchy: a person born in a rich and educated family is by default a prince; he has access to all the modes of learning: such as parental guidance, best educational institutions, books, libraries and internet; peer pressure as a motivation, and intellectual discussions and debates with well-informed teachers, family members and close friends further hone one's cognitive abilities.

A poor peasant, on the other hand, lacks the wherewithal to educate himself and his children to that level. Thus, when the neoliberals blame the uneducated for their lack of education, they are actually blaming the victims for their misfortunes. They ought to blame the structural injustices and the capitalist system which engenders social stratification and consequent inequality of educational opportunities.

It bears mentioning, however, that I've written this article in the context of the Third World's stratified educational systems where we have markedly different educational institutions that impart elementary education to the children of the elite and the masses.

The public schools of the developed world provide quality education to all the citizens, irrespective of their social class, because in a country like the UK, the budgetary allocation for public education is more than \$50 billion for a population of 65 million, while in a Third World country, like Pakistan, the education budget is roughly \$5 billion for a population of more than 200 million. Thus, equality of opportunity, which is directly linked to the equality of education, has been ensured in the developed world, but not in the Third World.

In the Third World developing countries, especially in Pakistan, there are four distinct types of educational institutions that impart elementary education to citizens:

Firstly: The elite English-medium schools that offer courses in O/A Levels, and Junior and

Senior Cambridge. The quality of education in such institutions is quite good, but their tuition fee and other expenses are so exorbitant that only the upper middle class can admit their children in such schools.

Secondly: The Urdu-medium public and private sector schools that cater to the educational needs of the children of the middle and lower middle classes. Though such institutions are often misrepresented as “English-medium,” because the textbooks are in English, the lingua franca in such schools is generally Urdu; and their quality of education is average, at best.

Thirdly: The government schools that are run by the provincial education departments. The tuition fee in such schools is quite nominal and so is the standard of education that they impart. Such institutions cater to the educational needs of the children of the poor classes.

Fourthly: The religious seminaries, or madrassas, that are funded by the Islamic charities and endowments, and that impart religious education to the children of the poorest of the poor.

These petrodollars-funded madrassas offer the kind of incentives which are lacking even in government schools, like free boarding and lodging, meals for the poor students, free of cost books and stationery; and some generously funded madrassas even give monthly stipends to their students.

The poor folk who admit their children in madrassas, in a way, outsource the upbringing of their children to the madrassas; because, for all practical purposes, such children are raised by religious clerics.

Regardless, in today’s complex world, without education, people are not equipped to survive. For instance: if I go to China and I don’t understand the Chinese language, I’ll be needing a tour guide with me all the time.

Similarly, those of us who can’t read and write, they can survive due to their traditional social networks in villages, but not in modern cities. And the innumerate who can’t do math, they cannot succeed in business. If you want to register a property or a vehicle to your name, and you don’t know the law and the understanding of how the system works, you can run into a lot of trouble.

Therefore, education is imperative for survival in today’s complex world. Biological evolution is based on the cardinal principle of natural selection and the survival of the fittest; thus, fitness to the environment is the only law that ensures our survival. But that fitness is bestowed upon us by nature; and like I have argued earlier, that in today’s complex, man-made world, every newborn child is unfit to survive until he gets proper education.

More to the point, the lack of fitness of an individual, or a social group, is not their fault, it is the fault of the society as a whole. If you are fortunate enough to have been born in upper middle class family, by default you will be equipped with all the necessary tools that are required for survival and progress; but if you have not been properly educated to understand and deal with today’s complex modern societies, then you will remain an unfit peasant.

Finally, and in a nutshell, equality of opportunity, which is the fundamental axiom of the modern egalitarian worldview, is directly linked to the equality of education, or at least, the equality of educational opportunities.

In the capitalist neoliberal societies of the Third World, however, only the children of the upper classes get proper education which is essential for upward social mobility, whereas the children of the masses get barely sufficient education which might be enough for becoming clerks and technicians, but as far as honing one's cognitive abilities and critical faculties are concerned, their optimal potential is not realized.

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