



Competitive Exams and Aspirants in India: A Sociological Study of Anomie and Strain

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Abstract- In today's India, competitive exams are the way to jobs, social status and progression. Every year, lakhs of youth prepare for the UPSC, SSC, NET, NEET and banking, railway and different state-level government services exams. These exams are presented as merit-based, fair and give equal opportunities to all. However, the real lived experiences of aspirants often show stress, doubt, repeated failure and psychological pressure. This paper, based on Emile Durkheim's concept of anomie and Robert K. Merton's theory of strain, gives a theoretical sociological perspective on these exam preparation process. Based on their everyday experiences – such as long preparation time, financial dependency, family expectations and social comparison – this paper argues that the culture of competitive exams creates anomie and strain. The gap between socially approved goals and limited institutional paths creates anxiety, confusion, and frustration in aspirants. This analysis may be useful for government (for policy making), coaching classes, aspirants and their families. The paper concludes that the understanding competitive exams through sociological lens, helps to shift the focus from individual failures to the structural conditions and emphasizes the need for a more humanistic approach to youth expectations and job opportunities.

Keywords- Competitive exams, aspirants, preparation, coaching, anomie, strain theory, youth, lived experience.

I. Introduction

In India, competitive exams have a central position in the lives of educated youth. Exams such as the Civil Services, Staff Selection Commission (SSC), National Eligibility Test (NET), banking, teaching eligibility tests and state-level services etc., are widely regarded as gateways to secure employment and social respect. For many young people, clearing a competitive exams is not merely a career goal but a life goal which promises them stability of life, dignity in their society and recognition from society.

From a young age, students are socialized into the belief that the hard work and dedication will eventually lead to success in these exams. Families, teachers, coaching institutes, and popular narratives support the idea that competitive exams reward merit, and talent. As a result, large numbers of youth invest years, and years of their lives in the preparation of these exams and postponing their employment, marriage, and financial independence.

However, in the reality, aspirant face intense competition and limited opportunities. There is a fight of thousands aspirant for one position. Many aspirants have gone



through repeated failures, long waiting periods between exam cycles and uncertainty about their future. This gap between expectations and outcomes creates emotional stress in aspirants.

This paper tries to understand aspirants lived experiences with sociological perspectives. Instead of focusing on the motivational aspects of the individual, it uses the concept of anomie and the theory of strain as proposed by Durkheim and Merton respectively to understand the impact of the social structure and cultural expectations on the lives of aspirants. It is also asserted that the culture of competitive exams in India creates conditions of normlessness and strain that impact the mental well-being of aspirants.

Competitive Exams as a Social and Cultural System

Competitive exams are not isolated academic or career events, they are now part of a broader social and cultural system. They reflect societal values related to success in life, merit, discipline, and achievement and many more. In Indian society, government jobs and academic positions obtained through competitive exams are associated with security, high prestige, and moral worth.

Exam preparation demand a full-time commitment that requires discipline, sacrifice and self-control. Aspirant's daily routines revolve around libraries, study schedules, mock tests, and revision cycles. Leisure activities, social interactions and personal relationships are frequently postponed or remain minimised. Many aspirants live in shared accommodations, PG near their coaching hubs, libraries or remain confined to their study tables at their homes for years. For many aspirants, preparation is not a short phase but a decade-long journey. Aspirants from marginalised communities often lack proper guidance and facing stigma of taking benefits of reservations. Aspirants from these communities lack cultural capital.

Despite these sacrifices and challenges, success in these exams remains uncertain. The unpredictability of exam patterns, changing syllabi, frequent paper leaks, delays in results and limited vacancies exacerbate aspirants' anxiety further. Yet, the dominant narrative continues to emphasize on the individual effort, meritocracy and resilience, leaving little room to acknowledging structural constraints. This contradiction between high social expectations and limited structural support creates a fertile ground for sociological analysis.

Durkheim's Concept of Anomie

Emile Durkheim was one of the founding fathers of sociology, his theoretical perspective is structural functionalist, which sees the society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability in society. In his book *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), he introduced the concept of anomie to describe a state of normlessness in which the social norms lose their ability to regulate the individual desires and expectations. Durkheim argued that social norms and values regulate human ambitions and prevent unlimited expectations. When these limits are unclear or unrealistic, individuals experience confusion, dissatisfaction, and discomfort.



In the arena of competitive exams, aspirants are constantly encouraged to aim for higher and keep trying and the success is showed as something anyone can achieve it through the hard work and the dedication. This creates a strong belief in meritocracy—the idea that only effort alone will leads to success. However, when aspirants repeatedly fail despite theirs sincere efforts, this belief begins to weaken. They start questioning about themselves, whether their hard work is truly enough for their ambition.

Many aspirants say things like, “I don’t know how long I should continue this preparation,” or “I am doing everything right, but nothing is working.” These statements show more than the disappointment. Aspirants experience the feeling of self doubt, confusion and emotional exhaustion. There is no clear cut social guidance about the how many attempts or years are reasonable for these exams preparation ,when the one should stop preparing, or how to move on without feeling like a failure. Without these guidance aspirants continue to prepare for years and years. The norms related to success and adulthood become unclear which lead normlessness or anomie among the aspirants.

The long preparation period also creates a sense of being stuck at same point for years. They feel no upward mobility when they do comparison with theirs friend who either got government jobs or doing business etc. Aspirants usually and heavily remain financially dependent on their families for many years. They avoid the social gatherings, family functions or get together because they feel uncomfortable answering questions about their job or future plans from the relatives and others. Over the time, this can lead to isolation and withdrawal from the mainstream society.

This situation reflects what Durkheim described as anomie. Anomie occurs when social existing norms fail to provide the clear cut direction or individual did not adapt with new norms. In the case of competitive exam aspirants, society strongly promotes success but does not clearly define limits , alternative paths, no discussion on mental health of aspirants preparing for exams. As a result, individuals feel unsure about their goals, their identity, and their place in society. There is no shared understanding of when to stop preparing for these exams, how to redefine success, or how to maintain dignity after failure. This weak regulation creates uncertainty and emotional strain among the aspirants. Therefore, the experiences of aspirants can be understood as a form of anomie, where social norms fail to balance ambition with realistic opportunities.

II. Merton’s Strain Theory and Aspirant Life

Robert K. Merton developed strain theory by building on Durkheim’s idea of anomie. While Durkheim focused on normlessness, Merton link this condition to the social structure. He argued that the modern societies promote certain cultural goals, such as success, status, and upward mobility. At the same time, the access to these legitimate means of achieving these goals is not equally available to everyone. When people are encouraged to desire success but face barriers in achieving it, they experience strain. In India, competitive exams represent one of the most socially approved paths to success. Clearing a prestigious exam is seen as proof of intelligence, discipline, and personal worth. Families, communities, and media ,now social media reinforce this



belief strongly. However, the resources which require to succeed—quality schooling, expensive coaching, stable financial support, time for preparation, and emotional security—are not equally available for all.

Aspirants depend on their families for financial support for several years. Many aspirants manage preparation with part-time work, which reduces study time and increases fatigue. Aspirants from rural areas or first-generation learners struggle with language barriers (especially Hindi medium aspirants), limited guidance, and strangeness with the recruitment or exam process. In such situations, the cultural goal of success remains strong, but access to effective means becomes restricted. This gap between aspiration and opportunity creates structural strain.

Merton suggested that individuals respond to strain in different ways. These patterns can also be observed among competitive exam aspirants in four ways.

- **Conformity:** Most aspirants continue preparing sincerely. They accept the goal of success and follow socially approved methods, even after repeated failures. They believe the system is fair and that if they just work harder, they will eventually succeed.
- **Ritualism:** Some continue studying in a routine manner for 5-7 years and now they lost hope of success. Preparation has now becomes mechanical for them, they are just passing their life rather than doing any purposeful. The routine protects them from the shame of quitting.
- **Retreatism:** When the pressure of the success in exam becomes too heavy, some aspirants mentally or physically drop out. They reject both the goal of success and the effort of studying. This manifests in depression, isolation, or substance abuse. In the worst cases, it leads to suicides, as places like Kota. They feel that they cannot win the race and cannot survive the running, they must leave the track entirely.
- **Innovation:** In a society where the pressure to win is massive but the actual number of seats is tiny, some students feel forced to innovate, in Merton's terms, it means they still want the goal (the job) but they abandon the honest means to get there. This explains why we see paper leaks, cheating scams, and bribery. They feel that the legitimate path is impossible, so they create an illegitimate one to reach the same finish line.

These different responses show that aspirant behavior cannot be understood only at the individual level. Their struggles are shaped by a social structure that promotes high aspirations but not distributes opportunities equally. Through the Merton's strain theory, the challenges of competitive exam aspirants can be seen as a result of structural tension rather than personal failure.

III. Lived Experiences of aspirants

The real lived experiences of the aspirants reveal how this strain affects their everyday life. Aspirants describe that their journey is emotionally exhausting, testing patience, impacting mental well being, attached with lots of sacrifices etc. Many aspirants believed that the chance of success is increase as they increase their study hours. Each and everytime when the new exam advertisements released ,it brings hope and



confidence, followed by anxiety during result periods, and disappointment after the results, if they got fail.

Failure after failure affects the self esteem and confidence of the aspirants. Aspirants start to compare themselves with the peers who have succeeded or moved on to jobs and family life. And the Social media amplifies this comparison, as the only success stories are widely shared and celebrated while the struggles of an aspirants always remain hidden or barely discussed.

Expectations of family further intensify this strain. Parents are a support system, yet they often feel anxious because their time, money, and social reputation seem to be at stake. Aspirants also feel guilty for being financially dependent for a long period of time and fear becoming a burden on parents. Many aspirants do part time jobs, taking coaching of school kids, etc. to manage their expenses.

They also enjoy their life but not fullest the enjoyment is very limited, they have their love ones, whom they share emotions, do chat, etc. But aspirants always worry about their completing the syllabus, giving test series and more about their job, which give them a recognition from the society, give stability to their life.

IV. Competitive Exams, Identity, and adulthood

Competitive exam preparation significantly shapes aspirants' identities. For example aspirant preparing for UPSC Civil Service exam are to be labelled as upcoming IAS, IPS etc., by the society and fellow aspirants. Many aspirants begin to think, speak, and behave like the group they hope to join, long before they actually succeed. In trying to belong to their imagined future, they gradually internalize the values, lifestyle, and identity of that reference group.

Markers of adulthood such as stable employment, marriage, and economic independence are postponed for these exams. Aspirants may feel disconnected from their age group, experiencing a sense of stagnation as a result of years long preparation. This reinforces feelings of anomie, as traditional life journey become uncertain. The aspirant identity is also fragile. Success brings sudden recognition, while failure brings invisibility. Such sharp contrasts negatively impact self-worth and belonging.

Structural Inequality and Hidden Disadvantage

Although jobs through competitive exams are presented as neutral and merit-based, but the experiences of aspirants reveal the hidden inequalities in the competitive exam arena. Some aspirants have cultural capital like access to good schooling, English language skills, stable study environments, guidance, etc., which play a significant role in exam outcome. But the aspirants from marginalised communities or backgrounds often face greater or double strain because they must have to overcome both this competition and structural barriers of caste, weaker socioeconomic backgrounds, etc. Yet, the mainstream discourse rarely discusses about these differences and acknowledges them. Many students from SC, ST, OBC, Muslim and poor backgrounds who clear tough competitive exams still face serious stress inside top institutions and system.



Hidden disadvantage means the silent and everyday difficulties that the competitive exam aspirants from marginalised backgrounds face during the preparation or after selection. These problems are not always openly visible, but they slowly affect a student's confidence and sense of belonging. Many aspirants are called "quota students," and their hard work is reduced only to reservation. They may be repeatedly asked about their exam rank, face indirect comments, or become the subject of jokes. Such experiences create silent humiliation.

Many students feel that they are being left out in classrooms, hostels, and study groups. They hesitate to speak or ask questions because they fear being judged. Some aspirants even try to conceal their caste identity while searching for a rented room in order to avoid stigma and discrimination. As first-generation learners, they already lack guidance, networks, and familiarity with elite academic culture. When these hidden forms of discrimination and exclusion combine with academic pressure, they create alienation, self-doubt, and emotional stress. In this way, hidden disadvantage works quietly but deeply in the lives of competitive exam aspirants.

Wider Social implications

When a large number of educated youth spend years and years preparing for competitive exams without securing stable employment, the effects become visible in everyday life. Many cross the usual age of employment while still dependent on their families for financial support. Household savings of families are used for coaching fees, hostel rent, books, and repeated application forms. In middle-class and lower-middle-class families, this often leads to economic strain and delayed life decisions such as marriage or starting a career. The problem, therefore, is not limited to individual failure; it reshapes family planning and economic stability.

Over a period of time, questions paper leaks and exam cancellations, delayed results, and limited vacancies create frustration in aspirants and distrust toward institutions. Aspirants started to question the fairness of recruitment processes and the value of their hard work. Some withdraw socially, while others express anger through protests or in social media. In cities known for exam preparation, like Delhi, Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad), Patna etc. It is common to see highly qualified youth working part-time in small jobs just to survive while continuing preparation. This underemployment reflects a mismatch between educational expansion and job opportunities in public sector as well as in private sector.

At the same time, coaching industries rapidly marketing the success stories. Large hoardings, toppers' photos, and motivational seminars create the impression that success is only a matter of effort and right guidance. Even when selection rates are extremely low, aspirants continue investing money and years because they strongly believe in the promise of meritocracy. This shows that the exam-based success system is deeply rooted in society. As a result, it often turns the hopes of those who want to succeed into long periods of uncertainty, along with financial and emotional stress.



V. Conclusion

These competitive exams in India is not only about the tests, ranks, results or jobs—it is about lives of aspirants shaped in this whole process. When we see beyond statistics and success stories, what becomes visible is a human experience marked by hope, struggle, resilience, and uncertainty. This paper has tries to bring that lived reality to the centre, using sociological lens to understand what aspirants go through in their everyday lives. For most aspirants, preparation start with belief in hard work and merit. Families invest emotionally and financially in this process. As the time passes and attempts increase, the gap between aspiration and outcome becomes more visible. It is here that the experiences of aspirant begins to shift—from motivation to pressure, from confidence to self-doubt.

From the perspective of anomie, aspirants are not just dealing with studies, but also with a situation where clear social guidelines are missing. They often do not know how long they should keep preparing, when it is practical to stop, or what other options can be considered respectable. Because there are no clear guidance , many continue preparing without a sense of direction. They feel caught between their dreams and the reality they face. Over period of time, this leads to confusion, and a feeling of being alone, even when they are surrounded by others who going through the similar experiences.

As per strain theory, society pushes everyone to succeed, but not everyone gets equal chances—so the problem is in the system, not the individual. Some aspirants have good guidance, financial support, and helpful networks, while others face difficulties like lack of money, language problems, and limited support. When repeated effort in preparation does not lead to success, this should not be seen simply as personal failure, but as a result of unequal opportunities and a gap between what is expected and what is actually available.

This situation becomes more complex when society responds to it. Success is celebrated enthusiastically, but failure is seen as a personal defect. This creates hesitation in aspirants to speak about their struggles. Many aspirants stay away from social interactions such as family functions , avoid conversations about their future, and carry a sense of guilt for depending on their families for a long period. Over a period of time, this affects not just their career path, but also their self-worth, and sense of belonging. This raises serious questions about the availability of jobs, equal opportunities, and the kind of future being imagined for the students.

Therefore, the need of the moment is not to discourage aspirations, but to make the system more realistic, practical and humane. It is important to accept that success is not always in individual's control. Conversations around alternative careers (Plan B), mental well-being, and dignity beyond exam success need to be discuss. Recruitment and testing institutions must ensure transparency , fairness and must hold discussions with student bodies regularly and the most important is timely processes of advertisements, exams date results declaration , while society must learn to value effort without attaching worth solely to results.



Ultimately, understanding competitive examinations through a sociological lens allows us to shift the existing narrative. Aspirants are not merely individuals chasing for success but also they are part of a larger social structure which shapes their choices, struggles, and experiences. By recognising this, a more supportive environment can be build where ambition is balanced with empathy, and where young students are not defined only by whether they clear an exam, but by the dignity of their efforts as they put in countless nights and the struggles of their journeys.

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