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An Ethnographic Account on the Perception, Ideologies and Performances of the Teachers at a Higher Secondary School in a Suburban Setting of Howrah, West Bengal, India

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Abstract: ***This article is an output of a five year ethnographic in depth research in a Higher Secondary School in an suburban setting of the district of Howrah, West Bengal, India; tries to explore the perception, ideologies, and performances of the School Teachers' who are one of the major agencies of the institutional as well as cultural settings in the context of wider world. At the same time they witnessed the changing nature of the students' perception towards learning process and the rapidly changing curriculum that effect and affect the entire school culture. Their views, opinions and perceptions are significantly important for better policies and actions for the betterment of School culture in near future are reflected by the author in this endeavour at her best.***

Keywords: School, Perception, Culture, Agencies, Ideologies

I. INTRODUCTION

Universalization of the meaning of education is quite difficult yet. Etymologically, the term 'education' comes from the Latin word *educare*, means *to raise* and *to bring up.* The meaning of education differs through groups, disciplines and periods (Ogbu, 1981). The educators treat education as a process allowing institutionalized curriculum for individual (Harrington, 1982) while the anthropologists' vision to education encompasses almost everything that is learned by the person throughout one's lifetime. It includes the knowledge, skills, values and behaviors within the specific content of the social, cultural, or group value system and also is the process by which that particular group transmits those through generations (Comitas and Dolgin, 1978). The consistency of a culture is retained through this process. Education involves all senses which enhance and grow the mental capacity of person to achieve a set of or a specific objective. It is channelized through 'regulative and operative' institutions and is perceived as "...an extremely complex set of multifaceted institutions, goals, theories, and social actors found in the home, at work, and in school settings" by Comitas and Dolgin (1978; p-165). Education, in the broader sense, is any act or experience that shows a formative effect on the mind, character or behavior of an individual. The key factors behind academic success, the studies concentrate on the words, attitudes, behavior, objects and play of students towards ceremonies, daily events, teachers, school setting, academic curriculum, learning difficulties, technology, career and others recognized as optimal for improving academic achievement (Ghrib, 2004; Akey, 2006). During the era, the scholars published sound works on classroom behavior, educational policies, tendencies of students and even the role of them in forming and reforming the culture of school from various grounds in the field of academic and applied anthropology of education (Hansen, 1982; Schensul, Borrero and Garcia, 1985; Anderson, 1989; Barnes, 1992; Hinde, 2002). This rich domain offers a number of approaches of study. Modiano in 1973 identified two foci of research in education and schooling: the school in its socio-cultural milieu and the classroom within the school. According to Bailey in 1969, the dynamics of classroom interaction and the relation of the school to its socio-cultural milieu can be understood more fully by utilizing models developed in social anthropological research. Ogbu (1981) believed ethnography on school as an academic institution may be conducted in two prime ways: micro-ethnography of school and macro- ethnography of school. Yet micro-ethnographies overlook the interrelation between schooling with other social institutions and their impact on schooling whereas Roberts's in 1971 postulation strongly claimed that the processes within classroom only be grasped after interpreting actors' cultural frames.

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II. THE OBJECTIVE

In this context, the present study tries to explain the perception, ideologies, and performances of the School Teachers' who are one of the major agencies of the institutional as well as cultural settings in the context of wider world for better policies and action.

III. RESEARCH DESING AND METHODOLOGY

The research is based on ethnographic approach and methods. The School is selected by three major reasons- the author is a former student of the school that helps to get a touch of insider' perspective and she can herself observe the changing situations of school culture in her time of thirteen (13) years back, accessibility, and geographical proximity. The selection of the participants has been conducted by using convenient and snow ball sampling method. The data has been collected by using semi-structured and in-depth case study method. The rich data has been transcribed verbatim to unfold themes of concerned, and are interpreted by using narrative data analysis method.

IV. THE FINDINGS

The teachers assume the quality of this school is better in respect to other schools of North Howrah. As per their consideration, it is a 'quality school' based on accomplishing some issues like, maintenance of school disciplines, regularity of students and teachers, providing lessons of the whole syllabus under curriculum in time, and finally maintaining considerable student strength and inter-school communication. They provide 'quality teaching-learning' in terms of acquisition of knowledge through academic performances, students' ability to response in the class and external talent tests, standard of question papers and examining the answer sheets, securing 60% and upwards marks by the majority. The findings in detail are explain under the following broad heads as themes-

A. On Academic Practice, Mannerism And Recent Tendencies Of Students

A teacher's pattern of performance is essentially grounded on her perception, ideologies and somewhat on personal experience. In terms of date of joining, there are two categories in teachers, senior and junior. In case of the school, the teachers who have joined the school since the foundation of the institution up to before the promotion of School Service Commission (SSC), are familiar as senior teachers; while all the teachers have joined the school through the commission are junior teachers, further show three categories – firstly, ex-student of this school through SSC, secondly, posted here through SSC up to five years ago and thirdly, posted here through SSC within last five years. The first category bears the ideology almost similar to the senior teachers who feel deep attachment to the aim of the school as was triggered up during the time of establishment. Since being their direct teachers, these junior teachers cum ex-students respect their colleagues cum senior teachers.

According to their perception, discipline and practice is the building block of success. A student may be weak in academic performance but she is expecting to obey the discipline and rules of the institution, and to respect the elders as well. The second category reflects more or less similar views of these seniors. As per the data, the perception and ideologies of the third category are quite different. They are accustomed with the present crisis of education i. e., the cultural circumstances. Their vision to teaching primarily is as a profession only like working in an office. Being unaware about the tradition and aim of the school they pay less attention to teach discipline to the students.

A senior teacher of the school inclined of these junior teachers in enriching human resource (i.e. regular reading and knowing) has been drastically declined. They have forgotten that they should be enriched in knowledge. Following the query of the ethnographer that "does the interest of teachers in reading has been declined after the repeated reluctance of the students in reading, that -'For whom I provide labor? To whom I expect?'.... etc.??", a senior teacher (teaches Bengali) replies very politely, "no....no...no my child..a teacher is largely responsible to provide guidance. She has no way to escape...a teacher must have the devotion to the duties. It is not a profession only. It is a vow to teacher to help and guide students in knowing and making sense. A teacher is expected to find out students' drawbacks and rectify them. As a teacher I have to think like students to teach them in their way, but having the essence of knowledge... One may not grasp it...second one may not grasp it....likewise ten may not, but eleventh has the chance to enjoy in grasping the meaning of knowing...this 'one' will be the asset of future...this 'one' will bring other ten heads in the light of knowledge...here lies the success of being teacher."

She pauses for a while and explains again, "....by providing less importance in learning English the government generates an 'educated' group having superficial knowledge in English, hardly having the efficiency in writing English but having high marks in the subject.....they somewhat lacked the chance to overcome their faults in learning, similarly their teaching can't make up the faults of the students.

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B. Present Academic Practices

Most of the teachers believe strict discipline kills the childhood of the students but student-hood always needs to learn minimum mannerism of school. This mannerism is being damaged due to accumulation of high rates of first generation learner in the institution. A senior teacher of school-A mourns, "Alas!! These girls now run for external gorgeousness.....they hardly bother about internal beauty. Now they are very adamant, non-obedient.....and beyond discipline. They forget that anything to develop solely necessitates discipline, practice and sincerity. Declining sincerity in everything leads to decreasing the quality in education. They live life without having any ideal. I am shocked following that they even are reluctant to rectify their mistakes on class notes even after checking it. The aim of the school has been wiped out among recent generations...it is very unfortunate that the tendency of students in knowing and understanding has been decreased enough. Their concentration is now in grasping only the 'notes' provided by the private tutors.... notes' like 'readymade tablets'...just like quinines, sugar-quoted quinines....recovering fever but is not bitter...means students will pass the subject....achieve high marks but after providing comparatively small time.....(concentrating on the recorder) can you follow me??? They are impotent to understand if the fever is recovering from the base or not...they follow only the symptoms which become cure by pills."

After few second of pausing she recounts her feeling, "...the students passed out at least 10-15 years ago, having the quality to assure 50% marks is equivalent to securing 80-90% marks of the present students." All most all the teachers continuing service at least 10 years at this school echo that the students are going through havoc changes specially throughout last five years (the work has been conducted in 2010- 2011), none of which was appraisable by the teachers. There are several factors like- motivation and influence of private tutors and parents, Withdrawal of punishment and effect of mass-media, easy access to social network site, private tuition of school teachers, students' inclination towards self-centrism, paying less value to celebrating special events at school, problem in teaching in class XI –XII, poor response of guardian in guardians' meeting, and composition of students makes the presence and probable future of school.

Finally the teachers argued that except a very few with well behaved, the attitude of majority of the students gradually was becoming so ungraceful, vulgar, non-obedient, hardly serious about issues, selfish, undisciplined, '*uncultured*', uneducated, arrogant and despaired. And they showed pre-matured adolescence behaviour in maximum case. The most miserable change of the students to the teachers is disobedience of students which hurts them. This scenario, according to majority of the teachers except a few enjoying teaching till date, shrinks their views of devotion to teaching and they tend to treat it as duty. They regular attend school and class, deliver brief and routinized lecture to complete syllabus under curriculum in time, have Tiffin, perform scheduled academic and administrative responsibilities and run for home just after dissolving the school hours. Due to high job dissatisfaction, they learnt to not to bother about the students' crises.

C. On Evaluation

None of the teachers of the school greet the current system of evaluation and blame it for declining quality of education in this school. They face some challenges and inconveniences due to this system of unit test. The teachers are always in hurry to complete the syllabus of upcoming unit test within short duration of 1-1.5 months. The rush of examination restricts time to provide class work of 55-56 students (in each section) or to check the notebooks of class work or homework, or even to memorize the lessons thoroughly. The pressure of examination compel to look forward without exercising the style of reading, writing, thinking, remembering, and applying that learning in reality. The fact generates a great problem of students in preparing the whole syllabus just before the annual examination. Literally it silently shrinks the skill of remembering the whole syllabus at a time, makes students incapable to attend broad question, left no time to utilize teaching aids or to practice activity-based learning to promote interests, creativities and learning new issues.

Practice of writing objective type answer generates writing difficulties. Generally except the serious students the majority fixes their target in achieving pass marks in examination, when it is 40 they aim to secure 40 and when it is 25 they set aim accordingly. It minimizes the glory of performance of the teachers.

Being designed to promote gross incorporation of children into elementary school education it is incompetent to provide individual care and/or remedial learning for the students with learning difficulties. In spite of identifying such students the teachers can't overcome the problem due shortage of time. Similarly the rush restricts satisfying the intellectual requirements of best to good category students. Unfortunately, such practices are misinterpreted by the students and parents as the '*inadequacy of teaching-learning processes*'. Side by side, the regulation of remedial test seriously damages the academic practice of the 'poor' students and severely affects the standard of the school.

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D. Threats Faced By Teachers

1) *Shifting Reliance on Private Tutors (PT):* Mentioned content generates inconsistency among the increasing pressure of homework, excessive pressure of preparation for examinations and to collect high scores in the examinations. Gradually the fact stimulates the stigma of teacher by labeled as '*inefficient'* by the students, parents and others related to academics. It further leads the students' dependency on PT to understand the subject-matter and to secure better marks in examinations. The first generation learners thus have to solely rest on PT. Through times, the blind relying on PT provokes the children to lose the sincerity about the teachers and teaching of school. They learn to nurture negative emotions (misbehavior, negligence, disobeying) towards teachers, the problem of which increases with the succession of classes.
2) *Indebtedness Concerned to Examinationine:* Teachers have been instructed by WBBSE to diminish drop-out, encourage regularities and to enhance potential of students in anyway, otherwise the failure would be identified as the failure of the teachers not of the students. In reality when the teachers examinationine the sheets of class V-X neutrally, only 15% of them in each class passes in each subject, while being informally being pressurized the teachers give maximum marks to promote all most all the poor students in next class. It makes them overconfident to take teachers and teaching so casually. According to a teacher of school-A, teaches Bengali, "few days ago I was checking the examinationination sheet of a girl....became shocked that the sentences were incomplete and the quality of writing was very poor. But surprisingly she collected 40 marks by accumulation of 1 or 1.5 marks in each question. And it was more shocking that after going through this tradition of short question, four girls failed....they even could not gain the pass marks..... But we are employees under this system, so we have no right to select minutely (she can't veil her grief).....and we are forced to giving qualifying marks to the students."
3) *Dissatisfaction of Job:* such the objective based question generates dissatisfaction of teacher since lacking the degree of assessing the acquisition of knowledge through subjective answers. Again the excessive pressure of examinations decreases their creativity and sincerity to teach.
4) Allegations *of Parents Against Teachers*: Even being facilitated by the regulation of withdrawal of pass-fail the students, identified as 'lost cases' by the teachers, gradually promoted up to class VIII, but become threatened seriously in class IX which restricts promotion in next class even after being failed only in one subject. They exemplify the case of 2009 that, 79 heads (out of 134 students) became unable to promote in X due to fail in any subject, specifically in mathematics. The fact was that, even being unsuccessful in mathematics in each year from V to VIII, they got promoted in next class due to the approval of consideration of best of four/five subjects among the seven/eight. As a result the bases of maximum of the less serious students remained very weak in basic subjects like, mathematics, English and sciences. But the fact appeared to the parents as an instance of teachers' inefficiency, biasness and negligence about their children. Both the emotional and physical violence of offended parents set the teachers in corner.

E. Threats on the Notion of Examination

1) *Even In Such Looseness Of Evaluation System, Some Students Unable To Secure Pass-Marks:* Moreover the projection of oversimplification of questions in both general tests and remedial, monotony of repetitive tests, great chances to accumulate high scores attending objective questions, withdrawal of any sort of punishments etc. threats the notion of removing fear of examinations and challenge the existence of examinations. In case when a student becomes unable to achieve pass marks after each two units, one remedial test and the obtained mark was calculated as double to maintain the parity of total score. Then they got advantage with better scores in respect to others who secured pass marks but not performed well in first chance. Containing 'very very easy question with the expectation to be answered' as per the merit level of the '*below standard*' students the glory of remedial tests became under question.
2) *Threat of Summative Examinations:* The familiarity with primarily objective type questions covering few chapters associated with short duration of examination made it problematic for the majority of the students of all kind in facing– (1) the comprehensive and explanatory questions, (2) the long duration of annual examination led to fail patience, (3) it encouraged the memorization rather than understanding, and (4) the habit of avoidance of comprehensive questions created great problems in higher class since IX.
3) *Operational Inconvenience in Accommodating Tests:* The scheme instructed the school to arrange unit tests in the working days (one/two subjects in each day) of the scheduled month at students' own classroom, specified for their regular academics to provide an anxiety free familiar circumstance. But the reality found it hardly possible to accommodate in daily classroom. For the operational convenience the school authority routinized three dates (three different subjects held in a day) for examinations only within the scheduled time. As a result the students faced extreme problems to prepare three unrelated domains in each day.

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Additionally, like regular classes all the students of particular sections took seat, two/three heads in a bench following their class role numbers. Such crowd in a bench used to impede in concentration and enhance chances to copy one another. Thus examinations faced challenges by various propositions, appeared '*illogical*' and '*unaffordable*' to the context. After providing the remedial classes before/after school hours, the teachers got surprised that hardly one/two heads attended the class when 34 out 55 of them with learning difficulties were identified. Following investigation the teachers explored all the students attended their scheduled private tuitions as they left no more dependency on school.

F. The Consequences Of This System Of Unit Test

The positive outcome of the scheme is to collect score easily and to decline of drop-out. Each unit covers very few chapters, made the study and examination so stress-free. The most favorable aspect of these tests is to enjoy with high score providing little concentration. They relish answering short question. It satisfies the intention to decrease the drop-out rate at school that, it experienced 6 drop-out cases in 2001-02 and 2 in 2010-11.

The teachers of school-A admit that, this system is beneficial for securing high marks i.e. increases the quantity of literates but never fruitful to enrich and/or sustain the quality of education. In old curriculum when they used to go through two terminal and one annual examinations, the except the 'good', all the mediocre and poor students were found to perform 'very' weakly in 1st terminal examination due to their initial aloofness in studies. Then maximum of them found to improve to some extent in 2nd term. But in annual examination, almost 100% of them were promoted with comparatively better marks to the next class. Thus three terms examination system was highly effective for the students of all categories. Under the new regulation, five times tests makes the students fatigued and reluctant. Such process of evaluation hampers the regular academic practices severely and damages the ability to think independently, the ability to learn and write in their 'own words'. Here, the studious and serious girls concentrate on studies by their nature and collect high marks under such way of assessment but the 'poor' students superficially manage to collect comparatively better marks than that of before but remain unable to gain knowledge. It deteriorates the performance of average students. Generally this school used to consist of 25% 'good' and 35% 'poor' students and maximum (40%) average students in terms of academic performance which shifted to 10% 'good' and 25% 'poor' students and maximum (65%) average students but with less accumulation of knowledge due to this system. In sum, this system promotes 'matter-less' promoted students habituated with providing minimum input (learning) and securing maximum output (marks). It intends to increase the number of the literates in census where the quality is being compromised. The teachers find them helpless and vulnerable that after realizing the reality they have nothing to do except following generalize rule and to clap on 'high scores'. The serious and student-friendly teachers grieve that, "there were more we desired to teach the child to enhance potential….. But we are bound to give nothing..". The students become paralyzed due to spoon-feeding; their capability and interests are being killed like slow poisoning. The junior teachers claim that it is a way to destruct the emotion towards learning, teachers and even examinations. It makes them more self-centered and detached from classroom learning.

Resultant dependency on Private Tutors tends to generate creating new mode of inequality. Keeping '*the pressure of examination*' in front, the game of transformation of economic capital (of parents) into cultural capital (of child) indirectly encouraged the inequality in the class between the facilitated and guided student (through performing better) and the un-advantaged one. Therefore, the teachers experienced another challenge to deal with two extreme poles of learners in such short duration and the notion of diminishing inequality experienced severe threat on such secular ground like education.

Following the norms of the WBBSE there should be a scheduled life-style class, encompassing the learning of some essential features of everyday life, solving problem of early adolescence curiosity, discussion of common problems of life and more over the tactics of make life beautiful. But the rush of the repetitive examinations destroys the essence of life-style classes and preserved for completion of the pending work of the lessons for the next test. The pressure and rush of examinations made the students hardly liberal to show interests in participation the cultural programme and co-curricular activities which was an integral part of learning. Thus the cultural occasions arranged on special days faced challenged due to lack of audience s and participants.

Thus the gaps between the operations and not the process but the proposals brought several unavoidable difficulties in reality the consequences of which made the participants sufferer on the ground of academics. The teachers and students of school-B, C and D are quite satisfied with the regulation of unit test system. It enhances the chance of accumulating high marks in each examination, diminishes the frequency of drop-out and increases the quantity of promoted students at least up to Madhyamik examination. The teachers recount that except the monotony of preparing question and checking answer sheet repetitively, this regulation is solely fruit full for their students. It enhances the prospect of these schools.

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V. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Having acquaintance with all the senior teachers of school, it becomes possible to the researcher to relate the contexts and nature of classroom learning, their style of teaching and interacting, and ways of controlling the students. It makes the interpretation easy to the researcher. The students of class V, VI, and VII, do not tease behind the teacher whom they dislike. But the students of class VIII – X clearly clarify the 'effective' and 'non-effective' teachers of school and never hesitate to express negatively about the 'boring' teachers. They claim any monotonous topic of any colorless textbook may appear as highly interesting by person like the English teacher; otherwise a 'boring' teacher must be criticized from the possible dimensions. Contrarily, the students of class XI and XII are found to be more concrete in their liking and disliking, that they directly ignore to attend school according to the preferences of the favourable teachers. In sum, the influence of the teachers (may be positive or negative) prominently found on the students from V to X, but never on XI and XII, who are highly influenced by their private tutor as per the data reveals.

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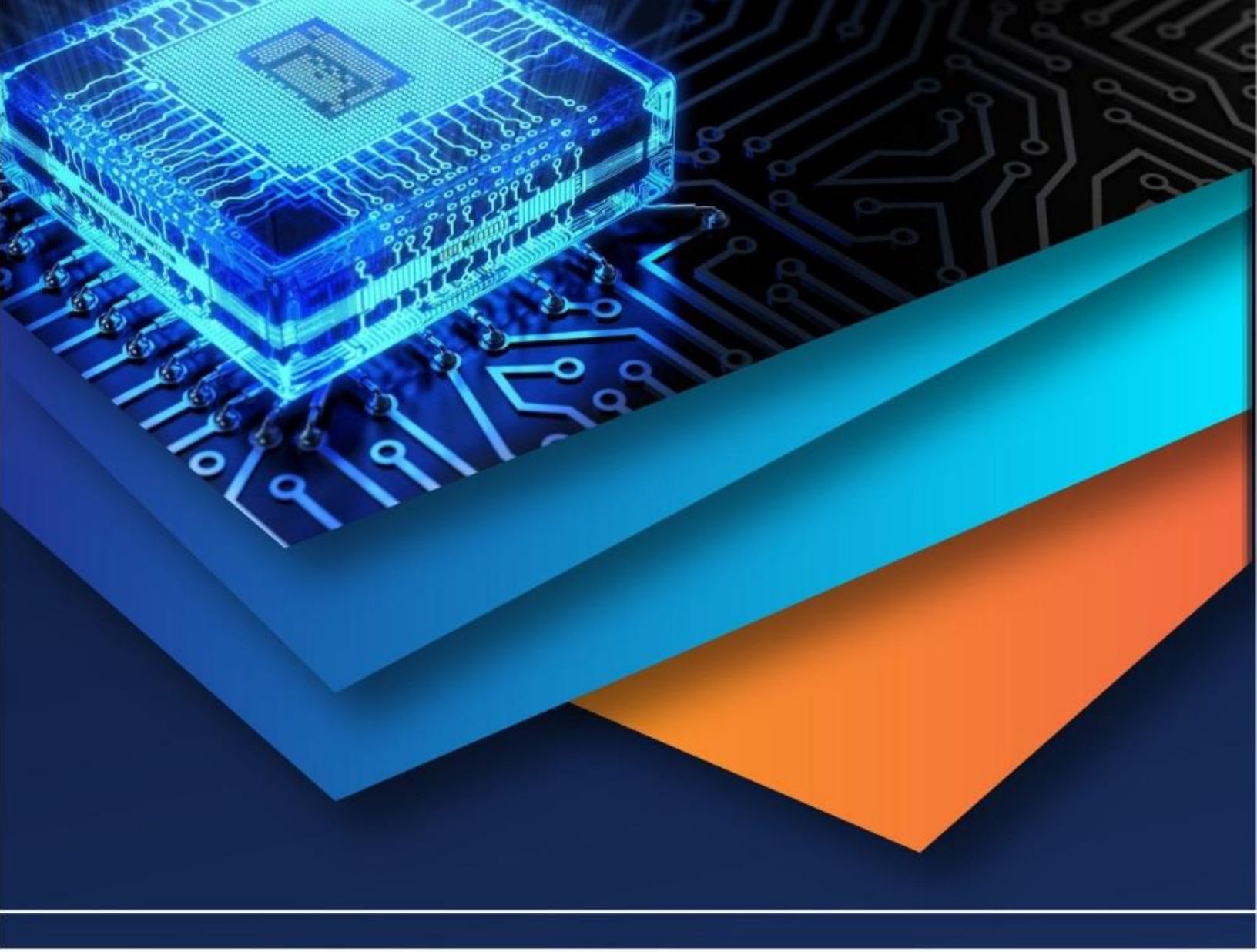

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