

UPSC to Guokao: Examining the Socio-Economics of Civil Service Aspirations in India and China

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Abstract

India and China have both witnessed the rise of mass civil service aspiration despite profound differences in their political systems. This exploratory research compares India's Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) examination and China's National Civil Service Examination (Guokao) to examine the socio-economic and political forces sustaining the appeal of state employment.

Drawing on qualitative data analysed through narrative and thematic methods, the study explores how labour-market uncertainty, aspirations for social mobility, state legitimacy, and familial expectations shape examination cultures in both countries. The findings demonstrate significant convergences across divergent institutional contexts. In India and China alike, civil service preparation functions as a response to economic insecurity and a socially legitimate pathway to status and mobility. However, these examination systems also generate prolonged periods of youth underemployment, delay key life transitions, and remove large numbers of educated young adults from productive economic activity. Ultimately, the study asks whether the rise of mass civil service aspiration signals the strength of the state, the weakness of the market, or a deeper reconfiguration of the relationship between the two.

Key words : UPSC, Guokao, India, China, socioeconomics, civil services, youth aspirations

Introduction

The modern state is built upon bureaucracy that administers law, raises money, and provides services. Hence, choosing personnel for the said purpose becomes vital. Though appointments can be done via patronage and inheritance, competitive exams have worked better and legitimized the state and provided the citizenry with upward mobility. Systems of this kind were established in India and China. For instance, in China, the imperial keju led to the establishment of the National Civil Service Exam (Guokao), whereas in India, the civil service of the colonial period was transformed post-independence into the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC).

Even though there are differences in terms of the political structure of both countries, the bureaucracy of India and China have quite a lot in common. There is a high value attached to competitive exams, due to their potential in terms of meritocracy and the impact on aspirations, stratification, and the state-society linkages. They have become increasingly relevant in a rapidly changing economy, where job placements in the government sector continue to be highly sought after even though there are opportunities in the private sector. For example, in 2025, the UPSC had 937,000 applications for 1,087 jobs, with only 958 being recommended, while the Guokao had 13.35 million applicants.

This persistence can be explained through two theories. Rodrik's concept of premature deindustrialisation highlights the scarcity of stable jobs, while Bourdieu's framework of cultural capital and habitus shows how unequal resources shape achievement in meritocratic institutions. To explore these dynamics empirically, this study draws on interviews with six participants who prepared for or attempted the UPSC and Guokao.

Together, the theories explain why thousands of people are still willing to take up these exams as a means to secure a better future. On the one hand, both exams represent stability in otherwise unstable economies, therefore making

them desirable to the general population. On the other hand, the existence of the competitive exams also represents the use of resources to establish social hierarchies. Ultimately, this is the main question posed by this research: why are civil service examinations so attractive despite the fact that they reinforce inequality?

Research Problem

Millions of young adults in both countries spend years, sometimes a decade, in suspended economic animation: not working, not fully living, deferring marriage, family, and income in pursuit of a government appointment. This is not merely career preference. This is a mass social behaviour with macro-economic consequences, and it demands a macro-social explanation.

Research Question

Primary: Why do India and China, despite opposite political architectures converge in producing mass civil service aspirations among educated youth?

Sub-question: What does this convergence reveal about how social stratification and economic precarity interact to make the state the dominant site of social mobility in large late-developing economies?

Aims & Objectives

This research aims to examine the socioeconomics of civil services aspiration in India and China as a comparative phenomenon, arguing that aspiration of this kind is neither simply a rational career choice nor a cultural tradition but a structural response to the relationship between social stratification and economic precarity.

It investigates the bidirectional causality at the core of this relationship: how social factors shape economic aspiration and how the economics of aspiration

reshape social structures like caste dynamics, the distribution of human capital, trajectories of intergenerational class mobility, and patterns of political affiliation.

Past India–China civil service literature has largely emphasized institutional design, exam mechanics, and recruitment outcomes, but it has overlooked the socio-economic dynamics of aspiration itself.

Literature Review

India and China together account for nearly 3 billion people– roughly 35% of the world population. They together produce approximately 23 million graduates annually – larger than the population of Netherlands, Sri Lanka & Chile. In China, the civil services are often called the “golden rice bowl” or “iron rice bowl” because it offers lifetime job security and perks like subsidized housing, making it highly attractive amidst a battered private sector. ([Affairs, 2013](#)) Similarly, in India, the civil service is coveted for its symbolic capital, administrative power, and the status associated with being a “babu” ([Chopra, 2023](#)). Understanding why these aspirations are so dominant requires a multidimensional evaluation of structural labour market constraints and the persistent influence of institutional and social factors that promise mobility to those who succeed.

1. Main challenges: Key research challenge in this field

The comparative study of civil service aspirations across the UPSC and Guokao systems is complicated by several structural and methodological challenges.

(1A) First is the scale of phenomenon. Competition for civil service positions is intense, with vast numbers of aspirants applying for limited vacancies in both India and China. This hyper-competitive environment encourages a protracted period of intensive exam preparation manifesting as the “exam ronin”

phenomenon in China ([Geng et al., 2025](#)) and similar patterns of multi-year coaching cycles in India – which fundamentally alters the career trajectories of the nation's human capital. The full social and psychological cost borne by the staggering majority of unsuccessful aspirants in both systems remains poorly documented in comparative literature.

(1B) Second, the costs of these aspirations are distributed unevenly across social categories in both nations, making aggregate analysis insufficient :–

(i) Gender dynamics: In China, parental educational expectations and investment patterns reflect a complex interplay of meritocracy and lingering son preference, often benefiting daughters as a pathway to empowerment([Wang & Chen, 2024](#)).Mixed-method analyses of UPSC mock interviews show female candidates are nearly three times more likely to be questioned about gender equality and family obligations than their male counterparts, who are more frequently assessed on international relations, economics, or technology.([Banerjee et al., 2024](#)) This asymmetry suggests that even candidates who survive the written examination face structurally unequal evaluation at the interview stage.

(ii) Linguistic hegemony in India: English operates as a form of symbolic capital within the UPSC ecosystem, creating structural advantages for elite, urban candidates. ([Rathour, 2025](#)) Evidence suggests that success rates for regional-medium aspirants remain low, with candidates from vernacular-language backgrounds frequently experiencing the preparatory infrastructure – from coaching materials to interview evaluation as systematically skewed against them([Khan & Jayaraj, 2025](#)).

(1C) Third, isolating the true opportunity costs of civil service preparation across both systems is methodologically difficult because many costs – eroded technical skills, deferred personal milestones, psychological deterioration are

invisible to standard economic measurement(Malik, 2026). For instance, in India, high-achieving STEM and medical graduates frequently make a “cross-domain shift” to humanities to prepare for UPSC. When they fail, they often become NEET individuals(Rathore, 2024) (Not in Education, Employment or Training). This talent is effectively locked away in a preparation pipeline for 4-5 years during their most productive years. Studies show that over 50% of aspirants experience depression and anxiety, with recurring failures harming self-esteem and increasing hopelessness. Those who fail are forced to confront a truthless job market without any tangible experience to justify their gap years.

2. State of the Art: What has been done so far

(2A) The Labour Market Withdrawal Effect

The most rigorous empirical evidence on the labour market consequences of civil service aspiration comes from India. Mangal exploits a partial government hiring freeze in Tamil Nadu as a natural experiment, demonstrating that increased exam competition caused male graduates to reduce time in employment in order to study more intensively([Mangal, 2021](#)). Crucially, the costs were durable: affected cohorts showed lower employment rates and reduced earnings even a decade after the freeze, suggesting that participation in the exam process did not build human capital([Mangal, 2021](#)).

The Indian case is further characterised by the sheer scale of preparation costs. Preparation frequently demands intensive daily study sustained over multiple years, and the total financial burden on families is significant when coaching fees and living costs in metropolitan preparation hubs such as Delhi are included. This has generated a commercialised coaching industry that, far from functioning as a pathway to selection, often entraps youth in a perpetual preparation cycle until they exhaust their permissible attempts or their family's savings. The examination cycle itself, stretching over a year per attempt,

compounds the sunk-cost dynamic – aspirants who have invested years of effort face powerful psychological pressure to persist regardless of rational assessments of their probability of success. This dynamic locks away a substantial portion of India’s specialist human capital during what would otherwise be the most productive years of career formation.

In China, the phenomenon of kaogong re has produced what [\(Wang & Chen, 2024\)](#) term “exam "ronins" – graduates who voluntarily withdraw from the labour market for extended periods of chronic exam preparation, driven by constrained career options, parental pressure, and the Confucian prestige historically attached to the scholar-official. Fu (2025) and Cai, Li, and Ye (2023) explicitly link this pattern to man jiuye (“slow employment”), a concept describing prolonged, voluntary delay of labour market entry among graduates who neither work nor actively seek employment outside public sector queues. Survey evidence from 2022 suggests that the motivational structure underlying this withdrawal is heavily utilitarian: 86.4 per cent of Chinese youth prioritise financial interest, and 70.24 per cent prioritise power and promotion prospects over the actual content of the job. **China Youth Daily Survey (2022)** The prospect of “grey income” – informal benefits associated with public office that are not reflected in official salaries remains a further hidden motivator that renders official pay comparisons with the private sector systematically misleading.[\(Deng et al., 2023\)](#)

(2B) Talent Misallocation and Structural Inefficiency

Beyond individual outcomes, the literature documents systemic misallocation of human capital. In China, Mei (2023) describes highly educated youth increasingly crowding into civil service and state-owned enterprise positions while private firms report persistent shortages of professional talent, a dynamic characterised as a “waste of social resources.” This pattern is reinforced by a

cultural preference for white-collar and authoritative employment that leads graduates to avoid expanding blue-collar and service sector roles, worsening structural unemployment (He & Zhu, 2025; Fan, 2024).

In India, the misallocation takes a particularly revealing form. Apastamb (2025), using experimental evidence, finds that aspiring bureaucrats display a strong revealed preference for entrance exams and generalist posts, systematically rejecting specialist roles that match their qualifications. This preference structure actively deepens skill mismatch – a system nominally designed to recruit competent generalists instead functions as a talent trap, pulling specialists out of productive, field-specific employment and into years-long preparation for roles they may never obtain. A parallel structural distortion operates through social stratification.

3. Analysis and Criticism: Evaluating the Evidence

The existing body of research offers substantial insight but is not without limitations.

(3A) Strengths. The causal identification strategy employed by Mangal (2021, 2024) represents a methodological high point, providing credible evidence of long-run labour market harm from exam competition that is largely absent from the Chinese literature, where comparable quasi-experimental designs are rare. The qualitative work of Wang et al. (2023) on “exam ronins” complements the quantitative record by illuminating the lived experience of labour market withdrawal in ways that aggregate data cannot capture. The broader sociological literature on symbolic capital, linguistic gatekeeping, and gender bias adds important texture to the aggregate labour market picture, revealing the internal stratification of aspiration pools that aggregate statistics conceal. ([Banerjee et al., 2024](#)) ([Rathour, 2025](#))

(3B) Disciplinary silos. Much of the literature proceeds in disciplinary and geographic isolation. Public administration scholars studying Indian civil service recruitment rarely engage with Chinese labour economics, and vice versa. [\(Goodburn & Mishra, 2023\)](#) This produces parallel intellectual traditions that identify similar phenomena – talent queuing, exam fever, structural underemployment, coaching industry capture, gender bias [\(Banerjee et al., 2024\)](#) in evaluation without the cross-fertilization that comparative analysis would enable. Notably, similar arguments about cross-domain talent diversion, sunk-cost dynamics, and coaching industry capture appear independently in both national literatures without mutual citation or theoretical synthesis.

(3C) Neglect of institutional history. Both the UPSC and the Guokao have deep historical roots, the former in British colonial administration, the latter in the imperial keju examination system yet the literature rarely integrates this institutional history into explanations of contemporary aspiration patterns. Zhang (2025) represents a partial exception in tracing the historical development of India's civil service system, but systematic historical comparative

(3C) Analysis remains scarce. The striking parallels between the cultural logic of the keju and the contemporary aspirational dynamics documented in both countries suggest that historically grounded analysis could substantially advance the theoretical understanding of why exam-centric recruitment systems generate such durable and intense aspiration even when selection probabilities are vanishingly small.

(3D) Gender and intersectionality. The role of gender in mediating civil service aspiration is underexplored, particularly in the Indian context, where female labour force participation and access to public employment interact in complex ways with caste and regional labour markets. [\(Banerjee et al., 2024\)](#) Existing

evidence on gender bias in interview evaluation (the threefold disparity in questioning patterns documented above) has not been integrated with the broader labour market evidence on the gendered costs of exam preparation and withdrawal.

(3E) Reform prescriptions and the design vs. policy debate. While the literature broadly attributes civil service aspiration problems to both design flaws and policy failures (Apastamb, 2025; Schneider & Pilz, 2024), it does not offer a systematic framework for distinguishing their relative contributions or for specifying what targeted reform would look like in each domain.

Recommendations in both national literatures tend toward general prescription: shortening the Indian recruitment cycle to protect mental health and reduce the consumption of “prime years”; aligning Chinese university education with industry demand to reduce voluntary unemployment caused by the civil service boom. These prescriptions are plausible but underdeveloped, and the absence of cross-national comparison forecloses insights that might emerge from contrasting the specific design choices and policy environments of each system.

In spite of some useful findings, there is still a lack of research synthesis in the field under consideration because of fragmentation of the existing literature among different disciplines, limited study of institutional history and gender relations, and no comparison of India and China.

5. Research Gap: What This Study Contributes

Despite the richness of country-specific scholarship, a systematic comparative socioeconomic analysis of civil service aspiration in India and China, treating both countries as theoretically informative cases within a shared analytical framework— does not yet exist in the literature. This is a significant absence, given that the two countries share important structural similarities (large graduate cohorts, exam-centric public recruitment, deep historical cultural

legitimation of scholar-official careers([Geng et al., 2023](#)), weak private market confidence among educated youth([Bloom et al., 2016](#)), and post-COVID intensification([Geng et al., 2023](#))) while differing meaningfully in institutional design, political regime, cultural context, and labour market structure.

Existing studies emphasize the importance of the tradition of civil service examinations not only from an historical point of view but also in terms of their current relevance in India and China. Although these studies help us understand the situation, they tend to fail to explain why these examinations are so popular today. In order to answer the question mentioned above, this study considers two different theoretical approaches, Rodrik's idea of structural scarcity and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital.

Theoretical Framework

1. Dani Rodrik's theory of premature deindustrialization

It suggests that developing economies often reach a peak in manufacturing employment at lower income levels than historically observed in earlier industrialized nations([Rodrik, 2015](#)). This structural shift leaves these economies struggling to provide sufficient secure, formal-sector employment for their educated youth.

In the Indian context, the civil services examination functions as a strategic response to this economic reality. The intense draw of the UPSC extends beyond the inherent prestige of the bureaucracy; it reflects a broader scarcity of stable, socially respected, and well-paying career paths.

Comparing this to China is instructive. Although China's industrial growth has successfully absorbed a larger segment of educated labour([Lazonick, 2009](#)), the surging popularity of the *gongwuyuan* (civil service) exams reveals comparable concerns over job security and social standing.([Francis & Vyas, 2015](#)) In China,

intense examination cultures, such as the *gongwuyuan* exams, emerge as mechanisms for navigating the uncertainty generated by volatile and evolving labour markets([Wen-zhong, 2011](#))

2. Bourdieu's Framework: Cultural Capital, Habitus, and Symbolic Violence in Comparative Perspective

Bourdieu's sociological insights offer a critical alternative to the pervasive myth of pure meritocracy often associated with competitive civil service recruitment.

The UPSC in India and the Guokao in China are formally accessible to all, yet achievement in both systems is fundamentally shaped by unequal access to cultural capital including linguistic proficiency, familiarity with bureaucratic discourse, interview confidence, quality education, access to coaching, and urban exposure. In the Indian context, candidates from metropolitan middle-class backgrounds often possess these resources prior to preparation.

Analogously, in the Chinese context, Guokao candidates frequently leverage advantages derived from urban residency, elite university networks, and fluency in the political vernacular required by the state, treating these advantages as individual achievements rather than structural prerequisites.

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, the durable dispositions cultivated through family upbringing and socialization, is highly relevant to this dynamic in both settings. Habitus dictates how individuals articulate themselves, conceptualize achievement, and navigate institutional frameworks.

We can draw on Rodrik's theory of premature deindustrialization to explain the UPSC exam craze in India, which is driven by a shortage of stable jobs. We then use Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital to explain the emergence of the civil service exam craze in China, a case where the country's industrial sector continues to absorb labour. The shared trait of uneven cultural capital

distribution in the two countries verifies Bourdieu's core logic that habitus shapes individual demands.

Not only does this help explain the reason for the continued existence of civil service examinations, but it also provides a framework within which such phenomena may be researched. Rodrik's focus on structural scarcity draws our attention to economic realities, whereas Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital helps us understand the sociological dimension to the candidates' experience. To address both these issues, our study makes use of a comparative approach involving narrative analysis and survey data.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

- This study adopts a comparative qualitative research design to examine how social background, economic conditions, educational experiences, and perceptions of state employment shape civil service aspirations in India and China.
- The research combines primary qualitative data from Indian UPSC aspirants with secondary qualitative data from published interviews, testimonies & media sources concerning Chinese Guokao aspirants.

2. Sampling Strategy

- Purposive sampling was employed to select participants actively engaged in UPSC preparation.
- The Chinese case relied on purposely selected secondary sources containing first-person narratives and interviews of Guokao aspirants relevant to the research objectives. [YouTube : China Deep Dive]

3. Participant Profile of Indian respondents

Participant	Age	Gender	State	Geographic Setting	Education	Preparation Stage
P1	22	Female	Andhra Pradesh	Urban	Graduate	1 Prelims (awaiting result)
P2	28	Male	Uttar Pradesh	Rural	Postgraduate	3 Prelims (awaiting result)
P3	26	Female	Delhi	Urban	Working Professional (Graduate)	1 Prelims + 1 Mains
P4	19	Male	Delhi	Urban	Undergraduate	0 Attempts
P5	19	Male	Delhi	Urban	Undergraduate	0 Attempts
P6	22	Male	Rajasthan	Rural	Postgraduate	2 Prelims (awaiting result)

Table 1. Demographic Profile of UPSC Aspirant Participants ($N = 6$)

4. Data Analysis Method

- Interview narratives were analysed using qualitative narrative and thematic analysis.
- Themes from the Indian and Chinese datasets were compared to identify convergences and divergences in civil service aspirations across the two national contexts.

5. Ethical Considerations

- Participation in the study was voluntary and based on informed consent.
- Participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the research prior to the interviews.
- Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and participant codes.

6. Limitations

- The study is based on a small, non-random sample and therefore does not claim statistical representativeness.
- Further data could not be collected due to time constraints; consequently, the sample does not constitute a complete representation of the wider population of UPSC or Guokao aspirants.

- The Chinese data relies on secondary qualitative sources rather than direct interviews, creating differences in the depth and comparability of the two datasets.

With the help of such an approach, we can better understand how structural scarcities and cultural capital show up in the lives of candidates. The next section describes the main results of our study.

Data Interpretation

1. 1. The State as Insurance: Civil Service Aspiration in an Age of Labour-Market Uncertainty

Among Indian respondents, this risk is articulated primarily in *anticipatory* terms. P4 frames the threat as generational and technological, describing a scenario in which years spent on UPSC preparation would leave him unable to re-enter a private sector reshaped by automation: “if I spend five years from now on UPSC, I know that the corporate world will not accept me... corporate careers will be finished for us, especially those not technologically integrated... we are the first generation competing not just with humans but with technology.” Notably, this anxiety does not translate into abandonment of the civil service track but into hedging within it, the same respondent frames SSC as a way of managing the risk that UPSC itself represents: “I thought I’d go for financial stability first to motivate myself. So I am preparing for SSC, but even with this, I’m not 100% giving up on [UPSC].”

P1 articulates a comparable anxiety by drawing directly on a family member’s experience of corporate employment, describing her brother’s working hours at a US-based company – “start from the 6 in the morning and somewhere stop at 10 and then again work again 12 sometimes 2 sometimes... there is no fixed hours” and concluding that the trade-off is not worth it: “I just do not want to

invest so much of my energy for just getting 20-25k of money.” The same respondent links this directly to automation, observing that “people are randomly just firing off people... especially now that the AI has taken over.” In both cases, the private sector is not characterised as currently failing these respondents; rather, it is characterised as a domain whose future viability, in terms of either employability or quality of life, cannot be relied upon.

Among Chinese respondents, by contrast, labour-market risk is described in the present tense. C1 reports that a substantial share of his graduating cohort remained unemployed: “After graduation, how many of your classmates have found a job, many haven’t found a job,” adding that “because the economy is so bad, everyone is hoping for stable jobs,” with the consequence that “some positions have thousands, even tens of thousands of applicants.” C5 describes this present-tense failure from the inside, recounting a string of unsuccessful job interviews in Beijing in which “either the salary kept dropping or they didn’t even offer basic benefits like social insurance,” with performance targets she calls simply “impossible to meet.”

The comparative implication is that while both samples treat the state as a hedge against labour-market risk, the temporal orientation of that risk differs: Indian respondents describe a risk that is prospective, tied to anxieties about technological displacement and unsustainable corporate working conditions, while Chinese respondents describe a risk that is retrospective and ongoing, grounded in labour-market failure already experienced directly. Both, however, converge on the same structural outcome: a narrowing of perceived viable pathways such that the state becomes, in effect, the default option rather than one option among several.

2. The Social Reproduction of Bureaucratic Aspiration

A second dimension concerns the symbolic and institutional role of civil service examinations as inherited mechanisms of social mobility, mechanisms whose legitimacy appears to derive substantially from historical continuity rather than from any contemporary assessment of their actual mobility outcomes.

Indian respondents frequently describe their aspiration as originating in childhood, transmitted through family figures rather than through independent evaluation of the career itself. P2 traces his ambition to a single early exposure: “When I was in class 5, my grandfather introduced me to the word ‘Collector.’” The weight carried by that single word established long before any substantive understanding of the role’s responsibilities illustrates how the aspiration precedes, and in some sense produces, the rationale that later justifies it. P1 frames the appeal in more structural terms, describing the civil service as a permanent status outside the volatility of political fortune: “the only thing that probably could happen in India is... aiming for permanent executive, which is IAS or which is UPSC in general... we don’t have to rely on political positions.” P1 extends this into a claim about social legitimacy itself: “UPSC gives you the opportunity to move forward. If you clear UPSC and become an IAS officer, society accepts you. Any day, you can enter politics or do something else.”

The Chinese data situates this same phenomenon within a considerably longer historical frame. C2 explicitly invokes the abolition of the imperial examination system, framing the persistence of aspiration as an irony worth naming outright: “It’s so ironic, the Imperial examination system was abolished 119 years ago, but today pursuing a career in government still remains the primary pathway for ordinary families.” The analytical significance of this framing is that it positions contemporary Guokao aspiration not as a product of recent policy or economic conditions, but as the continuation of a cultural script whose institutional origin no longer exists in its original form.

Read comparatively, both samples treat the civil service examination as carrying a form of legitimacy that exceeds its current institutional context – in India, transmitted through family narrative across a single generation (a grandfather's word); in China, transmitted through a civilizational narrative spanning more than a century (a system abolished, yet still governing aspiration). In both cases, the examination functions less as a rationally evaluated career choice and more as an inherited category through which mobility itself is imagined.

3. The Price of Hope: The Political Economy of Civil Service Preparation

The third dimension concerns the resource requirements of examination preparation and the implications of those requirements for who is structurally able to participate in this mobility pathway.

P4 reports: “directly in coaching I have invested 25k, but including other resources, it would be around 35,000... I think the total economic cost by the end if I get selected will be around 3-4 lakhs... is a risk worth lakhs, but I think if you get selected, then it is more or less worth it.” P2 reports a considerably higher cumulative figure– “around 8-10 lakh... has been spent” while also naming affordability itself as the binding constraint: “not everyone can afford this dream... we belong to a middle-class family. So the coaching that is there, it is very costly. We are not able to do that much... it matters how much in which big institution you go, at what level you stay. And this matters based on your background, how your finance system is.”

P1 offers perhaps the most granular breakdown in the dataset, separating coaching fees, accommodation, and test series into distinct line items: coaching at “Vision IAS... in Karol Bagh,” costing “around 2 lakhs per year”; a single room in a shared flat at “15,000 only for my room,” with total monthly expenses running to “22 to 25k”; and a further “35,000” for test series across optional and

general studies papers. Her overall cumulative estimate of “4 to 5 lakhs...including the coaching fee and then the stay and everything” – converges with P4’s projected figure despite the two respondents having very different backgrounds, which suggests this order of magnitude (roughly ₹3–4 lakh for a single preparation cycle, scaling toward ₹8–10 lakh across multiple attempts) functions as something like a going rate for serious UPSC preparation in Delhi. P1 summarises the structural implication directly: “UPSC is something that demands external support, that demands guidance, that demands a ‘paid service.’”

The Chinese data, however, surfaces an analogous cost structure expressed primarily in *temporal* rather than monetary terms. C1 describes graduates unable to secure employment turning to further study as a parallel response— “some even applied for civil service exams or decided to pursue further studies” – a choice that, while not quantified in currency in this dataset, represents a comparable deferral of earnings and a comparable dependence on continued family or personal support during the preparation period.

A finding that complicates a straightforward “preparation reproduces inequality” narrative emerges from P5’s account of post-pandemic shifts toward online coaching. Describing his own constraints explicitly – “I have purchased an online batch because, of course, I cannot afford offline coaching centers” – he goes on to characterise the broader shift as a genuine improvement in access: “online batches were comparatively quite good, they were cheap cost in which the faculty was also good... the revolution that came in education after COVID, that everything started online... this has economically, I think, helped the students a lot.” This suggests that the economics of aspiration in India should not be treated as a single escalating cost curve, but as two coexisting and partially offsetting dynamics: a high-cost, geographically concentrated coaching economy in hubs like Karol Bagh and Rajinder Nagar, and a lower-cost,

digitally distributed alternative that has emerged more recently. The coexistence of these two dynamics, rather than the dominance of either, is itself an analytically relevant finding.

4. Meritocracy Under Strain: Competing Narratives of Fairness, Privilege, and Access

Both samples simultaneously support and critique the meritocratic legitimacy of civil service examinations, but the sources of this critique differ between the two countries.

P1, self-identifying as belonging to a socially dominant caste group within her regional context, describes a structural contradiction: “I belong to a forward cast, and then I belong to the general category... it was kind of inhibiting my confidence... what benefit did I exactly get by being in higher strata when my entire career is costing me at some point of time.” P5 echoes this from within the same formal category, framing it as a difficulty to be managed rather than an injustice to dwell on: “I belong to the general category... it is a bit difficult for the general category... chances remain a bit less... but I take it as a challenge that no, it’s not like only the general category cannot clear it.” P2 describes a separate, more procedural mechanism tied to the CSAT reform: “The CSAT issue is the biggest one for Hindi medium... Hindi medium itself gets out at CSAT. Very low percentage is able to get to Mains...because of this entire institution, you have to change your own medium in which you studied so that you can keep up with the institution, rather than the institution keeping up with you.” Both caste classification and linguistic disadvantage operate as mechanisms through which socio-cultural identities influence aspirants’ lived experiences, creating barriers to their participation and success in the UPSC examination.

The Chinese data identifies mechanisms that are, by contrast, predominantly *informal and extra-institutional*. C3 draws a direct distinction between examination success and elite status: “passing the civil service exam doesn’t guarantee you’ll become a political elite...hard work and ability doesn’t always lead to promotions; sometimes what you really need is a ‘powerful good dad’ who can help you climb the ranks.” C4 describes entry routes that bypass the examination altogether: “if your uncle is a vice-provincial-level official, he can directly appoint someone to a civil service position like hiring a driver... if you have an overseas degree, you might be able to enter the civil service system through a talent recruitment program without having to take the exam.”

The comparative significance of this distinction is substantial. Indian respondents are, in effect, contesting institutional features of the examination system, namely caste-based reservation and linguistic disparities, which they believe compromise equal competition and could be reformed through policy intervention. Chinese respondents are describing mechanisms that operate *outside* the formal system’s visibility – a “good dad,” an uncle with appointment power, a talent-recruitment side door, none of which is subject to the same forms of public scrutiny or formal reform process. This suggests that while both populations describe a gap between meritocratic ideal and lived experience, the reform pathways implied by each account differ fundamentally: one points toward formal policy revision, the other toward the considerably more difficult problem of regulating informal influence that exists largely outside the examination’s own jurisdiction.

5. The Stability Paradox: Pursuing Security Through Uncertain Institutions

In the Indian data, instability is located primarily in the *examination process itself* rather than in the eventual position. P2 describes the UPSC pattern in

terms that emphasise its unpredictability as a recurring, almost structural feature: “the paper tendency... is full of uncertainty, the whole pattern keeps changing...if you have very limited attempts remaining, you cannot do it anyway, because 2-3 attempts go into just understanding the pattern.” P1 describes a recent paper in similar terms, framing the unpredictability as a deliberate shift in what is being tested: “at this point it’s not about them testing knowledge — it’s basically testing people’s emotional stability.” At the same time, P2 draws an explicit distinction in institutional reliability between two tiers of the state: UPSC, he notes, “has credibility with it... it releases its calendar on time. It conducts exams on time” – in direct contrast to the state-level commission, where “there is also a weakness of the institution... issues of transparency and accountability come up a lot... the [UPPSC] 2024 result has been finalised, but the marksheet has not been released yet.” This indicates that “the state,” within the Indian data, is not perceived as a single undifferentiated institution but as a set of institutions of varying reliability, among which respondents actively discriminate.

In the Chinese data, instability is located primarily in the *destination* rather than the gateway. C2 situates individual aspiration within a national picture of intensifying and geographically uneven competition – “the competition in Tibet is the fiercest, with a competition ratio as high as 150:1, even exceeding that of Beijing”– while also registering doubt about the durability of the prize itself: “there are concerns that civil service positions will gradually become saturated and the scale of future recruitment may shrink.” C3 makes this concern concrete with a specific, dated example: “In Henan, the government started reducing the number of civil servants in April [2025] this year, and many positions are being cut.” The same respondent draws the conclusion that “passing the civil service exam doesn’t mean you’ve secured a stable job, it’s just the beginning of a new journey.”

The comparative implication is that the “stability” attributed to civil service employment in both countries should be understood as a perception that is, to varying degrees, in tension with the evidence respondents themselves present. In India, this tension manifests as uncertainty about *access*, whether one can navigate an examination process whose format “keeps changing.” In China, it manifests as uncertainty about *tenure*, whether a position obtained will retain the characteristics that made it desirable, given that positions are “being cut” even as competition for them intensifies.

The analysis of our findings reveals that some of the themes of scarcity and inequity are repeated, and there is an added symbolism that surrounds passing an exam. It is important to note that although these themes are present in the real-life situation of the candidates, they gain their full meaning only when put into theoretical discussion. The following synthesis will demonstrate how our analysis is related to Rodrik’s idea of structural scarcity and Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital.

Synthesis

Despite their sharply contrasting political systems, India and China display a remarkably similar pattern of mass civil service aspiration. This convergence cannot be explained by institutional similarity; the two states differ fundamentally in their political organisation. Rather, it emerges from a common experience shared by young people navigating increasingly uncertain labour markets. In both countries, pathways to stable employment have become difficult to predict, making the civil service examination one of the few remaining routes through which effort appears meaningfully connected to outcome.

In contexts marked by social stratification and economic insecurity, the state acquires a distinctive attraction not because it guarantees exceptional rewards,

but because it offers a degree of certainty absent elsewhere. Indian respondents describe barriers rooted in caste classifications and linguistic hierarchies, while Chinese respondents point to the influence of family networks and personal connections. Yet these differences conceal a deeper similarity. Aspirants in both societies confront systems of inequality, but they perceive state examinations as arenas in which those inequalities are at least visible, bounded, and therefore navigable.

Among Indian respondents, concerns surrounding artificial intelligence further reinforce this perception. Several participants described the corporate sector as increasingly unstable, citing fears of automation, technological displacement, and layoffs. It suggests that AI has become part of the broader narrative of labour-market insecurity. In this context, civil service preparation is often perceived as a more manageable risk than competing within a rapidly changing corporate environment whose future appears uncertain.

The appeal of the state, therefore, lies less in the rewards of bureaucratic work itself than in its relative predictability. Under conditions of labour-market uncertainty, civil service examinations provide a rare sense of legibility: aspirants know the requirements, understand the competition, and can prepare accordingly. It is this predictability, rather than any unique attraction of government service, that sustains mass civil service aspiration across two otherwise very different political economies.

The integration of the findings of this research using the theories of Rodrik on structural scarcity and Bourdieu on cultural capital reveals not only convergence but also divergence regarding the nature of examination cultures. It is only when the above perspective is analyzed in the context of theoretical discourse that its relevance can be fully understood. This will form the focus of the discussion below.

Discussion

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital illuminates why examinations that formally promise meritocracy reproduce existing hierarchies in practice. In India, upper-caste, English-educated families transmit not merely knowledge but habitus – an embodied orientation toward the UPSC as a natural destination. Coaching hubs like Rajinder Nagar partially equalise access to content, and the post-COVID shift toward online preparation has introduced a genuinely lower-cost alternative; yet the interview stage continues to reward register, composure, and institutional ease that accrue disproportionately to candidates from advantaged backgrounds. In China, the stratification operates through a different axis – the urban-rural divide, elite university access, and the informal currency of guanxi but the Bourdieusian logic is identical: what the examination measures as merit is pre-structured by accumulated family capital long before any candidate enters the hall. This dynamic is compounded by the pipeline structure of elite reproduction: family cultural capital filters into Gaokao performance, which gates entry into Project 985 and 211 universities, which in turn determines access to the most competitive central government Guokao positions.

The premature deindustrialisation framework explains why this competition has intensified so dramatically in the present conjuncture. India never completed the manufacturing transition: the sector's share of GDP has stagnated at 15–17% against a stated target of 25%, while agricultural employment has paradoxically risen from 44.1% in 2017–18 to 46.1% in 2023–24, a reversal of the classical structural transformation trajectory [The Hindu Business Line]. The formal private sector, meanwhile, remains too narrow and too contractualised to absorb educated graduates at scale; the proportion of unemployed youth holding secondary or higher education nearly doubled from 35.2% in 2000 to 65.7% in 2022 [The India Employment Report 2024(ILO)]. China presents a symmetrical

but distinct failure: having built its growth miracle on manufacturing, it is now auto-disrupting that base through aggressive robotisation, one in every two industrial robots installed globally is deployed in China while simultaneously suppressing private sector dynamism through regulatory contraction that eliminated over 314,600 positions among its top 500 private firms in a single year [CNBC,2025]. The consequence in both cases is an identical labour-market outcome: a narrowing of dignified, stable employment such that the state becomes, in effect, the default rather than one option among several. In China, 63% of students listed public sector employment as their top career preference in 2024, up from 42% in 2020, with a record 3.7 million applicants competing for approximately 38,100 central government positions. India's trajectory mirrors this structurally: nearly 83% of the unemployed are youth, while even elite graduates face absorption failure – two in five IIT graduates went unplaced in 2024. [The Economic Times, 2024]

What both cases ultimately reveal is that mass civil service aspiration is not pathology or cultural inertia. It is a structurally coherent response, predicted jointly by Bourdieu's reproduction logic and Rodrik's deindustrialisation thesis, to the failure of late development to produce the broadly inclusive private employment that would make the state merely one option among many.

However, through the concept of "meritocracy as authoritarian co-optation", Hanzhang Liu (2023) argues that the exam system can also function as a tool for the state to co-opt elites and suppress demands for redistribution, rather than being solely a "hedge" or "insurance" against precarity. Integrating this perspective would add depth and a critical dimension to your analysis of state function.

Although this analysis seems to adequately address these parallels, it remains limited by its focus on the hedgehog perspective, which, as discussed, provides

a rationale for candidates' motivation but undermines the role of the state's strategic role in the matter. The political aspect of strategic processes via the means of examinations is poorly developed, and redistributionary aspects are absent. However, despite the strengths of both Bourdieu's and Rodrik's arguments, an alternative perspective offered by Liu in the form of meritocracy as co-opting would add to the analysis and allow balancing the perspectives on the matter.

Conclusion

This exploratory study investigated the bidirectional relationship between social structures and economic aspirations, examining both how social factors shape civil service aspirations and how the economics of aspiration, in turn, reproduce existing social inequalities. Through narrative and thematic analysis of primary semi-structured interviews from India and secondary testimonies from China, the central argument that emerges is a cyclical one: social stratification and economic precarity generate aspiration towards the state, while unequal distributions of economic, social, cultural, and political capital shape who can sustain that aspiration and compete successfully within examination systems.

The findings suggest a striking convergence between India and China despite their divergent political architectures. In both countries, the state continues to be perceived as a guarantor of stability, prestige, and upward mobility at a time when private-sector employment is increasingly associated with insecurity, economic volatility, and, in some cases, anxieties surrounding technological disruption and AI-driven labour displacement. Civil service preparation therefore represents not merely an occupational choice but a strategy of risk management in an era of uncertain futures.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that access to this promise of mobility remains unequally distributed. In India, disparities are primarily mediated

through unequal access to economic and cultural capital, including educational opportunities, coaching infrastructure, linguistic advantages, and the financial capacity to sustain prolonged preparation. In China, inequalities appear to be shaped more strongly by differential access to social and political capital, where institutional affiliations, political networks, and perceptions of nepotistic advantage coexist alongside formally meritocratic recruitment procedures. Consequently, both UPSC and Guokao illustrate how meritocratic institutions can simultaneously function as mechanisms of selection and sites of social reproduction.

The significance of this study extends beyond civil service examinations themselves. India and China collectively account for the world's largest cohorts of graduates and increasingly shape global flows of labour, capital, talent, and economic production. Understanding why millions of young people continue to gravitate towards state employment therefore offers insight into broader transformations in contemporary political economies. Moreover, the study sheds light on the social composition of the bureaucratic pipeline through which future policymakers emerge. If access to that pipeline is conditioned by socioeconomic inequalities, then representation, legitimacy, and the outcomes of the governance become questionable.

The study is limited by its small sample size and by its reliance on secondary testimonies for the Chinese case due to time constraints. The six semi-structured interviews conducted in India cannot fully represent the diversity of civil service aspirants across regions, classes, castes, genders, and educational backgrounds. Nevertheless, the research provides a foundation for future comparative studies on youth aspirations, state employment, meritocracy, and social mobility in India and China.

Ultimately, the persistence of civil service aspiration in both countries suggests that examinations are rather social institutions through which hopes of security, mobility, recognition, and citizenship are negotiated. However, recent work (e.g., Liang, 2024; Zhang & Ji, 2023) highlights how the phenomenon ‘neijuan’ (involution) explains the extreme competition, mental stress, and devalued credentials characteristic of the 'civil service craze' in China. Yet as long as access to these aspirations remains structured by unequal distributions of capital, the promise of meritocracy will remain intertwined with the reproduction of inequality, rendering the examination not only a site of opportunity but also a site where social hierarchies are continuously legitimised and reproduced.

In the end, the existence of mass civil service aspiration in India and China shows the necessity for policymakers to come up with ways of addressing the issues of labour market insecurity and lack of access to examination preparation. Construction of more education facilities at affordable prices, reduction of costs for preparing through coaching and transparency in the recruitment process could be useful in avoiding the reproduction of inequality. At the same time, there is a need for the government to create better opportunities for employment in the private sector in order to avoid too much concentration of young people’s talent on state examinations. From the theoretical perspective, the research shows that meritocratic institutions are two-way institutions; that is, they can act as sources of opportunities but at the same time serve as spaces where social hierarchy is legitimized.

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