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Changing Urban Education Trends: Case Study of a ‘Small Town’ in Madhya Pradesh
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Abstract: This paper looks at the shifts in education over the last three decades in a small Madhya Pradesh town called Pipariya. Pipariya is unique due to its location and rich history of social movements. Decades of neo-liberal reforms have not urbanized Pipariya and it remains bereft of any infrastructural development, industry, and private or government-run health and education facilities. However, privatization policies in education have impacted Pipariya’s school system in multiple ways, including the decline of the best government schools and the opening of private schools, which resulted in the middle classes exiting state institutions. The paper explores the changing educational and occupational aspirations of the people of the town. Choices for marginalized communities are limited to competing for a few lower-level teaching, banking, and bureaucratic jobs. The privatization of education is, therefore, widening the social and economic divide and increasing inequalities. The paper also explores how the town has emerged as a supplier of students to the expanding coaching industry in the state and beyond.

Keywords: Pipariya, privatization, urbanization, social movements, neo-liberal reforms

After completing M.Sc. in Physics from Delhi University, Sadhna Saxena moved to rural Madhya Pradesh to join Kishore Bharati in 1975 which ran educational programmes for landless labourers and their children and also, school science education programme. She later joined the National Institute of Adult Education (NIAE) as a Fellow, where she engaged in policy analysis and published on state-sponsored literacy and empowerment programmes. She taught at the Department of Education, Delhi University, from 2002 to 2019 and is currently a visiting professor at IISER-Mohali. Her areas of interest include science education and popular science movements; the politics of education, including conflict and education; and gender and education, especially gender and science.
Introduction: Revisiting Pipariya – a small town¹ in Central India

In 1974, I travelled as a young graduate student volunteer to join Kishore Bharti (KB), an organization working for rural education and development in Palia Pipariya village on the eastern tip of Hoshangabad district in Madhya Pradesh. The train made a short halt at Pipariya station, leaving me with only faint memories of yet another nondescript small town. Over the next twenty years, however, Pipariya was to be my nearest market town, and eventually my home. It also became a major centre of KB’s educational and social mobilization activities.

After moving to Delhi in 1992, I continued to visit the town and kept in touch with its people. Over the years, the educational landscape of the town and the aspirations of its young population underwent a striking change. Young students started to enrol in private engineering and management colleges across the country. Graduates from the town gained employment in national and international companies in Mumbai, Bengaluru, Pune, the USA, Europe, and Canada. I was curious to know what developments had made these changes possible and who had been left behind.

On one such visit to Pipariya in 2018, I met two old friends – a couple who work as schoolteachers and who graduated from Pipariya Government College (PGC). Coming from the Other Backward Class (OBC)² social category, they were among the last few young science and mathematics graduates recruited as permanent government school teachers in the mid 1980s. At their home, the parents introduced me to their two children who had completed secondary education in Pipariya. They had moved to Bhopal to complete their schooling and joined coaching classes to prepare for engineering and medical school entrance tests. Their parents told me that they chose Bhopal as the cost of living and coaching there was much lower than in Kota.³ The son later joined IIT-Bombay to study computer engineering and went on to pursue a masters from USA. He would go on to join a multinational company in Texas after

¹A ‘small town’ is not a well-defined category. Here, it is used for a town which has its own municipality and a population close to 50,000, though some have used it for towns with a population of less than one lakh. See Dipankar Gupta, “The Importance of being ‘Rurban’: Tracking Changes in a Traditional Setting,” EPW L, no. 24 (2015): 37–43. He calls cities like Bhopal, Ludhiana, Kochi, Hanamkonda, Kazipeth, Tirpur and others that have a population of nearly a million ‘small towns’ that have private English-medium schools and technology and management institutes.

²Other Backward Class (OBC) is a collective category used by the Government of India to classify castes which are educationally or socially disadvantaged. In the hierarchy of castes, all OBCs are above Scheduled Castes (SCs). However, OBC’s are further divided in to creamy and non-creamy layers based on economic levels.

³Kota is a medium-level deindustrialized town in Rajasthan state which has emerged as a major hub of coaching institutions for engineering, medical, and business management education, thus representing the privatization of higher education. For more on Kota and its status as growing hub for coaching, see S. Srinivasa Rao, ‘Production of an ‘Educational’ City: Shadow Education Economy and Re-structuring of Kota in India,” in Second International Handbook of Education Vol. I, eds. William T. Pink and George W. Noblit (Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 417-443.
graduation. The daughter studied medicine at Kasturba Medical College, Manipal in Karnataka and was a resident in gynaecology at a well-known hospital in Mumbai. Clearly, the parents’ socio-economic capital had enabled their children to pursue successful careers. I realized that the dynamics of education and urban development in this small town had undergone an interesting change since the 1990s, which this paper now studies.

After the introductory first section, the second section of the paper explores the town’s strategic geographical location and its economy, which is predominantly agricultural. I then discuss its social history – the transformation of a small settlement into a town and the emergence of stratified spatial and social structures. To map the social context, the fourth section briefly discusses the history of socialist ideology and political activism in Pipariya, which makes it unique among small towns. In the fifth section, I discuss urban research that has mostly focused on medium-sized and large cities – and more recently on Census Towns (CTs) – but not on small towns like Pipariya. Based on the existing theoretical understanding, I then construct a framework to analyse the shifts in the town’s formal education over the past three decades. After that, I analyse the findings from the interviews.

1. The geography and economy of Pipariya

Located in Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh, Pipariya’s population is around 50,000. It is around 150 kilometres from Bhopal, the capital of the state, and it is connected to the road and rail networks. The bustling town is organized around its grain market, the mandi, which is located next to the railway station. This area is home to the offices-cum-residences of some of Pipariya’s wealthiest grain merchants. The southern boundary of the town is close to the foot of the Mahadeo Hills, which form part of the Satpura range, and its northern boundary is river Narmada.

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4 A Census Town (CTs) in India is one which is not formally identified as a town but whose population has acquired urban characteristics. CTs have a population of more than 5,000, with 75 per cent of the male population engaged in non-agricultural work.

5 A new law passed by India in September 2020 provides for the abolition of these mandis, which will have serious consequences for grain merchants and farmers.
Pipariya is the railhead from where a 52 km road climbs through the Satpura hills to reach the flat plateau of Pachmarhi. These forested hills are the traditional homes of the Gondi and Korku peoples. Pachmarhi, the only hill station in Madhya Pradesh, is the location of the Army Educational Corps Training College and Centre. Close to its northern border, on the other side of the Narmada, lie the fertile wheat-growing surplus districts of Raisen, Sehore, and Vidisha, straddled by the Vindhya Range. The Pipariya mandi is accessible to farmers from these areas. Situated on the east–west road from Hoshangabad to Narsinghpur, the neighbouring district town, and onwards to Jabalpur, Pipariya is located at a very convenient road junction, making it an ideal location for a grain market.

Pipariya was historically a monsoon-dependent single-crop region and landless people used to migrate to the rich wheat-growing area for work during the lean rabi (winter crop) season. The coming of irrigation facilities, such as affordable ring-wells, government tube-wells, and recently the Tawa Canal Irrigation Project, has turned the fertile land of north Pipariya into a multi-crop area. Irrigation made it possible to cultivate cash-crops like long

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6 A large area of forested hills around Pachmarhi became the Satpura National Park and Tiger Reserve in 1981. As a result, the tribal villages in these forests were relocated to settlement villages on the periphery of the Reserve close to Pipariya. Torn from their livelihoods and cultural roots, these relocated families continue to struggle for respectable resettlement. This has sharpened the conflict between the forest department and the displaced villagers. Narendra Maurya, Personal interview with author, 11 January, 2019.

7 Wheat surplus districts are districts that export wheat to other parts of the country.

grain paddy, which is grown specifically for a private company. During the early years of the Green Revolution, a market also opened up for chemical fertilizers, pesticides and agricultural machinery (including tractors, electric motor pump sets, and other accessories).

In the absence of any other industry, the agricultural economy of Pipariya and its hinterland revolves around the grain mandi, dal (lentils), oil, saw and rice mills, and retail and wholesale trade. Currently, the town has around 40 automated dal mills. The mandi committee is generally controlled by the powerful local political elite, though the Madhya Pradesh grain mandis have been much better regulated since the major reforms of the mid 1980s. As the mandi grew and trade expanded, the business activities of enterprising merchant communities gained impetus. They were quick to grab the opportunities that emerging trade offered and moved to the town from their villages. They later emerged as farmers, grocers, cloth merchants, gold and silver jewellers, and money lenders.

2. From a small settlement to a town: Class and community power dynamics

Pipariya was a rural settlement which gradually grew into a village with the arrival of a railway line in 1870 and a railway station a few years later. The 1908 District Gazetteer of Hoshangabad lists Pipariya as a village with a population of 1,900 and one of the nine villages in Sohagpur tehsil with a population above 1,000. Sohagpur is known as a historic town and was the centre of a number of cottage industries, including weaving, dyeing, and clay and brass pottery. Pipariya outstripped Sohagpur in population growth (see Table 1) and is now more than twice its size. This happened after Pipariya acquired the status of a municipal town in 1948.

Table 1: Population of Pipariya and Sohagpur

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<tr>
<td>Pipariya Town Population</td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3,968</td>
<td>5,874</td>
<td>10,230</td>
<td>13,037</td>
<td>18,281</td>
<td>25,319</td>
<td>34,558</td>
<td>44,378</td>
<td>48,826</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sohagpur Town Population</td>
<td>7,420</td>
<td>7,239</td>
<td>7,053</td>
<td>8,141</td>
<td>8,629</td>
<td>8,993</td>
<td>9,352</td>
<td>12,097</td>
<td>15,642</td>
<td>18,614</td>
<td>22,339</td>
<td>25,040</td>
</tr>
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Source: Census data.

10 For a detailed account of the development of Pipariya, see Narayadas Maurya, Pipariya 2000 (Pipariya: Samanata Prakashan, 2000).
To understand the present social stratification of the town, a historical exploration of the evolution of the political economy of the hinterland is essential. Under British rule in the mid nineteenth century, the *Malguzari* rent system was introduced in the region. This recognized the erstwhile Gond Rajas as the *Ala* (superior) *Malguzars* and gave them complete control over the lands of the village, provided that they paid *malguzari* (rent) to the British government. However, the British later also installed *Adna* (lesser) *Malguzars* (with the title of *Patel*) from the migrant population, including Brahmins, Rajputs, and some OBCs at the village level. These were gradually given greater powers and control over their village lands. The migrants came from Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh, and had been settled in Pipariya for the past five or six generations. Some of them provided various services to the Raja households; for instance, the Brahmins worked as chefs and Katakwars (OBC) as managers. Others settled in existing villages or tilled fallow land to set up new villages. In the decades before Independence in 1947, land property rights became consolidated in the hands of village *Malguzars* and those who actually worked the land were rendered landless labourers, tenants or sharecroppers. A sharp division between the landed and the landless emerged.

The following generations of *Adna Malguzars* and Gond Rajas marched into independent India controlling huge areas of land – sometimes the *malguzari* rights of many villages – which they cultivated using the labour of oppressed landless workers. The lack of proper land records and their manipulation deprived several tribal families of ownership rights over lands they had been cultivating in the assumption that it belonged to them. Some of these families gradually moved to Pipariya and found work in the *mandi* as casual labourers. This working class of Pipariya has also been actively involved in the workers union and, at one time, formed the solid base of the Socialist Party that took root in Hoshangabad district.

The settlement of various communities and the making of Pipariya town have come at the cost of marginalization, land alienation, and the impoverishment of indigenous tribal people. The workers, labourers, Dalits, and tribespeople who built Pipariya came from neighbouring villages, but lived on the fringes of the town.

### 3. History of social activism

Pipariya and the state of Madhya Pradesh produced many leaders who later made an important contribution to raising the social consciousness of people. Hari Vishnu Kamath, a member of the Praja Socialist Party, was one of them. He quit his job as a collector in the British
government to join the independence movement and went on to be elected twice to the Lok Sabha from Hoshangabad in 1955 and 1967.

In the 1950s, Jaggu Ustad also of the Praja Socialist Party, a popular local leader, launched many development activities, including the electrification of Pipariya. He also opened the first public library (Janata Vachnalaya), government hospital, and government school for children of daily wage labourers. Maurya highlights the role of Janata Vachnalaya in raising political awareness among young people through its rich collection of Hindi books. The Pipariya Samata Sangathan also later opened a library-cum-study centre (Samata Adhyyyan Kendra). In 1983, yet another library and cultural centre called Shaheed Bhagat Singh Pustkalaya avam Sanskritik Kendra was established by Kishore Bharati. The idea was to create a space for reading and interaction amongst the people of Pipariya, especially the younger generations. The library had a collection of more than 5,000 Hindi books on literature, history, science, and the social sciences. With local support, the centre organized public lectures and discussions on education, science, and other social issues. After this, from the early 1980s, an education organization called Eklavya opened another library. Therefore, for more than six decades, the town has had multiple libraries run by different organizations, which helped promote socialist thought and awareness among the youth.

4. Small towns and their neglect and anonymity

In the context of urban education, the definition of ‘urban’ needs some discussion, as there are difficulties and methodological inconsistencies associated with defining and classifying the urban. In India, half of all urban growth between 2001 and 2011 has come about through the rising number of Census Towns (CTs), which became a source of cheaper property and labour for the expansion of industry. According to census data, the number of CTs increased from

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11 Narendra Maurya, Personal interview.
12 Samata Sangathan is an organization inspired by the ideas of socialist leaders such as Ram Manohar Lohiya and Kishen Pattanayak.
13 Bhagat Singh was an Indian socialist revolutionary who was executed by the British government when he was 23 years old. He became a legend of the Indian independence movement. Kishore Bharati, Shaheed Bhagatsingh Pustakalya Evam Sanskritik Kendra (Bankhedi: Kishore Bharati, 1984).
1,362 in 2001 to 3,892 in 2011 whereas small towns grew only marginally.  

Hence, the broader picture of urbanization over the last decade has been influenced by the dynamics of CTs, and from 2011 onwards, urban studies have focussed solely on these. Since Pipariya is not a CT, despite being much bigger in population and land area, it has escaped the attention of urban researchers. Scrase et al. explain this anomaly by pointing out that attention is focused on large cities and CTs that have been directly impacted by globalization and technological changes. Based on her study of seven small towns in north India, Sharma argues that since larger cities receive the most funding for development and research, they also get the most attention in academia. Also, the stagnation of small towns is an indicator of skewed priorities and the neglect of agriculture at the policy level. Existing research, such as Scrase et al.’s study on the urban expansion of mid-level tourist towns like Darjeeling and the economic transformation of Anand through a major dairy co-operative programme, does not help in understanding ‘economically unimportant’ towns like Pipariya.

Pipariya is less significant also because it is neither strategically important nor close to any industrial city. Nor is it located on the fringe of a megacity like Delhi, which is expanding spatially and whose peripheral villages are becoming important CTs in their own right. Similarly, the town has no commonality with coastal cities like Vijayawada, where rich farmers are setting up private education institutions for their children and abandoning government schools or with deindustrialized medium-level towns like Kota, as mentioned above.

Clearly, the town has not followed the same trajectory of urbanization as big and middle-level Indian cities, which feature gentrification, the emergence of business districts, bounded self-contained residential spaces for the middle classes, gated communities, shopping malls, and exclusive spaces for consumption and leisure. It is clear that studies like those

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18 Scarse et al., “Beyond the Metropolis.”

19 Sharma, “Rejuvenating India’s Small Towns.”

20 Scarse et al., “Beyond the Metropolis.”


discussed above are not of much help in understanding the shifting dynamics of urbanization and education in Pipariya.

5. Conceptual framework

To understand the impact of globalization on urbanization and education, Pink et al. strongly argue for the need to focus on the specificities and uniqueness of the context, and not to reduce it to a list of differences and similarities or to seek generalizations. They emphasize that context – including factors such as region, nation, people, cities, development, political economy – is important, and that the challenge is to understand how urban education is embedded in historical and other processes. India is a large and diverse country, so there will always be a temptation to find patterns for policy formulations, but this always comes at the cost of specificity. In the context of studying the privatization of secondary schools in Bijnor, Jeffery et al. stress the same point: ‘Looking in detail at one setting does, however, reveal how globalized educational policies impact on a particular locality’. 

This paper also draws on Bourdieu’s framework of capital, which is an important tool for understanding the emergence of a stratified school and higher education system in Pipariya, and its inequalities in terms of access and quality. Research on the new political economy provides a framework to examine the entanglement of economic restructuring, neo-liberal education policies, and the geographical (spatial) restructuring of smaller towns. Under neo-liberalism, there is a marked shift in the goal of education from achieving equality and democracy to ‘human capital development’, whereby education becomes a private good instead of ‘a social good for development of individuals and society as a whole’. In this paper, the restructuring of educational policies and goals and urban geography in the neo-liberal economic context forms yet another prism through which to examine educational shifts in Pipariya. A noteworthy point here is that the beneficiaries of neo-liberal restructuring are the middle classes who, in turn, also shape the perception of ‘good education’.

28 Lipman, The New Political Economy of Urban Education, 15
6. Education in Pipariya

**Senior secondary schools**

Until the 1980s, in addition to two government-run and two aided schools, Pipariya had only one Hindi-medium private senior secondary school called Mahesh Convent. In the late 1980s, the Catholic church opened Saint Joseph Convent School (SJCS), a popular English-medium school. From the early 1990s, Pipariya’s middle classes started to abandon government schools. By 2000, SJCS became the first choice for the trading communities and professionals. To cater to the growing demand, several English-medium private schools opened within next 15 years. Beersheba International English-Medium School, run by a Lutheran church group, also became another preferred institution later on.

Recent data from the Madhya Pradesh RTE portal shows that Pipariya and its surrounding small towns and villages are dotted with low-fee and other private schools. Pipariya and the neighbouring Hathwans village have about fifty private schools, of which nearly a dozen offer senior secondary education. These are run either by local trusts, national school chains, or church groups. Most of these schools started between 2005 and 2010 and initially offered secondary education. After being formally recognized by the state or national education boards, they started offering senior secondary education. Most of them are co-ed and run classes both in Hindi and English except Beersheba International and SJCS which are English medium schools. Interestingly, there are now many ‘international’ schools, such as Learning Stem International School, which was started by a local elite family. In 2005, a Don Bosco residential school was opened in Jhirpa village (about 20 km from Pipariya) by a Christian who was not a resident of the state. Parents were required to deposit Rs 1 lakh to secure admission to the school. Upper middle-class parents, mostly belonging to the Patel caste from Pipariya and its surrounding villages, sent their children to the school; however, it was shut down after a few years due to lack of funds.

It must be mentioned here that no new senior secondary government schools have opened in Pipariya in more than three decades. Only one government middle school, which has poor infrastructure and is located in the middle of the town, was upgraded to a secondary school in 2014. The town has only one government senior secondary school for girls. While it has not had a regular principal for many years, its student population has remained steady at around 1,500. The reason for this is that not all parents are keen to spend money on privately educating

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29 educationportal.mp.gov.in, accessed on 15 September 2019.
their daughters. The only government school for boys is called RNA School, which enjoyed the reputation of being the best school from the 1970s till the middle of 1990s.

The locations of these private schools correspond to the ongoing spatial reorganization of the town and reflect the social status of the institutions’ clientele. For example, gated residential complexes are being built on the road leading to Pachmarhi, where SJCS and Beersheba are located. Similarly, newer schools like The Learning Stem, Shemford School, Samaritans School, and Master Mind School have been established close to the emerging elite areas around Hathwans, another CT, and Sandiya Road – two important peripheral areas of Pipariya. Most of these schools have better infrastructure and sprawling campuses – features otherwise missing from institutions located closer to the town centre. Their transportation services facilitate enrolment of students from nearby villages. Other low-fee private and aided schools, including new junior schools, are located in the busiest part of town.

The tuition fee charged by most private schools ranges from Rs 1,000–4,000 per month. A shift towards higher fees has been witnessed in recent years. According to the Learning Stem School website, the fee for the 2019–20 school year was Rs 34,000 for nursery classes and Rs 44,000 per year up to class eight. Parents also have to pay monthly transport charges and Rs 500 for the admission form, a new development.

Higher education

Before 1990, there was only one co-educational college in Pipariya: the Pipariya Government College (PGC), which is currently affiliated to Sagar University. In its heyday, it offered only undergraduate courses and was the only higher education option for most students in the town. Postgraduate teaching was introduced in 1985 and a law course was launched in 1995. An undergraduate government college for women opened in 1990, followed more recently by a private college. Both these colleges offer only undergraduate courses in humanities.

In contrast to mushrooming private schools, the growth of higher education has remained stagnant. For many years, students from deprived communities of Pipariya and the surrounding villages are the only ones studying at these colleges. Currently, more than 3,000 students are enrolled in the PGC. I have been informed by teachers that most students who have the socio-economic capital to do so now leave the town to pursue higher education.

Insights from interviews

To understand the intersections of class, caste, and gender in the educational and employment trajectories of students in Pipariya, interviews were conducted with people from different parts
of town. Of the twenty-three interviews, fourteen were with parents of students and seven with former/current students.\textsuperscript{30} I also interviewed the Block Education Officer and the author of a popular history of the town. From the interviewees, I gathered information about children of eight other families who were either related or known to them. The interviews were conducted to explore narratives of education and to get a sense of the changing educational landscape of the town.

The social backgrounds of the twenty-three interviewees and the eight families about whom further information was obtained were as follows: merchant/trading castes (8), Brahmins (5), OBCs including two Gujar Patels who were landlords (10), and SC/STs (8).\textsuperscript{31} Their occupations included middle school teachers (5), high school teachers (3), government official (1), self-employed (2), traders and money lenders (8), farmers (2), activist (1), engineer (1), retired government official (1), and students (7). Based on the interviews, the period of educational transformation in Pipariya could be divided roughly into two phases: the mid 1990s to 2005, and 2006 to the present. The findings from these periods are briefly presented in the sections below:

\textbf{Shifts in educational trajectories: Mid 1990s to 2005}

Of the four middle school teachers whose children completed their education during this period, two were Brahmins and two came from the OBC community. One of the Brahmin teachers, who had retired from the RNA school, was from a lower middle-class \textit{purohit} (priest) family. He was the first in his family to get a government job. His three sons studied at RNA while his daughter attended the girls’ school. All of them completed their school education between the mid 1990s and 2000. According to the teacher, English-medium and private schools were not popular at that time and RNA was considered the best school in the town. He said that appointment of contract teachers in government schools started around mid-1990s which adversely affected the quality of public education.

It was only around the 2000s that Pipariya witnessed both the burgeoning of institutions, including coaching centres, and the growth in aspirations of mobility through education. Interviews revealed that the expansion of professional education in urban centres in the region around Pipariya enabled the upper castes and even those from the lower middle class

\textsuperscript{30} Most interviews were conducted in November 2018.

\textsuperscript{31} SCs (Scheduled Caste) and ST (Scheduled Tribe) are officially designated groups of people in India. The terms are recognized by the Constitution of India. SCs include Dalits or the untouchable castes. ST is the term used for the indigenous or tribal people of India. SCs and STs are socially and economically disadvantaged groups.
to acquire social capital through postgraduate education and secure employment, especially of their sons. Most of these children attended RNA in Pipariya and moved out after graduating from the local college.

It was interesting to observe the diverse educational pathways of children from OBC families. One lower middle-class OBC teacher shared his struggle to provide ‘good’ education to his four children. Since he was posted in a village, his children attended local primary schools before he could move them to schools in Pipariya. His schools of choice were RNA and Mahesh Convent for his sons, and the government girls’ school for his daughter. The sons went on to obtain a postgraduate education in sciences, finance, and engineering, gaining employment in other cities, with the youngest now a software engineer working for a multinational company in Germany. It is interesting that in the latter case, the teacher obtained a loan to put him through English classes.

Another OBC teacher was from a well-off landed family and farmed his own land in addition to teaching. He belonged to the Patel community (the erstwhile adna malgujars), which has prospered from land ownership and investment in agribusiness. According to him, the community was never inclined towards higher education, and unlike other trading communities, mothers were not involved in their children’s education. This teacher initially taught in village schools but later joined RNA in Pipariya. He wanted to send his children to a private school and chose Mahesh Convent, not SJCS. The daughter was married off after completing class 12, whereas the son pursued post graduation from PGC. After failed attempts at obtaining a government job, the son now assists in his father’s farming business.

The children of a trading community resident of the town, who was a tailor, moneylender, and agricultural landowner, also completed their education during these years. He emphasized that he did not want his children to pursue his own occupation, and was eager for them to move away for higher education and better prospects. His children studied at Mahesh Convent and graduated from PGC. His daughter went on to study for an MBA from Pune and later settled in the USA with her husband. The youngest son was accepted to study engineering without attending any coaching classes. He studied at a private engineering college in Bhopal and later obtained an MBA from a private college in Pune. Like other students from Pipariya, he too had to study English. He worked for various multinational companies in India and the United States and eventually settled in Vancouver, Canada. His wife is also a software engineer. The eldest son is a freelance journalist and lives in Pipariya. However, unlike them, the teachers did not refer to their daughters’ education and it was in the trading communities where mothers were seen to playing a crucial role in planning the education of their children.
While discussing the education of his children, this person also gave detailed information about two young women – one from a land-owning OBC family and the other from a rich Brahmin family. Both graduated from SJCS and went on to study engineering, followed by an MBA from Bhopal in around 2005/6. The two then worked in senior positions in the USA. One of them later returned to India and set up an IT company in Gurugram. These two women did not take any coaching in college, but did take private lessons to improve their spoken English.

However, the experience of first-generation learners, as described by the mother of the two Dalit brothers who could have completed class 12 around the mid 1990s, was completely different. From a village in Bhagalpur, Bihar, the landless parents came to Kishore Bharati in 1975 in search of a livelihood. For the sake of their children’s education, the parents moved to Pipariya in 1986. Their elder son was admitted to class 5 and the younger one to class 3 at a government primary school. After class 5, the elder son joined Navchetna, a private senior secondary school as he was not accepted to RNA. Two years later, the younger son joined RNA. Neither could complete their schooling: the elder son dropped out in class 10 and sat his final exams as an external candidate, while the younger one dropped out in class 9. Their mother underscored the caste discrimination the two suffered at school as primary reasons for their dropping out.

Significantly, during this period, RNA and the girls’ senior secondary school were considered the best schools in Pipariya; yet people from higher socio-economic classes, who were looking for exclusive spaces, chose to send their children to Mahesh Convent School. The establishment of private engineering and management colleges in the state created further opportunities for children from these families. Competition to study engineering was less fierce during this period, and the business of coaching classes had not yet begun. Therefore, students passed engineering entrance exams on their own. To study engineering, MCA, and other professional degrees from new private colleges, many young people migrated to Bhopal, Indore, and Pune, but almost all attended PGC for their first degree.

**2006 to the present**

In around 2005–6, enrolling children at SJCS or other English-medium schools became a priority for better-off families, particularly those from the trading and service communities. The educational trajectory of the two children, who attended SJCS, discussed at the beginning of this paper reflects their parents’ resolve to ensure a better education for their children.
The author of the oral history book *Aise Basi Pipariya*, who belonged to the OBC community, studied at the local government school and RNA and went on to further study at PGC in the early 1980s. He started a theatre group in Pipariya and was an active leader of Samata Sangathan. He then joined Kishore Bharati in 1980, where he helped found the Shaheed Bhagat Singh library and cultural centre, before moving to Delhi in 1989 to work for a newspaper. His two sons studied at government schools in Pipariya and later completed their school and college education in Delhi in around 2009–10. He trusted the government system and did not look for private alternatives. Unlike the author, his younger brothers’ children studied at Mahesh Convent School, except for the youngest who attended SJCS. For coaching classes and engineering courses, they relocated to Nagpur and Indore. In this case, the girls in the family were more successful than the boys. One went on to become a software engineer and the other obtained a BCA. Both found employment in the IT sector in Bengaluru.

Another Samata Sangathan leader from a trading community said that his great-grandparents migrated from Rajasthan more than a hundred years ago and made this town their home. He spoke about his joint and extended families’ determination to send the younger generations to bigger cities for better prospects. He worked with Eklavya while his brothers and other kin worked in family-run businesses. He was the first in his family to send his son and daughter to SJCS in 2003–4. Following this, all his younger brothers, cousins, uncles, and aunts also sent their children to SJCS. The family eschewed Beer Sheba, the famous Hindi-medium private school, ‘as only farmers’ children study there,’ one of the brothers stated with disdain. Educated mothers took charge of helping children with their homework, English tuition, and other education-related responsibilities. During the interviews, women were far better informed and more articulate than men about their children’s education and future planning.

The Samata Sangathan leader’s elder son was selected for admission to a private engineering college but had to give up the opportunity due to financial constraints. Both his children, a son and daughter, attended coaching classes, studied in private colleges in Indore, and became chartered accountants. Currently, his son is working for a multinational company and, as his father pointed out, frequently travelled to Europe. For the other children of this extended family, the son who travels the world has become a role model.

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33 Eklavya is another NGO working in the field of education in Madhya Pradesh. For details, see eklavya.in
Narratives of upward social mobility through education are clearly more common in Pipariya’s trading communities. Another enterprising person from the Maheshwari community, a trading and merchant caste, spoke of his joint and extended family’s experiences and achievements. His elder brother, an income tax lawyer, went to Indore in the early 1990s to practice law but returned due to lack of knowledge of spoken English. This experience strengthened the family’s resolve to educate their children at SJCS. His advice to the younger generation was ‘padho, aage badho aur dunia dekho’ – learn and explore the world. The option to pursue farming or trading was not given to the children. The mothers, who were educated in Indore and Nagpur, played an active part in their children’s education.

Agriculture and trade are no longer considered occupational options by the merchant community of the town. The trader interviewed above studied at government schools and PGC, as did his brothers, and their well-educated wives are from Indore and Nagpur. With better education and exposure, these women took an active role in their children’s education. Beginning with his eldest brother’s son in 1997, all the children in the family moved to Pune after completing Class 10. There, they each joined premier junior colleges to complete class 11 and 12 and then took coaching classes to prepare for competitive exams. Interestingly, investment in the reproduction of educational status is reflected in the long-term rental of a house in Pune to accommodate family and community members who go to the city to study. The interviewee’s three daughters studied at SJCS and later in Pune. The eldest daughter, an MBA graduate and engineer, works in California and lives there with her husband. The other two daughters work in senior positions in law and chartered accountancy firms set up by their cousins in Pune. All three daughters were able to get educational loans from banks thanks to their father’s social contacts and networks.

The number of private engineering and management colleges has been rising across India since the late 1990s. In Pipariya, young people from better-off families are following the trend of pursuing these courses, with few exceptions. One of these was a Maheshwari girl who completed her schooling at SJCS in 2015, scoring well in her class 12 examinations. However, she then enrolled to study economics at a premier women’s college of the University of Delhi. She stayed in an exclusive Maheshwari community guest house located in an upmarket area of Delhi and did fairly well in studies. Her father, a major landlord, local moneylender, businessman, and influential political leader, is clear that unlike his daughter, his son will study engineering and obtain an MBA.

Another exception was a young Brahmin boy who teaches English at Beersheba International School. His father, an employee of the telephone department, decided to send his son to Navodaya Vidyalaya instead of a private school. His is a nuclear family and so the father was the lone decision-maker. The teacher completed his school education around 2005 and studied for a B.Sc. from PGC before moving to Indore. He obtained a Ph.D. in chemistry from Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore University, and went on to teach at a private university in Gujarat, but moved back to Pipariya for personal reasons. He seemed committed to the pure sciences, keeping himself informed about the latest research in the discipline.

The third exception was the son of a legal advocate, who belongs to the OBC artisan caste of goldsmiths. The father, a former member of Pipariya municipal corporation, has always been very active in campaigning on behalf of oppressed people. The son completed his schooling in 2013 at Beer Sheba International School as it was less expensive than SJCS. While his peers started preparing for admission to engineering courses, he decided to study law and attended coaching classes for two months in Bhopal. He completed his law degree in Pune and is now planning to enrol in a masters. It is noteworthy that all three of the individuals described above studied at government colleges, unlike their peers.

PGC students also include the children of medium and small-scale farmers from neighbouring villages. They live in rented accommodation or with relatives, or travel every day from their villages. Many of them attend coaching classes in Pipariya after graduating, and compete for lower-level jobs. For instance, an educated mother of two who was an OBC decided to move to Pipariya from a village 30 km away for her children’s education. She was married to a farmer who was also the leader of the agricultural workers’ union. Both her children, a son and a daughter, graduated from PGC. The son is studying for a master’s degree from a private university in Bengaluru on full fee waiver.

Another OBC landless family from the same village also moved to Pipariya for their son’s education. The father, a graduate who regularly wrote on social and environmental issues, had no means of paying for coaching or professional education for his son, who went on to graduate from PGC in 2016 and then enrolled for a degree in fine arts at a well-known college in Gujarat. In both these cases, it was social and not economic capital that played a crucial role in shaping the educational futures of the next generation.

A completely contrasting picture emerged from interactions with Dalit and tribal students. Of the seven former students interviewed, four were female and three male. Four were from SC (Dalit) and three were from ST (tribal) communities. Their parents’ occupations were teacher (1), peon (1), driver (2), farmer (1), and labourer (2). Their mothers worked as domestic
help except for one who was employed as a sweeper with the municipal corporation. Nearly all students were first-generation learners and held the opinion that formal education was their only means of ‘upward mobility’.

Earlier generations of their families migrated to Pipariya from villages in search of a livelihood. Six of the families were landless and had no other assets, while the farmer owned a small piece of land. The tribal families lived in the old part of Pipariya and the Dalits in a Dalit settlement (except for one whose family moved to a slightly better locality as her father was a teacher). One tribal boy studied at Mahesh Convent School as he was refused admission to RNA. Later, he joined a private college after failing to get accepted to PGC. Of the others, two girls studied at the government school and one in Pachmarhi, while one boy went to RNA, and one girl and one boy completed class 12 through open schooling. One Dalit girl, who had scored well in class 12, was prevented from enrolling in a B.Sc. by her father. She pursued a B.A. from PGC and was attending coaching classes to prepare for the civil service entrance exams. Six students graduated and two obtained postgraduate qualifications. However, none were able to secure government employment or a regular private job.

None of the students were able to obtain bank loans to support their education, even though all of them applied. Their applications were rejected since their parents did not have fixed assets. They could not take English tuition, despite a strong desire to learn the language. All tribal and SC students received scholarships, but their higher education was interrupted due to economic constraints. Most reflected on their school journeys as unpleasant and tough, even though two of them recalled having supportive teachers. Even though they aspired to better education and jobs, lack of quality teaching and support from home made their journey challenging. Unlike students from higher classes, tribal and SC students lack social and economic capital, making their future uncertain.

7. Findings

**Changing schools and colleges**

Multiple factors led to the decline of government schools in India from early 1990s. One crucial reason was the abandonment of the constitutional commitment to equality through education.³⁵ Bhatty discusses the marginalization of equal opportunity in elementary education, most

importantly in the 1986 education policy, through the creation of hierarchies in the public school system and the non-formalization of schooling.\textsuperscript{36} The quality of education also suffered because of the failure of successive governments to respond to an increasing demand for secondary education, heightened non-teaching responsibilities for teachers, and the appointment of contractual teachers in government schools.\textsuperscript{37} Educational shifts in Pipariya reflect these changes at the national level.

Until the early 1980s, government schools were considered the best in Pipariya. Mahesh Convent, which opened in early 1980, was the first major initiative by the rich to create an exclusive school for their children. The second major shift in Pipariya’s school system came with the opening of SJCS in the late 1980s. From the 1990s to 2005, most students were enrolled at RNA and admissions were based on merit. Yet student numbers at RNA and other government schools started declining from mid 1990s. The student population at RNA, fell from over 3,000 before 2000 to 1,000 in 2018. The total number of students at SJCS rose to 3,000 during the same period. The extent of the drop in demand for RNA can be gauged by the lament of one teacher, who said, ‘Ab to bacchhon ko nahore kar lana hota hai’ (now the children have to be persuaded to come). Most senior teachers agreed that the deterioration of teaching quality at RNA was the main reason for the decline.

But what changed, given that RNA previously enjoyed a reputation for high academic standards? Teachers and some parents held the new teacher recruitment policies and increasing burden of non-teaching tasks responsible for the decline of the government system, which they felt also coincided with a governmental push for privatization and increasing demand for English-medium schools. In Madhya Pradesh, under the neo-liberal educational reforms, recruitment of permanent teachers was stopped from the early 1990s.\textsuperscript{38} Instead of regular recruitment, teachers were appointed on a contract basis, which created new hierarchies in schools resulting in insecurity and a loss of interest in the teaching profession.\textsuperscript{39} In 2018, many teachers reported that most of the government schools in Madhya Pradesh, including RNA and the girls’ school, are run mainly by contract teachers. Some teachers also said that the credibility of the government system was eroded further when, instead of regular schools, a

\textsuperscript{36} Bhatty, “Review of Elementary Education Policy in India.”


large number of poorly funded and ill-equipped Education Guarantee Schools (EGS) were opened in Madhya Pradesh in the late 1990s.\textsuperscript{40}

However, the Block Education Officer said that the quality of education at many government schools is better than most low-fee private schools in Pipariya.\textsuperscript{41} He said that the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009, which guarantees a minimum 25 per cent reservation of places in private schools for the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) has, ironically, resulted in the expansion of low-quality English-medium private schools in Pipariya.\textsuperscript{42} He explained that the children of marginalized communities in Pipariya town and the neighbouring villages are provided free transport, and that they study in these elementary level private schools free of charge. In return, the schools receive fee reimbursements as per RTE norms, which are adequate to run such schools. Despite the poor quality of education, parents are happy that their children are studying in English-medium private schools, though they are forced to shift them back to the government schools after class 8.\textsuperscript{43}

**Higher education**

Higher education remained egalitarian until the 1990s and most students chose PGC. However, no new government college has been established in Pipariya in the last three decades. This is why parents from higher social classes started moving their children out of the town to cities like Bhopal, especially for professional courses. A large number of private engineering, management and law colleges, and technical universities opened in the cities, creating opportunities for the middle classes from small towns like Pipariya. Therefore, Pipariya became a supplier of students to coaching centres and private colleges in cities like Bhopal, Indore, Nagpur, Pune, and in some cases, Kota, Mumbai, and Bengaluru. For colleges in bigger towns and cities, small towns emerged as suppliers of students, with English-medium private school education serving as a stepping stone.

\textsuperscript{40} Francois Leclercq, “The Impact of Educational Policy of Reform on the School System: A Field Study of EGS and other Primary Schools in Madhya Pradesh,” \textit{CSH Occasional Paper}, no. 5 (2002), New Delhi: French Research Institute in India.

\textsuperscript{41} Geetha B. Nambissan, “Private Schools for the Poor: Business as Usual,” \textit{EPW} XLVII, no. 41 (2012): 51-58. The author argues that not all private schools are high-quality schools and that a large number of low-fee private schools offering education of dubious quality have been opened for the poor, primarily in order to shift the burden of educational expenditure and responsibility from the state to parents.

\textsuperscript{42} The Right to Education Act is an Act of the Parliament of India, enacted on August 4 2009, to provide free and compulsory high-quality elementary education to all the children in the 6–14 age group.

\textsuperscript{43} Pradeep Sharma, Personal interview with author, 12 January 2019 and 20 September 2019.
Changing aspirations and career choices

The popularization of socialist thought in Pipariya led its people to explore diverse academic interests, including in literature, poetry, theatre, and the social and physical sciences. While science and commerce had always been considered elite subjects, literature and the arts were equally in demand. Young people pursued reading as a hobby, set up libraries, and organized social awareness events.

The advent of neo-liberal reforms in education during the 1990s shifted the goal of education in India from education for equality and democracy to education for ‘human capital development’, and from investment in education for social good and the development of individuals and society as a whole, to investment for oneself.44 The consequences of this transformation can be seen in Pipariya, as the privatization of professional and school education over the last three decades has brought about a shift in focus among the middle classes.

With more professional colleges, software engineering became the most sought-after option for the Pipariya’s young people. The opening of several private engineering (and later, management and law) colleges across different states in India around late 1990s created opportunities for more students from Pipariya to enrol in these professional courses.45 These opportunities also shifted the career choices of middle-class youngsters, who went from obtaining graduate and postgraduate qualifications in social and physical sciences to primarily studying engineering and management. The trend continued beyond 2000 as professionally successful individuals became role models and students pushed their parents to invest in private coaching and professional education. However, the job market started to shrink, and from 2012-13 onwards, many engineering and MBA degree holders from Pipariya failed to find work.46 Most of them have either set up their own businesses or are studying for the civil service. Not many chose law as a career because they did not have the money to set up a private practice. Similarly, medicine has not been an option for many because of the tough competition and huge expense.

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44 Lipman, The New Political Economy of Urban Education.
46 Deepak Tiwari, “Too many engineering colleges, too few students: MP government decides to act,” The Week, 1 January 2018. The author notes that there were 215 engineering colleges in Madhya Pradesh in 2018, but that 58 per cent of their student places remain unfilled. This is because students with more socio-economic capital go to institutions in southern states. Low demand for engineers from industry has also contributed to this situation. In 2020, the number of engineering colleges in Madhya Pradesh was 267, of which 45 were government colleges and 222 private colleges.
Community response and access to education

The occupations of Pipariya’s higher social classes are mainly trading, landholding, and jobs in service sector. Their response to changes in the education landscape and their plans for their younger generation’s future has not been uniform. Therefore, the rush for English-medium schools and subsequent migration to other cities for coaching and professional education has also not been the same across these classes. From the early 2000s, sensing the importance of English in the era of globalization, many parents from trading communities encouraged their children to move out of Pipariya for better prospects. They were not averse to the idea of their children going abroad as liberalization and access to technology opened up new frontiers. In fact, one parent pointed out that the growing need for computer engineers in the West at the turn of the century encouraged students and their parents to look beyond Pipariya and India. They chose the Mahesh Convent and then SJCS and other English-medium private schools for their children’s education in order to enable them to move out of Pipariya. Parents underscored the importance of peer interactions and guidance from teachers at SJCS in making strategic educational choices for their children. Pipariya’s trading communities are very well organized, and with their exposure to national business networks, they have been able to create support structures for their children in different cities. Additionally, the growing number of private institutions in India and the availability of bank loans ensured access to professional education for their children.

In order to plan for the neo liberal India, middle-class mothers needed to take primary responsibility for their children’s education.47 This trend is found in Pipariya, but only among trading communities, where well-educated women took charge of guiding and supervising their children’s education and sacrificed their own careers in the process. Most of these women regularly meet at community social gatherings and exchange information about their children’s education. They remained focused and come across as articulate, assertive, and well-informed about education trends and job prospects.

The big landholding castes, such as Brahmins and OBCs (Patels and Rajputs) – the descendants of the erstwhile Malguars – have by and large been conservative about higher education and are not keen on sending their children out of town. The rich Patels and Rajputs

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encouraged their younger generation to invest in agriculture and agribusiness in Pipariya. Barring the children of two schoolteachers and an IT professional, the younger generations of Brahmin landlord families have been active in controlling the mandi committee and in local elections. They are also engaged in real estate and the liquor trade. The influential Brahmins have clout among political leaders and the local and state-level bureaucracy. These networks allow them to acquire lucrative contracts for development and construction work. Despite having access to financial resources, most prefer Hindi-medium private schools for their children.

People from the service classes, such as teachers, municipal corporation members, and telephone department employees, are also deeply concerned about the education of their children, especially their sons. Generally, they are well aware about the need for English-medium education and higher education opportunities and are willing to invest in them. They enrol their sons at RNA or other affordable private schools. They struggle to finance their children’s education and often take out loans for higher education. Unlike in the trading communities, these students do not get academic support from either their peers or their mothers. In fact, the kind of extended family networks that help youngsters from trading communities to negotiate life in new cities do not exist for these young people. Instead, it is their education and stable income that helps them support their children’s education.

**Experience of marginalized communities**

Most Dalits, tribespeople, and children from underprivileged classes enrol in government schools. Many of those interviewed for this paper were the first generation in their families to enter higher education and, in some cases, even school education. It was their parents’ determination and support from government schemes that facilitated their entry into the formal education system. These students either studied at government schools from class 1 or at low-fee private schools up to class 8 under the RTE Act. The falling quality of RNA and the girls’ school – their only choices – has been detrimental to their careers. For higher education, these young people choose PGC or the women’s college. If they fail to gain admission to PGC, their last resort is the new private college that has been started by a local business family.

Unlike children from higher socio-economic groups, the parents of these students are employed in low-income jobs or as casual workers. Most of their relatives and acquaintances live locally or in villages. Therefore, they have no support network to help them migrate to other cities for education or work. Intellectual support and guidance is also limited due to lack of exposure among their peers and family. They have few or no economic resources for upward
mobility. For example, with private English-medium and professional education beyond their reach, they are forced to aim for the lowest-level jobs as bank and railway clerks, contract teachers, police constables, peons, and drivers. Only public institutions and welfare programmes offer them a chance of upward mobility. However, in the era of neo-liberalism, these very institutions are under attack, leaving dispossessed people at the mercy of the market.

Conclusion

Pipariya’s uniqueness stems from a combination of factors, such as its geographical location, rich socialist history, and multiple communities. It has also experienced stagnation and a lack of growth opportunities in recent years. Pipariya’s economy is dependent on agricultural produce from the hinterland and revolves around the grain mandi, agribusiness, and trade. There has been no infrastructural or industrial growth. Transport, health, and sanitation facilities remain rudimentary. There is only one government hospital, and no new public health facility has been established here in the last three decades. Unlike private schools, the private health sector has not grown here and people have to travel to Bhopal or Jabalpur for treatment. At the same time, educational and occupational shifts in the town represent changes at the national level. Young people have been migrating to towns like Bhopal, Pune, Indore, and Kota since the 1990s for coaching and to access higher professional education and employment in the global IT sector.

However, class as a category is not sufficient to understand these shifts, as better-off communities and castes have not responded uniformly to these changes. Unlike Brahmin and Patel landlords, the trading and merchant communities have clearly emerged as major beneficiaries of the privatization of schools and expanding private professional education. Educated women in this community took charge of their children’s education and played a decisive role in shaping their future. In contrast, among Brahmins, Patels, and the service classes, women did not emerge as active providers of academic support. Thanks to their education and stable income, the service classes across all castes have also been able to support their children’s professional education and in some cases, even non-professional higher education at premier universities. Despite expanding education access to the marginalised communities, the decline of public institutions and high cost of professional education has led to new inequalities in the education system. The history of socialist thought and the presence of public libraries have inspired the youth of Pipariya to aspire for social change. The importance of education was recognized as early as the 1950s, but the ushering in of neo-liberal
reforms and the privatization of education have changed people’s aspirations. It can be argued that privatization weakened the middle-class base of social movements like Samata Sangathan, as the career-oriented younger generations abandoned socialist ideas. The camaraderie that existed among people of different castes and classes who studied together at government institutions in Pipariya during the 1970s and 1980s did not continue in the generations of the 1990s. Such forces will continue to impact not just the education system, but also the social movements and histories of small towns such as Pipariya. These issues require further research, but lie beyond the scope of this paper.
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