

Access and Aspiration: Higher Education and The Class Divide in Professor Vikas Sharma's *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*

Sapna Singh*

*Research Scholar (English) IIMT University, Meerut (U.P.) INDIA

Abstract : Professor Vikas Sharma is a social writer and he often touches upon social themes. In many of his works, he has attached the theme of class division and the importance of education. In his novel, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, he talks about how class distinction affects the access to higher education. This novel is based in the small town of Panipat. Through a wide range of characters that come from different backgrounds, he talks about the journey of different people who aspire for higher education. He also talks about the difference between characters who choose different paths to fulfill their aspirations of upward mobility. This research paper presents a close analysis of the novel in an attempt to highlight how the lack of educational institutions, financial barriers, and the commodification of education, create impediments for people who come from economically weaker backgrounds. This paper also investigates the rule of education as a tool of aspiration and also as a marker of privilege and exclusion. Professor Vikas Sharma also throws light on the moral compromises, psychological burdens, and fractured ambitions that arise when education becomes accessible.

Keywords: education, exclusion, infrastructure, development, class differences, intellectual spaces, educational institutions.

Introduction - Professor Vikas Sharma has authored a number of novels based on themes concerning Indian society, thereby establishing him as a contemporary social writer. His novels touch upon the aspects of a common man's daily lives. This makes his works highly relevant and relatable for the masses. The novel, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, is also structured on the same lines. It is constructed in a way that explores powerful themes of social mobility, class difference, and education, in postcolonial India. The novel is set in the small town of Panipat. Panipat is not a developed town or a metropolitan city. At the same time, it is also not completely immersed in traditional values. It seems to be stuck between tradition and transition. Professor Vikas Sharma has woven this novel around characters that come from a middle-class background. Characters like Pritesh, Yukti, Dipali, etc. portray the complexity of the lives of middle-class people in India. For these people, education is a tool for change. They aspire to get educated as a way to change their lives and climb the social ladder. It also operates as a status symbol. The novel comments on the inequalities that prevail in the system that create a wide gap between the number of people who aspire for higher education and the number of people who are actually able to realize this aspiration.

Professor Vikas Sharma constantly refers to mythological narratives, famous political thinkers, and examples from contemporary life to add to the discourse. The novel presents a very rich commentary on India's education divide. The novel addresses important questions about class struggle and the attempts made by people like Pritesh to climb the social ladder through education. Despite being talented, brilliant, and highly dedicated, Pritesh struggles to get higher education because of his family's financial situation. Professor Vikas Sharma also comments on the need to walk on the right path. Through the example of Ajoy, Professor Vikas Sharma delivers the message that there are no shortcuts to success and hard work is the only way to change your life.

Education And Class Distinction In Panipat: Professor Vikas Sharma uses the town of Panipat as a symbol of industrial rebirth in this novel. The small town of Panipat serves as the backdrop in this novel. The town is not very big and it is still under the process of industrialization. It is historically known for its battlefield. However, in the modern day, it has gained recognition for its blanket industry. As a centre for the trade of blankets, carpets, bedsheets, and other textiles, it provides employment to the residents. This industrial growth also plays a very important role in the novel.

While it brings with it modest prosperity, industrialization also widens the gap between people as it deepens class stratification. While the town has definitely progressed a lot, not everyone has benefitted from the same. Only a small portion of the population has reaped the true benefits of this progress while the rest continue to sustain themselves and their families within limited means.

Just like industrialization, the effects of urbanization are also not uniform. Not everyone has benefited from urbanization. While some areas of the town have developed a lot, the major part of the town continues to reside in smaller towns without any real change or progress. This reflects how prosperity is often selective. Only a small portion of the people actually benefit from drastic changes like these while the majority continues to live in the same, and sometimes even worse, conditions. The infrastructure of the whole town speaks volumes about this disparity. Public colleges, for example, offer very limited opportunities, while private ventures serving the rich people offer a wide range of facilities. This shows how economic growth does not always guarantee inclusivity or overall development. Despite progressing so much economically, the town of Panipat fails to offer important services like higher education to people like Pritesh who need it the most. Professor Vikas Sharma also highlights how education does not operate as a tool to attain enlightenment; it is often a marker of class privilege and social capital. Pritesh is an intelligent and hard-working student. This is evident from his marks and his dedication towards higher education. He wants to go to college and pursue an M.A. in English. However, it is not easy for him to do despite being a brilliant student. Because of his financial conditions, and the lack of colleges in Panipat that offer higher education, Pritesh is forced to accept the harsh reality that he can not gain higher education. Professor Vikas Sharma also presents a contrast in the form of his classmates- Yukti and Dipali. Despite being uninterested in higher education, they are able to go to a different city for education. This is all because of their family's elite status. Their families are well-off and they can send them to different cities, rent apartments for them, and even pay for private colleges. Their family status also enables them to be more confident and comfortable with the culture of big colleges and educational institutions. They have access to better facilities and exposure to a lot of opportunities. On the other hand, Pritesh, despite being more deserving than both of them combined, is unable to go to a decent college that offers the course that he wants to do, let alone go to a college of his choice, solely because of his weak financial condition. He feels the clear divide between him and his friends.

"I knew the gap that existed between me and my friends like Yukti, Dipali and Naini. Yukti's parents used to earn a lot of money from their nursing home and her mother Anuradha was M.S. and hence known in the town as the best surgeon. I had accompanied her to

Ambala, Kurukshetra, Karnal, Jind, Sonapat etc. to take part in the seminars, debates and Quiz contests. She needed company and security and I needed somebody to pay for travelling expenses. She had studied in Sharma Convent School since childhood with Dipali and Naini. Kamal Naini (18) was known as the best player of basketball and tennis and I had no interest in these games. Often I watched the rich guys playing tennis in the Downtown Club and hoped Someday I too would play like them."

(Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow, 12)

Here, education operates as a gateway to both status and exclusion. Students like Pritesh come from poorer families and struggle with access to basic facilities. On the other hand, rich students use education as a lifestyle choice. They join courses and programs they are not even interested in, only as a symbol of status and social class. This disparity grows even more because of the commercialization of education. Rich students like Yukti spend a lot of money just to obtain notes that she does not even study with interest or dedication. Pritesh, on the other hand, uses material from public library books to prepare his notes. In towns like Panipat, education is not just a right or a basic necessity; it is more like a social filter that divides the rich from the poor.

Access To Education And Aspirations: This novel starts with Pritesh and his desire to gain higher education. He is the protagonist of the novel and he represents the lower middle class students in India. He struggles a lot as his aspirations are much larger than what his circumstances can provide. He is not rich by any means and his father barely earns enough to support the entire family. In such a situation, Pritesh feels that his dream of pursuing an MA in English will most likely remain a dream. He does not merely want to pursue education as an academic ambition; instead, for him, it represents a desire to move upwards in society and attain intellectual fulfillment. His family's already struggling financial background and the lack of colleges to provide post graduate education in his hometown, add to his struggle. He is aware of his family's financial situation and he realises that there is no way that his parents can send him to a different city and pay his college fees as well as lodging expenses just for his educational aspirations. His father is a subordinate clerk and his income is very limited. Because of a lack of financial resources, his father fails to see the feasibility of funding further education. For this family, even daily survival is a huge challenge in itself. In such circumstances, it is not possible for them to fund their child's higher education. Pritesh is also aware of this situation. It is true that he aspires to gain higher education and become a scholar, but he also realises that he must navigate his dreams in a reality where ambition is often dismissed as impractical and unachievable. This internal conflict is not unique to him. It represents a wider phenomena and Indian society. Many people like Pritesh

have high aspirations but because of weak support systems and infrastructure, they are often forced to settle for less.

Professor Vikas Sharma also comments on the inequality in access to education. Panipat has developed a lot because of the industrial revolution. However, the town still lacks institutions for higher education. This forces students like Pritesh to move out of their hometown to other cities like Ambala or Amritsar for education. This movement causes a lot of burden on their family in the form of relocation, hostel fees, and academic expenses. It is not possible for everyone to afford this. In the end, it becomes impossible for people like Pritesh to gain higher education as their families often live from paycheck to paycheck. On the other hand, people like Yukti and Dipali do not have to think about all these things at all. They face no obstacles of any sort and exercise a great level of freedom in choosing between universities, renting apartments, and travelling for extra curricular activities. This gives them a privilege over students like Pritesh. Because of their family's wealth, they have better access to education and other facilities. This highlights how higher education is less about talent, interest, or intellect, but more about resources, networking, and inherited advantage.

Education also serves as a tool for social mobility and legitimacy. For people like Pritesh, education is not just about ambition or aspiration, it is required to change their social status. Pritesh is very intelligent and interested in studies. Because of his intellect and talent, he is able to make his place in intellectual circles. However, he can do so only when he is able to afford the cost of entry, which is not easy at all. On the other hand, Yukti effortlessly moves through such intellectual circles and spaces. She does not have to think twice before deciding to move to a different city to gain education. She even offers to loan some money to Pritesh for his education. This highlights how education can become a transactional privilege which is offered to the aspirational by the privileged. Educational access is also attached with a certain number of social implications. Pritesh views education as a tool to earn legitimacy and social respect. He struggles to keep up with academically elite peers and maintain his image as a scholar. On the other hand, his younger brother, Ajoy, seeks money and financial stability. He abandons education and enters the world of gold smuggling. This gives him a lot of money in a very short period of time. However, he fails to earn legitimacy or respect.

Educational goals are also affected by cultural expectations and family dynamics. Within the institution of the family, aspirations of education are often based on economic necessity and gender roles. Pritesh's parents somewhat acknowledge and appreciate his desire to study. It is true that it is always subject to their financial means. However, the picture is entirely different for his sisters. They are tied to marriage prospects instead of education or academic ambition. This highlights how access to education

is also severely affected by gender roles in our society. The difference between Pritesh and his siblings highlights the class struggle within Indian families. All of them want to improve their social status and financial condition. However, the path that is chosen for them is very different. Pritesh turns out to be the scholar while Ajoy becomes the businessman. Their sister, Toshi, remains confined in the four walls of her house. This highlights how economic class often restricts the freedom of choice. People like Pritesh do not form a part of the urban elite class, have to struggle a lot for education, while privileged people like Yukti and Dipali gain education as a luxury.

"To my surprise more than 40% students took education as a luxury as most of them hailed from rich families. Nearly 20% of the students were pretty serious and remained dedicated listeners in the lecture halls. They wanted to achieve their goal and a few were interested in I.A.S. and I.P.S. competitions."

(Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow, 20)

Structural Barriers And Mobility : Professor Vikas Sharma uses the lack of educational institutions in Panipat to highlight structural barriers that make it difficult for people like Pritesh to climb the social ladder. Panipat has developed a lot and has become economically active and semi-urbanized. Despite this, the town does not provide good educational institutions. There are no postgraduate colleges that offer an MA in English. Because of this, students who want to gain higher education have to consider migration as the only option to realise their dreams. This becomes a source of tension for many people. The same happens to Pritesh. He is very willing to pursue an EMI in English, but he is also aware of the fact that we cannot do so while staying in Panipat. The weak academic structure of the city forces him to compromise his ambition. His friends plan to move to cities like Ambala or Amritsar for higher education and suggest he do the same. However, this presents another challenge for him. Contrary to popular belief, migration is not just geographical; it involves high economic as well as emotional costs. If Pritesh decides to leave Panipat and move to Amritsar or Ambala, he will have to arrange for a lot of capital. This is because he will have to settle down in a new place where he will require rent, food, books, etc. Pritesh knows his family cannot afford this. This is why he hesitates to gain higher education or promise anything to his friends. This highlights a larger truth in the smaller towns of India- while education is available, it is not available locally, affordably, or equitably. Pratibha Tyagi and Anshu Devi write in their research paper titled, *"Tomorrow And Tomorrow And Tomorrow: How Poverty And Wealth Dictate The Lives Of People"*:

"He had an aim in his life and he was devoted to it. Unfortunately, he had to rethink his career plans because of his poor financial condition. He could not go to his dream college not because he was not intelligent enough but because he could not afford the

cost of higher education. Education is a thing that so many people take for granted. Yet, there are so many people who yearn for it but cannot afford it. This is what poverty does to people. What Pritesh wanted was not a huge luxury or anything of the sort; he simply wanted to pursue higher education so that he could become an assistant professor. But it was not easy for him in any sense as he had to think about his family's financial condition as well."

(Virtues and Vices: The Moral Tug-of-War in Vikas Sharma's Writings, 5)

As a student, Pritesh does not just have to face the cost of education in the form of tuition fees. Education requires multiple expenses like rent, study materials, daily sustenance, etc. All of these are things that his family cannot afford. While his friend, Yukti, offers to help him by sharing a flat with him, Pritesh knows that this comes with a lot of emotional burden as well as the risk of dependency and imbalance in power. Professor Vikas Sharma also talks about the moral complexity in a student's life when he enters hostel or off-campus living cultures. Yukti talks about the scandals that take place in hostels and expresses her desire to rent a private flat instead. For a number of students, especially women, hostel life is a site of surveillance, insecurity, and social suspicion. On the other hand, male students like Prite who come from poor backgrounds feel alienated and inferior in elite academic spaces. This pushes them towards moral compromise and emotional isolation. Professor Vikas Sharma highlights how educational institutions create environments that give rise to a number of inequalities instead of overcoming or eliminating them. Education is often talked about as a liberating force. However, in reality, it is used as an instrument of exclusion that comes with a number of social costs.

Professor Vikas Sharma also offers a contrast to Pritesh and his dedication to earning a place in intellectual circles. His younger brother, Ajoy, is not like him in any way. He lacks an interest in studies and soon quits formal education to pursue a life of illegal trade and smuggling. At a very young age, he is employed by a man named Vikrant. Vikrant is a gold merchant. He offers Ajoy a huge sum of money in exchange for his contribution to smuggling. Ajoy soon turns into a smuggler of gold, and when Vikrant moves to Delhi in search of a better life and social status, Ajoy takes over his shop and becomes an independent businessman. His life is not governed by books or knowledge; instead, he works on risk and opportunism. At the young age of 17, Ajoy has already become a millionaire. This is very ironic as his elder brother, Pritesh, struggles to fund his education, while his younger brother achieves great wealth by engaging in criminal activities. While Ajoy earns money, he fails to earn a good lifestyle. He soon falls prey to evils like drinking, prostitution, etc. He fails to keep up with his own lifestyle and soon finds himself in the hospital after a life-threatening accident. He barely survives but

requires multiple surgeries. This symbolizes the crash of his short-lived dream of quick wealth. His story is a cautionary tale. It delivers the message that in the absence of accessible education, out of frustration and a pressing need to get rich, poor people often resort to illegal ways and shortcuts to fulfill their dreams. These shortcuts often destroy their entire lives. Ajoy's fall is not just symbolic of an ethical crash, but it also highlights how unchecked ambition for economic advancement can be fatal. He takes a leap towards mobility without morality, and this proves to be very unsustainable. Kamal Kant Sharma writes in his book:

"Through Ajoy and Vikrant, the novel explores the dark reality of smuggling. Ajoy's greed for money leads him down an illegal path, revealing how financial desperation and the lure of wealth can push people into crime. His involvement in smuggling is not an isolated case but rather a reflection of how many individuals fall into such traps in real life."

(Vikas Sharma and His Literary Works: Defictionalising the Reality, 149)

The Commodification Of Education: Professor Vikas Sharma also addresses the modern trend of treating education as a commodity. He criticizes this trend. In India, the failure of public institutions to meet the growing qualitative and quantitative demands of the students is a major issue. Private institutions often claim to fill this gap by providing opportunities to students. However, this comes at a hefty price. The institution that Pritesh's friends attend for their higher education represents this trend. The annual fees in this college are very high. In a way, such institutions cater to the wealthy elite class. This makes education purchasable instead of accessible. Education no longer remains a right and turns into a profit-based enterprise. Students from different social and financial backgrounds have very different experiences. While the rich students are able to enjoy their college life while also being able to access multiple opportunities, poor students like Pritesh struggle to make ends meet and have to rely on public colleges. These private institutions promote an exclusionary academic culture where merit means nothing without money. Professor Ajay Shukla writes in his research paper titled *"The Prominence of Education as Depicted in the Novel 'Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow'"*:

"Moreover, 'Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow' sheds light on the barriers that hinder marginalized communities from accessing education. It addresses socio-economic constraints, limited infrastructure, and the educational disparities faced by rural and backward areas. By doing so, the novel raises awareness about the urgent need to address these inequalities and inclusive education for all."

Through the representation of Pritesh's family, the novel underscores the far reaching impact of education. It showcases how education can serve as a

pathway to socio-economic mobility, shaping aspirations, and influencing family dynamics.”

(Dynamic Narrative Concerns in the Novels of Vikas Sharma, 58)

Higher education is often inaccessible for students like Pritesh. It operates as a site for class-based exclusion. It does so financially as well as culturally. Wealthy students are more groomed, confident, and familiar with academic norms. Their families possess the means to give them a number of facilities from a young age, which transform them into more confident individuals. Pritesh's friends enjoy their lives and feel free to talk about seminars, research topics, novels, etc., while Pritesh struggles to pay rent and continue his education. This difference leads to academic elitism as poor students get marginalized. Their voices are often suppressed and unheard in intellectual circles. Professor Vikas Sharma criticizes this effect of education that creates a two-tier system.

Conclusion : Hence, it is clear that this novel exposes the deeply entrenched class inequalities in Indian society that govern access to higher education. While characters like Pritesh represent the endless struggle for academic advancement and upward mobility in a society that has been characterised by poverty, institutional failure, and emotional pressure, students like Yukti are able to access higher education and other opportunities without any difficulty because of their privilege and wealth. In such a situation, people like Ajoy, who are not very determined, fall prey to

the deceiving idea of quick wealth through illegal trade. This exposes the dangerous steps that some people take because the educational system shuts its doors on them. This novel is not only a tale of individual induction but it is a social documentary. It calls for urgent attention to educational policy and equality. Professor Vikas Sharma suggests that true access to education does not mean mere physical enrollment. It should extend to dignity, affordability, and meaningful opportunity for all people regardless of their social class and economic background.

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