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Unmasking educational hegemony: Restructuring of precarious minds in *Hichki* (2018) and *Super 30* (2019)

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Abstract:

*The persistent influence of class hierarchies present within educational administration monopolizes admissions criteria, conformity to norms, and student categorization. Such ideologies exert control over the educational environment, impacting students' mental conditioning, and become the cause of one's vulnerability and precarity. The paper aims to unravel the hegemony held by the upper class, contributing to student precariousness. Using qualitative methods, the study analyses the contemporary cinematic narratives *Hichki* (2018) and *Super 30* (2019), revealing cognitive patterns such as anger, anxiety and fear in response to social criticism and educational hierarchy. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's "hegemony" and Alfred Adler's "inferiority complex", it explores the psychological reconditioning of students. The characters Naina and Anand Kumar are positioned as therapists aiding cognitive restructuring, fostering determination, and cultivating resilience. The study seeks to deconstruct conditioned mindsets perpetuated by societal realities and biased educational commentaries, using these films as insightful lenses.*

Introduction

Class hierarchies in the social milieu have created a stratum in educational administration where political agents and business industries dominate and exercise control. The hegemony of education tries to build a utopic reality where it is made available to one and all with equal opportunities and lack of bias, but these "policies and programs are unable to encompass the

complex social reality within a single framework and are, therefore, unable to bridge the gap between policy and practice” (Chanana, 1993, p. 69). The financial status of students become their social identity which sets the norm for the students as to which type of financial and social value would suit their institution. Ideology, hegemony and discourse intersect between the “social production of knowledge and the perpetuation of inequitable power relations” acting as “social privilege and injustice with an account of the production and circulation of culture and knowledge” (Stoddart, 2007, p. 192). The identity and status of the students in social strata become their face value while entering and undergoing education at a so-called “good school” (emphasis ours). Young adolescent minds are made aware of their social identity through defining their contextual reality which lets them undergo struggles and conflicts in the process of defining and substituting their position in the social hierarchy leading to alteration, repression and coagulation of mental conditioning. Further reaffirmation and repetitive biased commentaries from parents, teachers, masters and peers sets them into a vulnerable and precarious situation where they start doubting their capabilities, abilities, skills and intelligence.

The origin of the term “precarity” (emphasis ours) in anglophone literature is described as “a social condition, a situation, a state of families/households, and also a process potentially leading to poverty” (Choonara, 2020, p. 429), and as for the new-age definition, the Oxford English Dictionary describes it as an instability or persistent state of uncertainty affected by one’s employment, income and social living. Children who come to school lacking the opportunity to develop and practise their skills are quickly labelled as “at-risk” and categorized as “less able” (Callahan, 2005, p. 99). Precarity encapsulates the idea of uncertainty and vulnerability contributing to elevated stress, increased anxiety and a compromised sense of one’s own value. It is a sense of lack, a sense of hollowness, a sense of vacuum which features in one’s life through a dearth of stability, security and predictability.

Hence, juxtaposing and deducing the definitions, it can be highlighted that educational hegemony and biased commentaries impose a social and psychological condition among students which arises from financial instability, conditioning their minds as the “[s]on of kings will be king” (Bahl, 2019, 01:42:05). This either leads to accepting it as their fate or exhibiting frustration, anger, vulnerability and precariousness to their state, situation and system. Marchetti and Possel critically state “[a]dolescence is a critical period for the development of depressive symptoms and the understanding of vulnerability factors that facilitate their onset is pivotal” (2023, p. 1209).

Hichki is a 2018 film directed by Siddharth P. Malhotra and produced by Aditya Chopra and Maneesh Sharma. It is a linear and emotional narrative that talks about the role of teacher Naina Mathur (Rani Mukherji), who suffers from Tourette Syndrome, in trying to tame and direct the lives of 14 students (Class 9F) living in a slum and with limited financial resources. The script of the film is based on a true story, from Brad Cohen's biographical novel *Front of the Class: How Tourette Syndrome Made Me the Teacher I Never Had* (2005) co-authored with Lisa Wysocky, which was adapted into the film *Front of the Class* (2008) in America (Qi, 2019, p. 205).

Super 30 is a 2019 film directed by Vikas Bahl and produced by Phantom Films, Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment, Reliance Entertainment and HRX Films. It is an Indian biographical drama based on the life of mathematics prodigy Anand Kumar (Hrithik Roshan) from Patna, Bihar, and about his tutoring the first batch of 30 economically deprived students for the IIT JEE Exam. The movie is an eye-opener as to how the education-imparting institutions have become money-churning machines gambling in the name of students' hopes for prospective careers and the future. It encapsulates Anand Kumar's ideology of similar education for all.

The qualitative study encapsulates the examination of precarious minds, dwelling in the realm of educational instability and vulnerability. Shadowing conversational analysis, the roles of Naina Mathur in *Hichki* and Anand Kumar in *Super 30* take centre stage as therapists guiding the process of psychological reconditioning, playing a pivotal role in reshaping the cognitive landscape of their mentees. Thus, the study underscores the potential of psychological intervention, addressing the challenges posed by educational precarity and hence offering valuable insights through nurturing resilience and empowerment among students.

“They don't belong here”: Precarity within educational administration

“Man is not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas” (Bates, 1975, p. 351). Antonio Gramsci explicates that when a particular section of society dominates and manipulates another culturally diverse section of society through ideologies, notions, beliefs and viewpoints such that it becomes a norm or social construct, it is termed hegemony. In *Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935) and also in Marxist philosophy, it has been described as “cultural hegemony” (Lears, 1985, p. 568). “Hegemony places its emphasis upon the influence of ideology and culture upon consciousness and posits that the relationship between the socio-economic superstructure...” (Dawson, 1982, p. 150).

The right to education as a human right makes its “availability, acceptability, accessibility and adaptability” (Malvankar, 2018, p. 220) for one and all. Irrespective of any social background or economic strata, learning is counted as one and the same for every individual who wishes to learn, grow and progress. But a similar idea propelled by educational institutions or a sort of hegemony is imposed which reflects a difference between preaching and practice. “When we speak of the right to education of children, we emphasize a right-based approach rather than a welfare approach” (Malvankar, 2018, p. 221). Educational institutions, administration and politicians take their rights as a medium of showcasing favour as if they are obliging students of lower strata to be part of the privilege. Dawson opines, “...schooling has contributed to the reproduction of the social relations of production largely through the correspondence between school and class structure” (1982, p. 152). This not only controls but also manipulates the constructed reality of the students; “cognitive styles are generally considered to be information-processing habits: individually characteristic ways of interpreting and responding to the environment” (Shipman and Shipman, 1985, p. 229-230).

Education is being treated as a business, in the hands of politicians, businessmen and other influential dignitaries. “And at this time, education is the best business...” (Bahl, 2019, 01:46:47). They take education as a premium product on which the career or future of the child can be gambled. “You need sweaty wads of cash or your studies will be a car crash” (Bahl, 2019, 01:42:05). The superimposition of money on education has posed the binaries of the rich and the poor, the superior and the inferior, and the premium and the lower, making it a privilege or luxury for the few and a struggle for many. “A premium teacher should not waste his time. Premium teacher should teach premium kids” (Bahl, 2019, 01:27:42). The teacher, who is the mason laying brick over brick with the mortar of education, is beholden to the highest bidder; one could mark the dark hole of the nation where its future will sweep into. Teachers should be the most impartial figure in the whole education set up, treating and providing one and all with the same, equal and uniform respect and opportunities. But hegemony, empowerment and entrapment of economics and materiality do not play a fair game, “It takes a kingmaker to train a king. No one puts lame horses into the Derby... They stand outside the railway station” (Bahl, 2019, 01:27:08).

“Son of kings will be king”: Vulnerability probing inferiority complexes

Alfred Adler, in a prominent article entitled “Study of Organ Inferiority and Its Psychological Compensation”, describes “organ inferiority” (emphasis ours) as a portion of the body weaker

than the rest. On this principle, annotating psychology with personality, he enlists four types of personality.

1. Ruling or Dominant that is superior in type built with leadership, confidence, optimistic traits.
2. Leaning or Recessive that is Inferior in nature and connotes to a personality suffering from anxiety, depression, lack of energy, low self-esteem, shame, frustration and anger.
3. Avoiding or introverting presents a personality type where one tends to be shy, lonely, antisocial, withdrawn, coy and solitary.
4. Socially useful or extrovert personality can be noted in a person with gregarious, lively, genial, unreserved, demonstrative characteristics.

The “Leaning or Recessive” personality resonates with the inferiority complex, a psychological phenomenon where one has a distorted self-perception about oneself, “negative self-referent cognitions have long been theorized to be central to the experience of depression” (Mahali et al., 2020, p. 1). One often concentrates and centralizes one’s inadequacies, degrading and downplaying one’s positive attributes, strengths and accomplishments which further give rise to emotions of insignificance, uncertainty, insecurity and worthlessness with a persistent fear of failure and rejection.

The origins of an inferiority complex can be traced to early childhood experiences of interactions among peers, elders, siblings, friends and family. It could be in the form of societal comparisons, setbacks, failures, rejections or bullies which, if not addressed tactfully and considerately, could affect one’s personal relations, educational endeavours and career ambitions in future.

“Educational Hegemony affects the consciousness and behaviors of students, teachers and all those involved in everyday activities” (Dawson, 1982, p. 154). Students feel a sense of inferiority by the repetitive commentaries and remarks made about them, the biased and unresponsive attitude shown towards them, the discrimination they need to face, and the mockery made of them. “Ma’am, in the beginning, the slum kids tried really hard...to keep up with the kids here. But the kids here never accepted them and even the teachers didn’t help much either. So now the slum kids are rebelling” (Malhotra, 2018, 00:31:02).

Claustrophobic towards their situation and circumstances, they adhere to their isolated compartments of loneliness, exhausted and afraid to face the world outside which has become antagonistic towards them devoid of kindness, respect and empathy. “I do fear, ma’am. I am afraid that...I’ll never be good as 9A. But what I fear most is...to trust someone, anyone,

myself and you. That you would leave us too” (Malhotra, 2018, 01:26:58). Their inferiorities do not let them compete with the outer world for the fear the world outside would not let them live because maybe it is not made for them. “At-risk students often have deficiencies in self-esteem of feeling capable and worthy and having the skills needed to study, live, and socialize effectively” (Bauer et al., 1999, p. 41). They consider their position and destiny at the periphery, at the margins of some prosperous world out there.

That day we were taking the exam with kids whose houses we would have cleaned, whose dustbins we would have emptied. Sitting next to them our brain just stopped...He (Fugga) was frightened. He must have thought we'll never catch up. We can't compete. There is no place for us in the English-speaking world. (Bahl, 2019, 00:51:13)

“Fly” and “jump”: Psychological reconditioning of precarious minds

Cognitive Restructuring (CR), Cognitive Therapy (CT) or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) was first proposed by Aaron T. Beck in 1960, emphasizing the reiteration of irrational or negative thoughts, developing a chain of maladaptive thought processes known as cognitive distortions that ultimately lead an individual to feelings of distress, anguish, pain and agony and a state of escapism and vulnerability. Thus, cognitive restructuring acts as a device, technique, tool, strategy and exercise that reconditions thought patterns orienting them towards positive, rational, logical and creative thought processes.

The therapist and the client work in coherence, where their alliance, collaboration and partnership function with an aim to identify and replace maladaptive thoughts or “dysfunctional automatic thoughts” (Hope et al., 2007, p. 2), thoughts which are illogical, irrational, unreasonable and erroneous in nature developed in correspondence with past conflicts or an incomprehensible environment and atmosphere. CBT intricately analyses three interconnected facets – thoughts, behaviours and emotions (Fenn and Byrne, 2013, p. 2). The processing of these operations formulates new, distinguished but relative ideas to surroundings which may deal with an individual's past, present and future.

Psychological reconditioning or cognitive restructuring is a psychotherapeutic, strategic and systematic exercise that involves “change in the perceptual or cognitive field rather than taking it ‘as it is’” (Cramer et al., 1989, p. 104); it incorporates a four-step process: firstly, problematic, dysfunctional and negative thoughts are identified. Secondly, cognitive distortions are located through conversing with the patient, observing his or her mood swings, reaction to stimuli and response through speech and actions. Thirdly, using the Socratic method of dialectical talking the cognitive bents and distortions are disrupted; and fourth, the thought

process is reinstalled with rational and positive thoughts where time to time upliftment, motivation and positive enforcement help to streamline the teaching-learning process in a better direction.

Beck postulates that the root cause of any maladaptive thought lies in interception and introspection with three interwoven components of perception – the Self, the World or Environment and the Future (McLeod, 2023) along the lines which human thinking or human processing of thoughts take its basis. An individual lives in a social dynamic environment where one's interaction with the contextual environment plays a deep-seated role in one's progression and development. Physical, social and mental complexities operate in one's background and govern one's identity, behaviour, attitudes and aptitudes. The negativity or pessimism derived from such an environment, especially in the tender age of adolescence, could act as a catalyst in the genesis of friction with one's social, cultural and physical milieu where negative thoughts start being processed in coherence towards the self, the world and the future

A. Therapist Naina Mathur: Unravelling cognitive restructuring in *Hichki* (2018)

The paper attempts to prove that Naina Mathur was a therapist for her 9F class, which is already regarded as good for nothing – “9F. They're not fit to be students” (Malhotra, 2018, 01:13:13) – by the school administration without providing them with an equal platform, neither to learn nor to showcase their intelligence, skills, abilities and capabilities. The learning they acquire from their menial jobs has been considered their sole competence, assumed to be their destiny. The biased attitude of the school administration, the stringent behaviour of teachers and the mockery through peer pressure connotes “F” for failure, before giving them an equal chance and opportunity which Naina Mathur tries to provide them not only in the form of opportunity but also through her trust and faith within them.

Wadia Sir: They don't belong here; they never did and never will.

Naina Mathur: They will Sir. Maybe we haven't tried hard enough, that they do belong. They just need some time and effort (Malhotra, 2018, 00:37:20).

Naina, by investigating, talking about and interrogating the social situation of students and peeping into their psyche, tries to locate maladaptive and dysfunctional thoughts. She could glimpse over the dismissive, obstructive and antipathetic surrounding the children are floundering in, and not only with respect to their homes but also the treatment they receive in

schools. Despite being upset and irritated by their pranks and mischief, she locates their potential and practicality which helps her to inculcate new methods of teaching.

Naina: Like you said, we all know this prank might be their doing. But Sir, what they did require planning, foresight and intelligence. Sir, I believe if we can find a channelize this energy correctly, they can make St. Noteker's proud one day ... I assure you, Sir. (Malhotra, 2018, 00:36:55)

The positivity, firmness and confidence of Naina in her students works in two ways. Firstly, she could lead the school administration to believe that 9F bears the power to transform the future. She suggests and explicates to them that if the mischief and pranks played by 9F could harness scientific knowledge, they could perform science experiments so interestingly and successfully that if they were given due time, attention and guidance, what could not be possible. On the other hand, with this strategic use of the situation and apt decision-making, she could also reinstall the faith in the students, being an angel or spirit to them playing the role of protector.

She observes and finds that students with this background lack the proper foreground due to previous negligence and hence require more practical-based teaching rather than theoretical or classroom learning. Students start trusting and building a bond with her by sharing their deep-down secrets, ideologies, notions and nuances which further help Naina to pin down cognitive distortions. Their treatment in school becomes a challenge for these children, connoted as "culturally special need children" (Wadhwa, 2018, p. 280). They share discrimination, humiliation, shame and mockery which have made them thought of as insufficient in their competence and proficiency. "We can try all we want, ma'am, but we'll never become 9A" (Malhotra, 2018, 00:47:34).

Naina Mathur, working on the psychology of the students teaches them to combat their fears. She makes them accept themselves first and then gives them the ease to let them go as she explains in either of the situations, escaping or holding tight will make them more vulnerable and prey to their situations and circumstances.

...But there's one more thing you're all masters of blaming your situations. But if you accept this fear...this truth ...will become the wind beneath your wings...From today, these fears will be your strength...not weakness! Let them go, and you will fly with them. (Malhotra, 2018, 01:01:28)

The reaffirmation of faith and making them aware of their powers inherited, practised and adapted from their menial jobs makes them capable of converting the theory into practice: only

the ability to make their willpower strong which would help them to fight their inferiority complexes is needed: “If you ask me, you’re all experts of your own subjects” (Malhotra, 2018, 01:01:28). It is true the biased commentaries by teachers, parents, the principal and other external factors have time and again imposed class-hierarchical thoughts which have not only questioned, commented and underestimated their potential but also have deprived them of being treated equally and provided with equal opportunities: “They won’t understand all this. Maybe if it was a solar slum, they’d get it” (Malhotra, 2018, 01:07:41). But it is also true that teachers like Naina Mathur work as therapists for students who fix their psyche by undoing the hegemonic stratification through reconditioning their cognitive distortions reinstated by inferiority complexes, “[t]here are no bad students, only bad teachers” (Malhotra, 2018, 00:13:18).

Naina Mathur is a pioneer figure as the first teacher and first guardian of class 9F, who understands the mental and emotional conflicts, dilemmas and turmoil which her students are grappling with. Their anger, frustration and irritation reflected in their attitudes and aptitudes are not behavioural impertinence but rather a reciprocation to what they receive from their environment which is not only associated with pessimism and disappointment towards themselves but also towards society’s distressing, spiteful and acidulous remarks and hopeless, despairing and despondent future. Naina Mathur takes the role of a therapist to rescue and liberate the 14 students of class 9F from this vicious cycle of the dark abyss into an optimistic and sanguine future where they are individuals of their own distinguished identity known, celebrated and acknowledged for the potential, skill and ability they have. Committed to the role of a teacher, counsellor and therapist, she not only instils self-belief among her students but also conditions and reconditions them to counteract and counterpose the corrosive impact of societal hierarchy, hegemony and biases, underscored in the form of their irrational, unreasoned and vacuous notions, perspectives and ideologies.

B. Therapist Anand Kumar: Unravelling cognitive restructuring in *Super 30* (2019)

Anand Kumar also uses a similar technique of cognitive restructuring deploying the techniques of Socratic questioning while teaching an introductory class of 30 students. He tries to peer into the students’ determination and will to fight back against all odds by knowing and understanding their socioeconomic situation, willingness to learn and grow and the dreams they aspire to. He again uses this method in the process of awakening them from their fears and anxieties which have been controlling them and restricting them from making a start towards the journey of passing their exams. “Are you scared? Of what you have scared. What do you

have to lose? Anything? You were dead the day you were born in a house of poverty” (Bahl, 2019, 01:24:15).

Simultaneously, he also uses the techniques of thought reordering and emotional reasoning where he tries to present a new perspective of visualizing their situation. He tries to bring to the surface the inferiority complexes among the students by letting them accept the truth of difference and comparison but reflecting a ray of hope by reverting their perspective towards their untoward circumstances.

The rich build a beautiful road for themselves. They leave our roads filled with huge potholes. But that’s the mistake they make. They teach us how to leap over potholes. When the time will come you will see...the highest...the farthest...the longest jump will be ours. We will jump!” (Bahl, 2019, 01:22:5)

He proves and provides learning as the solution to their misery. If socioeconomic difference has engulfed their identity, education will give them the power, ability and strength to establish their individuality and identity. “Learning is your auspicious shield...he who learns will conquer the world” (Bahl, 2019, 01:22:25).

In his teaching methods, he uses the method of guided imagery where he puts more focus on the practical use of the knowledge rather than mugging up the same, “learning styles are cognitive, affective, and psychological indicators of the manners by which students perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning” (Matthews, 1996, p. 249). His students could visualize a problem and try to solve it with knowledge in hand and the abilities gained in times of necessity and strife. The students realize their struggle is not only with the outer world but with themselves, in which they need to devise solutions for day-to-day activities and struggles, “[t]here are two kinds of people in the world. There is Ricky and there is Bholu. Ricky has everything readymade served up on the plate. Bholu has nothing, only his wits and his willingness to work” (Bahl, 2019, 01:10:40).

The reconditioned mind of 30 students has re-erected faith and belief in themselves and in their teacher that he is their true guide and that their hard work, right direction and keen motivation would benefit their situation one day and inculcating qualities and attitude in “willingness to take strategic risks, the ability to cope with challenges and handle criticism, competitiveness, motivation, and task commitment” (Subotnik et al., 2011, p. 40) would help them to fight with their inferiority complex. Their anxieties, fears, and apprehensiveness have duly fought off with their redirected mind of optimism and practicality, “Anand Sir taught us

to see. He taught us to think. We looked for solutions everywhere. We could do anything. We could become anything. We were ready” (Bahl, 2019, 01:12:47).

Anand Kumar works as a teacher and guardian to his 30 students, not only bearing the responsibility of imparting education and helping them to pass competitive engineering exams but also making them holistically face, combat and compete with a competitive world where the right to possess education demarcates and distinguishes between its have and have-nots. The educational administrators in the face of ministers and instructors devise tricks and techniques to filter out the masses from having the right to compete. The dark, deep-seated shallow ideologies act as a smack to the deserving, hardworking and conscientious students who have the intelligence, knowledge and capability to compete but not the means to survive in a financially dominated environment. Becoming prey to the smirks and sarcasm of the modern elite and privileged class, they lack the confidence to demand equal rights of representation in education. Their interest in academia is seen as a part-time hobby despite their willingness and eagerness to learn and grow. The deficit they hold within themselves is the deep-seated fear that their physical, social and cultural environment has infused within them, losing hope, optimism, self-efficacy and resilience within themselves, their environment and their future.

Acting as a guiding, motivating and inspiring spirit, Anand Kumar proves to be a therapist who not only provides them with the substantial chance and scope to progress but also trains them to decondition their fears and inferiorities and reinstate the belief within themselves that they need to drive through their mindful choices and actions. Their efforts and endeavours would only pave the way for their liberation and enfranchisement.

Conclusion

The paper attempts to establish Naina Mathur and Anand Kumar as therapists and their class of 9F and 30 students as clients respectively, who are fighting against educational hegemony created in the form of business. Playing the role of therapists, these teachers have reconditioned the vulnerable minds by reinstating and rebuilding their belief, faith and confidence in their abilities, capabilities, skills, expertise and potential. Thus, the process of reconditioning the mindset, also known as cognitive restructuring, can be traced where maladaptive thoughts are explored, evaluated and substituted through a four-step process: first, identification of problematic thought processes; second, identification of cognitive distortions; third, disputation of these automatic thoughts through the Socratic method and fourth, reinstalling rational and positive thought processes. It could be further noted that the process of cognitive

restructuring is accomplished through four techniques: Socratic questioning, emotional reasoning, thought reordering and guided imagery by therapists on their clients.

The paper underscores the potency of two prevailing ideologies, “[t]here are no bad students, only bad teachers” (*Hichki*) and “[t]he son of kings will not be king; now only he who is fit to rule will mount the throne” (*Super 30*) provide an audiovisual embodiment of the discussed argument. Reiterating and confirming their ideologies with firm faith and belief they reconstruct the distorted mindsets of the students reinstalling their future with optimism, hope and positivity. By dotting the lines of their discourse with a dominant pervasive educational set-up on the one hand and inferior anxious-ridden students on the other, their methods of psychological reconditioning and cognitive restructuring serve as beacons of empowerment and rejuvenation. Thus, the narrative arcs of Naina Mathur and Anand Kumar showcase the transformative potency of tailored interventions in shaping individual cognitive patterns.

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