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Language medium and a high-stakes test: Language ideology and coaching centers in North India

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Abstract: The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) offers its set of examinations in a “medium”, whether in a language recognized by the Constitution of India or in English. The notion of medium in the examination borrows from the notion of medium in schooling where it refers to the primary language of pedagogy. Although not all students who have studied in a particular medium in school and university go on to attempt the UPSC examinations in the same medium, most do. This article reports on fieldwork conducted in 2014 in coaching centers in Delhi’s Mukherjee Nagar and in the city of Varanasi. It traces some of the ways in which people hold ideologies about the significance of studying in one medium or another. Much ideological reflection, for example, was oriented to the fierce protesting that broke out in various locations in Delhi during the summer of 2014, just before my fieldwork. The protests were focused on changes made to the UPSC examination in 2011 which initiated increasingly poor results among Hindi-medium aspirants. The article also answers the call of scholars to consider institutional practices – especially as they change – alongside ideological reflections because, in the case of coaching centers, practice and ideology are not aligned.

Keywords: language ideology, institutions, Hindi, English

1 Introduction

I got off of the Delhi Metro at the GTB Nagar stop for my first visit to a coaching center for India’s Union Public Service Commission examination. Mr Rajan had asked me to come in the early evening after his classes so that we might have some time to chat. I followed hundreds of young people, from mid-20s to late 30s, to the exit of the metro station. I joined a group on a rikshaw and we made our way approximately two kilometers north to Mukherjee Nagar, a

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neighborhood well known for its coaching centers for the UPSC exam. The halls lining the metro station advertised institutions, subjects, and individual teachers, and, just outside the station, on the Grand Trunk Road, there lie thousands of discarded leaflets, many offering batch starting dates, discounts, and air conditioning. By the time I reached the heart of Mukherjee Nagar, the ground from the street to building entrance was covered with the paper of discarded leaflets, and very little of the space offered by the walls of buildings was left uncovered with advertising for test tutorial services.

The UPSC's test provides entrance into some of India's highest non-elected government posts. People have used language distinctions in the rubric of "medium" to frame ramifications of the creation of the Civil Services Aptitude Test (CSAT) in 2011 and its inclusion in the UPSC's test. Language medium in India is an especially robust ideological construct because it can be used to refer to schools, language activity, text artifacts (such as books and tests), as well as to people. The language-medium distinction rests on historical processes of standardization and nationalism such that Hindi – rather than a more regionally circumscribed language – might provide an alternative to English. Hindi's potential – in contrast to English's – to stand for something with respect to the nation continues to underpin the legislation making Hindi (and other languages recognized in the Constitution of India) an option for the UPSC exam.

Teachers I met at coaching centers in Delhi and in Varanasi, a smaller city several hundred kilometers to the southeast, employed the language-medium distinction to make sense of the fact that Hindi-medium students had fared poorly in the UPSC exam since the introduction of the CSAT. They consistently explained that Hindi-medium students are no less intelligent than their English-medium counterparts. Hindi-medium students have, rather, inherited a mode of engagement with texts from schools that does not suit them well in the new test format. Thus, teachers at coaching centers reproduced a set of oppositions familiar to discourse about Hindi- and English-medium schools at all levels, from elementary to higher education. Coaching center teachers pointed out to me that Hindi-medium students are less flexible and less adaptable than their English-medium counterparts. This implied that Hindi-medium students would benefit in special ways at coaching centers. At the same time, some teachers expressed appreciation for working in coaching centers franchised from Delhi to smaller and less cosmopolitan metros like Varanasi when they praised students in such locales for their abilities in Hindi. Such teachers explained that Delhi is a place where the Hindi of residents is often less proficient and less clearly differentiated from English. The language-medium opposition thus worked on multiple axes of differentiation, sometimes

involving the practices and dispositions of students, and sometimes involving an alignment of locales with perceptions about languages. Hindi-medium students could be described as less flexible than their English-medium counterparts at the same time that less cosmopolitan locales could be appreciated for the quality of their Hindi.

An exploration of the ways in which the language-medium division is ideologized aids in the understanding of how students and teachers at coaching centers conceptualized recent changes to the UPSC examination and its consequences, but it does not help to explain the institution of coaching itself or changes occurring within the institution. Students at coaching centers, for example, drew contrasts between their former university professors and their coaching center teachers. Students remarked that coaching center teachers really care for them and answer any question they might have, whether it be about the UPSC exam or about life's difficulties. Students seek these attributes in coaching center teachers whether they have studied in Hindi-medium or English-medium schools, or are seeking to take the Hindi- or English-medium UPSC examination. Coaching center discourse on the internet claims that medium is not an issue, ostensibly because coaching centers offer tutorials and preparation materials in either medium.

Not only does the language-medium distinction not account for what makes tutorials valuable, innovation in coaching center practices turn ideological stereotypes on their heads. What the language-medium distinction cannot account for is that coaching centers in Varanasi, and not Delhi, are engaged in innovations to cater to students in new ways. The closed circuit television (CCTV) sessions being broadcast in small towns around Varanasi are primarily in Hindi, although coaching directors proudly pointed out that some are in English. Regardless, such innovation is not based on the dynamic between student and teacher whereby students value the teacher's time, accessibility, attention, and guidance. Such innovation is happening in the small regional metro – the place associated with Hindi-medium students thought by coaching center teachers to be too inflexible to adapt to changes to the UPSC examination – and not in the nation's capital – the place of especially prestigious English-medium schools.

This article argues that the stereotypes emergent from language ideological reflection and the trajectories of institutional change are not aligned. While teachers and students at coaching centers have deployed and reproduced language ideological notions to understand the ramifications of changes made to the UPSC exam, such notions do not aid in explaining changes to the institution of coaching. Indeed, changes to the institution of coaching contradict the stereotypes of language ideology.

2 Shifts in the examination and the response from Hindi-medium aspirants

Articles 315 through 323 of the Constitution of India called for the formation of the UPSC for the fair recruitment of civil servants through an annual testing process (Government of India 2015 [1949]). The UPSC was designed to have a certain degree of autonomy from the central government and terms were set for members of the commission so that they could not be removed easily. Those who are successfully recruited by the UPSC through the Civil Services Examination are given posts in the All India Services Group, which includes the Indian Administrative Service, the Indian Police Service, and the Indian Forest Service, as well as for a great number of services referred to as Group A and Group B. The UPSC thus administers the exam providing the placement mechanism for eventual promotion to especially prestigious posts in the public services including District Magistrate, Commissioner of Police, and Divisional Forest Officer.

The Civil Services Examination has always been competitive, but, since the 1990s, the exam's competitiveness has become notorious. Das reports:

The competition is quite tough. For example, in the year 2006, 3.84 lakh [1 lakh = 100,000] candidates applied for civil service positions, out of which the number of candidates who actually appeared was 1.96 lakh. Only 474 candidates were finally selected. This means that only 0.12 per cent of those who appeared for the examination were successful. Going by the success rate, it is clear that the civil services have been able to attract the brightest of educational system in India. In fact, the competition has become tougher over the years. For example, the success rate for the year 1950 was 8.58 per cent while for the year 1970, it was 6.36 per cent. For the year 1990, the success rate was 0.59 per cent and it had come down to 0.12 per cent in the year 2006.

(Das 2013: 62)

The Civil Services Examination is also notoriously complex. Aspirants must first take a preliminary examination that has two parts: a general studies component (which has to do with history and society) and an aptitude component (which has to do with analytical capability and emotional intelligence). The second part of the preliminary exam is popularly known as the CSAT (Civil Services Aptitude Test). Students who receive sufficient scores advance to what is called the "mains", a much more extensive exam including multiple sections on general studies, an essay, language comprehension, and a test in two subjects of the student's choice. Successful candidates in the mains appear for an interview. Only candidates who are successful in the interview receive posts in the branches of the public services.

When the CSAT was introduced to the Civil Services Examination in 2011 – especially the second paper, the aptitude component – students who opted for the Hindi-medium format of the examination began to fare exceedingly poorly. Fluctuations were reported in public media. In a story published by *The Hindu*, Bansal reported:

The number of students writing the UPSC mains exam in English has been disproportionately high over the last few years compared to that in the past, analysis of UPSC data from 2009 to 2014 show. A significant jump was seen in the year 2011 when 83 per cent candidates took the mains exam in English compared to around 62 per cent in 2009. Corresponding to that, Hindi saw a steep decline – a drop of around 20 percentage points from 36 per cent in 2010 to 15 per cent in 2011. This sudden change coincides with the introduction of the CSAT examination in UPSC prelims in 2011.

(Bansal 2016)

The website, *IASPassion.com* included a story by Kapoor offering the following data: in 2009, out of 11,504 aspirants who sat for the mains, having passed the preliminary exams, 6,270 had opted for English and 4,861 had opted for Hindi. In 2010, out of 11,859 students who appeared for the mains, 7,371 had opted for English, whereas 4,194 had opted for Hindi. In 2011, out of 11,230 students who appeared for the mains, 9,316 had opted for English and only 1,700 had opted for Hindi. The low number of students in the mains who had opted for Hindi in 2011 continued in the 2012, 2013, and 2014 examinations (Kapoor 2016).

The year 2014 saw a number of protests to the changes made to the UPSC examination. A protest in late June included over 200 examination aspirants in front of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's house. A protest in mid-July was held in front of the house of Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh (Sikdar 2014). In August, a reporter explained:

Hundreds of UPSC aspirants clashed with police and blocked traffic in Mukherjee Nagar on Thursday, demanding the scrapping of the Civil Services Aptitude Test (CSAT) in the UPSC examination [...]. According to police, around 8 pm, about 600-700 UPSC aspirants from coaching centres and hostels in Mukherjee Nagar assembled on the Gandhi Vihar road and shouted slogans demanding a written confirmation from the government that the CSAT would be scrapped.

(Hafeez 2014)

Another reporter described the mounting tension in August, “The UPSC Civil Services Aptitude Test (CSAT) row has escalated with protests by aspirants intensifying with each passing day. The agitating students want CSAT to be scrapped as they say the pattern of the test puts English-language candidates at an advantage, which is unfair for Hindi and regional language aspirants” (Kohli 2014). While both reporters invoked the CSAT in their descriptions of the

protests, the second reporter made explicit that the protesters saw the introduction of the CSAT and the decreasing representation of students who opted to take the examination in Hindi as connected.

Many popular media venues claimed that the protests over the Civil Services Examination presented the first problem or crisis for the new government of Prime Minister Modi. Indeed, the Government of India's Department of Personnel and Training announced that beginning in 2014 the CSAT would be a qualifying paper whereby aspirants would need to achieve 33 percent. No longer would the score for the CSAT be added to the student's overall score. A reporter explained:

Last year's decision by the Central Government to make the Civil Services Aptitude Test (CSAT) a qualifying paper in the UPSC exam came as a huge relief to lakhs of aspirants. The General Studies Paper-II in the Civil Services (Preliminary) Exam (CSAT) is now a qualifying paper with minimum qualifying marks fixed at 33%. This means that every student is required just to pass this paper with the minimum 33% marks. These won't be added to the final results of the preliminary exam.
(Kohli 2016)

The new policy was applied to the 2015 and 2016 examinations. The Central Government of India has also announced that the UPSC will have several years to consider and revise the test through the work of the Baswan Committee. The committee, named after its chairman, was formed in August 2015 to survey aspirants and recommend changes to the exam. Both the disposition of the CSAT within the structure of the exam as well as the language in which the exam is taken are major concerns of the committee's charge.

3 Language medium as language ideology

Language difference served to frame the protests as well as reflections on the protest by journalists and coaching center students and teachers. Given that the protests took place primarily in Delhi, most of the attention was given to Hindi, the standardized language with official recognition and sanctioned use in schools and other official domains across a number of states in North India (Aggarwal 1997; Brass 1990; Das Gupta 1970; Dua 1994; Fox 1990; Kaviraj 1992; Khubchandani 1983, 1984; King 1994; Kumar 1990, 1991; Lelyveld 1993; Orsini 2002; Pattanayak 1981; Sonntag 1996; Sridhar 1987, 1991; Srivastava 1990). Many of the protesters and most of the students and teachers I spoke with in coaching centers in 2014 after the protests had moved to Delhi from other areas of North India where Hindi is a standardized variety that is represented in schools to the

exclusion of other language varieties. Such varieties are sometimes associated with Hindi outside of relatively official contexts (LaDousa 2004, 2014; Simon 1986, 1993). Some journalists in the media were careful to point out that the situation pertaining to Hindi could be extended to any “vernacular language”, referring to other Indian languages sanctioned for use in schools and official domains in states outside of the “Hindi Belt” of North India. No matter which vernacular language was at issue, English played a role in discussions of changes to the examination (Dasgupta 1993; Faust and Nagar 2001; LaDousa 2007; Mohan 1995; Mohanty 2010; National Policy on Education 1968; Rajan 1992; Ramanathan 2004, 2005; Rao 2008).¹

In an effort to describe and explore the involvement of language as a reflexive resource in situations such as the 2014 protests in Delhi, linguistic anthropologists have developed the notion of language ideology, ideas about language that mediate linguistic practices (Errington 2000, 2000; Gal 2016; Gal and Irvine 1995; Kroskrity 2004; Silverstein 1979; Woolard 1998a; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). Their work has noted that language is a vehicle of interaction and discourse, to be sure, but also that people involved in interaction give evidence that cultural constructs help them to find ongoing interaction meaningful. Thus, Wortham and Reyes (2015) argue that individuals’ beliefs are an ideological refraction and not the analytical location of language ideology. Gal notes that calling processes ideological draws “attention to the fact that frameworks of understanding constrain which aspects of social life deserve attention, which merit comparison with what, and how they are to be measured” (2016: 91). Irvine and Gal have stressed that linguistic boundaries themselves can become a focus of ideology in interaction. They define language ideology as “the ideas with which participants and observers frame their understanding of linguistic varieties and map those understandings onto people, events, and activities that are significant to them” (2000: 35). Thus, there exists the potential for any aspect of social distinction to become a part of how people understand language varieties to be salient in the world.

The Peircian trichotomous apprehension of semiotics has been essential to the development of the notion of language ideology. Peirce ([1894] 1998) noted that when a sign represents its object through resemblance, the relationship is iconic; when a sign represents its object through spatiotemporal contiguity, the relationship is indexical; and when a sign represents its object by mere convention, the relationship is symbolic. Language ideology involves a consistent

¹ The term is “bivalent” in the parlance of Woolard (1998b) in that the term “medium” can be found in expressions understood as English, and can be found in expressions understood as Hindi when *mādhyaṃ* or *mīḍiāṃ* is used.

recognition of one relationship between a sign and its object of representation as another. Irvine and Gal (2000) note three possibilities of ideological process. Rhematization refers to indexical relations being understood as iconic; fractal recursivity refers to the projection of contrasting qualities at one level of difference onto another; and semiotic erasure refers to the ways in which ideological processes can render phenomena invisible.

The language-medium division depends on the alignment of distinctions along different axes of social reality. Such gives evidence that fractal recursivity is at play. Across North India, a set of contrasts has come to stereotype schools and their students by their language-medium designation (Bhattacharya 2013, 2016; LaDousa 2014; Proctor 2014; Ramanathan 2004, 2005; Sandhu 2014, 2015). For example, Hindi-medium schools are thought to be cheap, run by the government, and the option for those who are too poor to attend English-medium schools. In contrast, English-medium schools are thought to be expensive, affiliated with a number of private school boards, and the option for those who can avoid attending a Hindi-medium school. Rhematization is at play when any one of the distinctions thought to be prescient to the language-medium divide can cue the understanding of a student as from a humble background (Hindi-medium) or as possessing an especially vibrant, ambitious personality (English-medium). Finally, the notion of medium sets Hindi- and English-medium schools in opposition such that schools that do not conform to a set of indexical relationships between the medium and other aspects of the school are “erased” or rendered invisible (Irvine and Gal 2000). There are indeed examples of Hindi-medium schools that are privately administered, for example, but they generally remain unnoticed as people reflect on the differences between Hindi- and English-medium schools.

The ways in which people used the ideological constructions of language-medium distinctions to understand the ramifications of changes to the UPSC exam, however, did not simply reproduce the general dichotomy of Hindi- and English-medium institutions and students. Indeed, the study of the dynamics of language ideology must always be oriented to the actual circumstances in which practices emerge. Nakassis (2016) notes: “It is important to see that there as many kinds of ideologies as there are phenomena or media to which social actors’ practices are reflexively oriented. Further, this proliferation of ideologies beyond the linguistic is *implied* by the language ideology construct. Yet, because what kinds of ideologies we attend to are ethnographically motivated, ‘language’ and language ideologies of necessity remain an ongoing focus of linguistic anthropological inquiry” (2016: 334). In the case of changes to the UPSC exam, understandings of ramifications were configured by different sets of actors, practices, and notions of language, and which of the three semiotic processes came to be relevant depended on the set in question.

People argued that language difference was relevant and consequential to the introduction of the CSAT in the Civil Services Examination, but two constructs contributed to their arguments in specific ways. A reporter for the *Hindustan Times* quoted Anurag Chaturvedi, another journalist, to explain the controversy, employing the two language ideological constructs in turn: “Test candidates say that there are two main flaws in the CSAT paper. ‘First, the Hindi version of the question paper, is just a virtual translation of the English paper. Second, there is a compulsory English comprehension component which automatically puts Hindi medium students at a disadvantage,’ says Chaturvedi” (Kohli 2014). Most of the coaching center students and teachers and university professors with whom I spoke drew on language ideological constructs matching those invoked by the reporter for the *Hindustan Times*. On the one hand, there was the notion that Hindi and English are different languages, and that one might be employed in ways to match (or not match) the referential value of an utterance offered in the other. On the other hand, there was the notion that language difference can differentiate types of people such that the particular language of the exam might best match a particular person.

Many people focused on the UPSC’s use of technology to provide a Hindi translation for certain sections of the English version of the examination. Indeed, a professor of education at a central university in Delhi explained that some of the questions had been indecipherable in the 2014 iteration of the Hindi-medium version of the test. Many coaching center teachers told me the same story and several students recounted its details as well. The professor told me that the English version of the exam had been run through Google Translator to produce the Hindi version of the exam. Some really unfortunate translations had resulted. Whereas the English version of the exam included reference to the North Pole, the translator had produced the word in the Hindi version for staff or stick: *khambhā*. Students taking the test in Hindi were confused, whereas students taking the test in English were engaging with the untranslated questions. The professor explained that he had seen his students use Google Translator toward the production of similar kinds of errors in their papers and that he and his friends found much amusement in discussing them.

Alternatively, people focused on the people taking the test to account for poor performance. Students and teachers focused on the student rather than aspects of the test’s generation when they told me that students who opted to take the test in Hindi had studied in such a way that they were unable to answer questions successfully in the second part of the preliminary exam. People explained that such students had studied in Hindi-medium schools. Teachers in coaching centers were quick to explain to me that Hindi-medium students are

not “stupid” or “dull”. Rather, they are used to the rote learning that takes place in Hindi-medium schools (Majumdar and Mooij 2011; Vaish 2008). Teachers explained that students from a Hindi-medium background are unable to answer questions unless they are phrased in such a way that provides an elicitation of material learned by heart from a primer or textbook. Indeed, decrying differential intelligence as an adequate account of the controversy was the strategy of every coaching institute I visited over a two and a half month period. That Hindi-medium students are not flexible in their answering strategies and that Hindi-medium students lack the confidence to exhibit such flexibility was the focus of every conversation I had with teachers at coaching institutes, whether coaching in Hindi or English.

While all of the teachers at coaching centers explained that students from a Hindi-medium background did well as long as they could provide information on a test as they had learned it, a few teachers extended the idea to describe students from a Hindi-medium background as “inflexible” and “lacking in adaptability”. Mr Sharma, who coached in Hindi or English depending on the class, explained, “For this only the students from the Hindi background do not cope up with the CSAT. They cannot change the point of view of the material. It is not a matter of intellect, intelligence. They are just as intelligent as those students coming from the English-medium background.” A focus on language medium remains even when teachers try to take a sympathetic stance toward those whose fortunes in the exam have suffered since the introduction of the CSAT in 2011.

Online posts show that students themselves use the language-medium distinction to configure their chances of success at the examination. On the website quora.com, an anonymous post asked, “I am Hindi medium student, if I choose English medium for UPSC exam then what types of problems I have to face? Or is it better or not for me?” A. K. Pandey responded on 11 September 2015:

- (1) After thing [thinking?] a lot. I want to suggest you to analyse yourself whether you are able to judge your command over English or not Those who are writing answers here on Quora or are answering to Insights Secure Initiative [a website for UPSC examination preparation]. They have been studying English language since their childhood and in touch with English language through several ways.

Another reply dated 18 April 2015 came from a coaching service:

- (2) There is no problem when it comes to language. What you have to focus is your content. Good, well presented content in any language will fetch you marks. You need to work upon the power of your expression in either of

these two languages. And then practise writing answers in that only. We, at Synergy are running answers in both Hindi and English – and you can see our Mains Preparatory Programme answers for the same. All the best!

While A. K. Pandey intimated that the very identification of the poser of the question as a Hindi-medium student might reveal her to be unlike the other people posting on the website, the coaching center refocused the discussion on “content” and made explicit that it offers such content in either Hindi or English. In other words, the website promised a product to the person who asked the question – and to the reader of the post – and configured needs by the language-medium division between Hindi and English.

Yet a third post, dated 29 April 2015 and signed by Prabat Dhayal, warned:

- (3) I read your question ... Not to be rude ... But there were quite a lot of grammatical errors. I am not claiming proficiency in English either but for such an important exam don't take chances and go for what you are comfortable in. If it's hindi ... Choose Hindi. Or you might not be able to understand one or more questions and failing because of this will be a stupid move. Regards.

Dhayal pointed to errors to substantiate the mismatch between the language-medium background of the person who posted the question and the language medium of the website. Dhayal suggested that bringing the medium of the examination into line with the language-medium background of the aspirant would make for comfort and an avoidance of misunderstanding.

The online coaching service referred to by A. K. Pandey above, Insights IAS, describes itself thus: “This initiative famously known as Insights Secure is for those who want to hone their writing skills and improve their answer writing abilities to highly dynamic IPSCIAS Mains questions. Answer writing practice is the backbone of IAS exam preparation. Good answer writing skills help you get the highest marks in Mains” (insightsonindia.com). Under the website menu item “IAS Myths”, one finds, “My English is very poor. They say I am out of the race. Am I?” Insights IAS responds:

- (4) No. You are still part of the race. Now you have figured out the problem – that your English is poor. Work on it. All you need is basic English. Moreover, you can write this exam and give the interview in your mother-tongue. Buy a basic Grammar book – read it, listen to English news on TV and radio, try to write something in English, everyday (don't worry if it is very bad, keep trying). Necessity should push you to learn. Push yourself. Win the race.

At the same time that the website argues that either language medium will serve, it describes the disposition one must have to match the qualities of the examination as “highly dynamic”. This is precisely the quality that teachers argued that students from a Hindi-medium background lacked. Thus, while coaching center advertisements offer services in either language medium and urge students to be comfortable, and while teachers argue that Hindi-medium students do not lack intelligence, they nevertheless associate the qualities of the section of the test introduced in 2011 with a single language medium, English.

4 What makes coaching valuable?

While language-medium distinctions served as the frame of students’ and teachers’ reflections on the controversy, coaching centers themselves, whether offering courses in Hindi or English, were seen as valuable. When students reflected positively on coaching centers, they focused largely on the role of the teacher. One of the most successful coaching teachers I met in Delhi was named Ram. He had come to rent out a three-room flat in the heart of Mukherjee Nagar’s cluster of multi-story buildings devoted to coaching tutorials. One entered a waiting room that was adjacent to Ram’s office. To the side of the office was a narrow hallway that led to Ram’s assistant’s office and a bathroom. Ram’s office was furnished with a large desk behind which Ram received long lines of students after class, workers from nearby print shops running errands, or former students who had come to pay a visit and often inform the teacher of business dealings. Students would wait in the room outside of the office until Ram’s assistant would motion for a student to join a queue of students sitting on a couch perpendicular to Ram’s desk. A large portrait of Mahatma Gandhi hung on the wall behind Ram and several nameplates on the desk had Ram’s name engraved on them. Across the way from the waiting room was a lecture hall that accommodated approximately 40 students. The room was equipped with a chalkboard mounted above a slightly raised platform from which Ram delivered his lectures. Such was the setup of all of the coaching teachers I met who had been working for anywhere between 10 and 25 years. For more junior teachers there was no office, but rather an endless rotation through other people’s rented spaces. Though such teachers would not tell me how much, they all mentioned that they receive less than what students pay because the space through which they pass belongs to someone else. These teachers compared themselves favorably, however, with those tutors who visit students more informally for coaching.

Often, after Ram's lectures, I would not make it across the hall quickly enough to join the rush of students entering Ram's office. I would sit in the lobby with anywhere from 5 to 20 students who themselves waited their turn to be able to join Ram's queue. A routine developed whereby students would address me and ask me, rhetorically, whether I could see the attention that they were receiving face to face with the teacher. Consistently, students explained that Ram truly cared about them. If I asked students to explain how, they consistently answered that Ram would allow them to ask a question and would always provide an answer. They argued that this contrasted starkly with their experience in university where teachers did not care about them and certainly would never entertain any unsolicited questions. While teachers were often late to the lecture hall, every teacher whose lecture I attended in Mukherjee Nagar lingered after the lecture, whether in an office or in the lecture hall itself, to take students' questions. These were often about the test questions and strategies for answering, but they often were about student financial difficulties, batch dates and travel obligations, or discussion of plans for special subject study. On several occasions, a student's tears would prompt a teacher to tell the other students to leave to give privacy. The first time this happened, I went to leave, but the teacher told me to stay. This happened with other teachers too. I came to feel that I was being invited to witness the ways in which the teacher cared about the student and offered the student comfort and advice. Many of the students explained that their parents were terribly upset at their insistence on continuing to study for the UPSC, usually in the face of several failed attempts. Young women often shared with the teacher their concerns over the postponement of marriage.

Some coaching teachers told me that they had begun to rent a space to house an office where they could meet students after lecturing at an allotted time in a small lecture hall nearby. Such coaching teachers served batches of students numbering anywhere from 20 to 40. Sometimes the teachers taught one of the two subject papers for which students would sit. Sometimes the teachers would only have one batch of a subject at a time, but some had as many as three to accommodate students' schedules (and to accommodate more students, of course). Students in those batches had already passed the preliminary exam and were preparing for the mains exam. Sometimes the teachers taught additional batches of students who were studying for other parts of the exam, such as one of the language papers or one of the four General Studies sections of the mains exam.

Several teachers remarked that Ram, one of the most successful teachers, was not content with setting up small batches, but that his charisma had enabled him to teach a lecture in a giant cinema hall that had been converted

into a lecture hall. On some days, Ram taught as many as four three-hour lectures, one in a hall that accommodated approximately 800 students. Thus, Ram taught small batches out of his office, but also rotated through a larger lecture hall where a number of other teachers known for their charisma were also teaching. In all of these contexts, he lingered after lectures to answer students' questions, and students mentioned to me that he expressed his love for them in his willingness to talk to them while eating. Indeed, students explained to me that even with so many students, Ram was willing to spend as much as an hour or two after his last class of the day to stay and answer questions. Evidence of Ram's success came in the form of his ability to purchase a large flat in Mukherjee Nagar where real estate values had skyrocketed since coaching centers had come to the area. Ram was also able to afford a car in which his nephew drove him from home to office to lecture hall. One teacher was rumored to have such a large fleet of cars that people in the neighborhood could no longer park near their flats. What was undoubtedly true is that most teachers involved in coaching from their own offices could not afford to live in Mukherjee Nagar and had lengthy commutes from their homes further north or further east. These aspects of the political economy of coaching, however, never played a part in students' or teachers' reflections on coaching. Rather, students and teachers alike remarked on the attention and love students received, all in contrast to the relationship between students and teachers in university settings.

All of the teachers I met had failed the UPSC exams. Some of the teachers explained that after finishing their university studies they attempted to take the exams for several years in a row before giving up and beginning to participate in coaching services. One of the coaching teachers reported that he had tried to take the examination six times before finally deciding to start offering coaching services. A recent blog started by someone who identifies himself as Abhishek explains:

- (5) I am a computer engineer and have appeared in the Civil Services Examination four times. I have appeared in all three stages of the examination, including two interviews where I scored 180/300, and, now, after a job stint, I am mentoring UPSC aspirants for realising their dream of cracking this examination. This blog is an attempt to share my experience and those of my friends while preparing for this exam and help the civil service aspirants who many a times are confused as to what to study and how to study. My aim in starting this blog is to help those who don't have access to coaching or guidance. Even if one single individual benefits from my experience, my effort in starting this blog would be justified. Aspirants

are welcome to ask queries relevant to the UPSC preparation, which I would be answering either personally or through a separate posting in the blog, depending on the relevance of the question. (www.tehelka.com/2015/03/the-dreamdom-called-upsc/)

The kind of relationship between the aspirant and the blogger differs from the relationship between the aspirant and the coaching teacher. Neither does the aspirant have to pay Abhishek, nor does the aspirant have to make accommodations to attend his coaching lectures. One can imagine, however, that Abhishek's blog could serve as an advertisement for the coaching services he explains he now offers. Several features of Abhishek's blog post itself, however, resonate with the offer of coaching tutorials. Abhishek failed the exam several times. He claims that if his services help even a single aspirant, his efforts would be justified. And finally, he offers bloggers the chance to ask specific questions.

Coaching teachers in Mukherjee Nagar told me often that even a single instance of success makes the teacher's efforts worthwhile. Here, the competitiveness of the test aided in fueling the imagination of a kind of success against all odds rather than adding a dose of realism to efforts to succeed at the odds of something like three to 100. Students were much more varied in their explanations of why they were engaged in tutorial services for the exam. The desire to fight corruption was the central theme of many explanations to pursue the exam. Some students explained that the prospects for a good job were so bad that they had decided to continue their studies after university rather than having to look for work. Most of the students were from smaller metros or from small towns, and explained that the prospects for work, either at home or where they had gone to university, were particularly bad. Such students' reflections on the poor prospects of decent jobs are reminiscent of the participation in student politics described by Craig Jeffrey (2010) as "timepass". Some students mentioned their desire to postpone or avoid work in favor of their interest in or passion for a particular subject. For example, a student from a rural area just outside of Jaipur in his late 20s spoke of his love for Ruskin Bond's literature, and mentioned that he would rather study for the UPSC's exam in history than sacrifice his time to a job in which he had little interest. Another student mentioned her desire to be able to further her passion for classical music, and noted that being able to do so was incompatible with what was required to find and keep a job. Never did the language-medium distinction play a part in students' or teachers' explanations of the value of coaching or in students' explanations of why they were pursuing coaching.

5 Innovation in the hinterland

After spending five weeks rotating among coaching centers in Mukherjee Nagar, I traveled to Varanasi where I have been visiting schools and investigating people's notions of language-medium schooling for approximately two decades (LaDousa 2014). A teacher who had been particularly kind and generous to me in Delhi gave me contact information for a "new branch" in Varanasi of the Hindi-medium coaching center for which he worked. He mentioned that he enjoyed visiting the new branch in Varanasi from Delhi for teaching batches of students because their Hindi was particularly good and that they had special ability when it came to the subject paper for which he coached, Hindi literature and poetry. When I asked him to elaborate on what made the Hindi of the students in Varanasi good, he mentioned that they can produce language that is "pure" (*shuddh*) in comparison to his students in Delhi, and that they can speak Hindi relatively free of English.²

These predictable distinctions between center and periphery and English and Hindi were what I had come to expect from fieldwork in schools. In Varanasi, in reflections on schooling generally, Hindi is a language associated with the nation (*rāṣṭra*, *deś*), whereas English is a language associated with the international (*antarrāṣṭriya*). People explain that to gain employment, and certainly to attend especially prestigious boarding schools, one must move (*ghūmnā*) to a more cosmopolitan locale. In such conversations, people often mention Delhi as an especially attractive destination for economic mobility, and people often mention that no school exists in Varanasi with nationally recognized prestige. In the city, Hindi-medium schools are often assumed to be cheap because they are run by the government (*sarkār*), and English-medium schools are assumed to be comparatively expensive because they are private (*fiz lenā vāle*). Varanasi's position in reflections on Hindi is a special one, and people mention the place of the city in the history of Hindi's literary production and standardization. Some people also contribute to Varanasi's salience in the contrast between Hindi and English and Hindi- and English-medium education when they note that the city's schools – especially Hindi-medium ones, but English-medium ones too – could not teach students to speak in English free of

² *Shuddh* is an attribute of language that speakers employ to describe a number of different phenomena. These include, for example, the absence of lexical items in other languages, the absence of phonetic features associated with other languages, or the presence of lexical items derived from Sanskrit. These may or may not co-occur, and speakers' awareness of such co-occurrence may vary too.

Hindi. The coaching teacher from Delhi drew on associations between Varanasi and Hindi to highlight the city's positive attributes.

What I was wholly unprepared for, however, was the warning at the coaching center in Varanasi not to record the lectures in which I could sit and about which I could write notes. In Delhi, not a single teacher had expressed displeasure at my request to take notes during the three-hour lecture that most coaching sessions turn out to be. The director in Varanasi explained that students all over Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar were watching the lectures on close circuit television, and that the lectures belonged to the teachers who were delivering them. My look of incomprehension prompted the director to explain that in rooms in small towns like Mirzapur, Ara, Ghazipur, and Robertsganj, groups of students were watching the lecture being delivered in Varanasi's coaching center on CCTV. Such towns serve as district headquarters, and students watching the CCTV broadcasts traveled from villages in the districts. The director explained that the coaching institute was going to keep the lectures in a database in case they could be shown to future batches.

On a visit to the center the next day, the assistant director asked me at length why I thought students attended coaching services. He became impatient with what were likely obvious replies – that students were unhappy with corruption and might make a difference in the nation's future. He explained that the CCTV was the director's idea, and that his own contribution would be the building of a coffee shop at one of Varanasi's malls at which tutorial services would be urged on patrons. He explained that university students in places like Varanasi, far outside of Delhi, represent a huge untapped market. In contrast to places like Delhi, where the idea of coaching is well known, Varanasi presents a large number of university graduates who could become involved with coaching and try to master the UPSC exam. The assistant director went on to argue that such students spend time at malls, and that a coffee shop would be an ideal place to catch their attention and have them commit to coaching classes. It would seem that these two innovations are happening in precisely those areas that ideas about language and language-medium distinctions get associated with rote learning and a lack of innovation. Furthermore, such innovations sideline the cachet of the teacher's care and attention entirely.

6 Conclusion

In reflecting on changes made to the UPSC examination in 2011, teachers and students at coaching centers – as well as journalists – drew on the highly

salient notion of language medium. No one construction accounted for the cause of the increasingly poor performance of aspirants opting to take the exam in Hindi. Some noted that faulty translations affected the Hindi rather than the English version of the exam while some noted that students from Hindi-medium schools could not answer questions apart from a memorized response. The ideological opposition between Hindi- and English-medium institutions and students was salient in both explanations, but the latter explanation that focused on students served coaching centers particularly well. Coaching center teachers were quick to point out that students coming from Hindi-medium schools were not incapable of passing the new exam's CSAT section, but, rather, were used to providing memorized answers. Thus, the introduction of new sections of the UPSC exam reinvigorated an ideological construction of Hindi-medium students and their difference from English-medium students. And such reinvigorations made possible new contradictions. Just as coaching center teachers defended Hindi-medium students, advertising by coaching centers claimed that language-medium difference in the UPSC exam is inconsequential and that aspirants should choose the medium that is comfortable. Thus, the language-medium divide is so robust that it could be deployed toward the production of different consequences for the representation of Hindi-medium students as well as different suggestions for how such students might proceed and benefit from coaching.

One must look outside of the ways in which the language-medium division is ideologized, however, to understand what makes coaching valuable from the perspective of students as well as to understand how coaching is changing through innovation. Medium figures neither into the ways in which students value the coaching teacher's concern and accessibility, nor into what students see as the teacher's sacrifice of time and convenience. The benefits of coaching inhere in the relationship between teacher and student regardless of medium (yet coaching teachers claim that coaching is of special value to Hindi-medium students in the wake of changes to the UPSC examination). Copresence and gestures understood to constitute care and concern underpin the value of coaching. At the same time, in Varanasi, innovations are obviating the context of such gestures. Language ideology focuses on the Hindi-medium student as someone defined in opposition to the English-medium student who has the capacity to adapt to change.

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