

THE STRUGGLE FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION: ACTIVIST NARRATIVES FROM INDIA

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to explore and analyse constructions of public education amongst Left-leaning education activists in India. This discussion highlights the adverse impact of two decades of pro-privatisation education reforms on entrenched educational and socio-cultural inequalities. It also provides a preliminary mapping of the scope and substance of social mobilisations in the domain of public education. This discussion is grounded in my ongoing research with the All India Forum for the Right to Education (AIF-RTE): a nationwide network of organisations and individuals engaged in collective struggle to protect and strengthen public education. I explore a multiplicity of activist representations about public and private education as well as their 'imaginaries' about the transformation of educational and social inequity. In addition to positing education as a site where subaltern groups engage the capitalist state, I show that activists construct knowledge in different ways depending on the contexts and relationships in which knowledge production occurs.

Introduction

Approximately one in four people in India fall into the category of school-aged population (aged between 6 to 24 years) (GoI 2008). The Government of India claimed to have achieved universal primary education by the end of the last millenium (on the basis of primary education enrolment data). However, completion data and the disaggregation of national statistics by caste, class, and gender paint a different picture about what is happening in our schools. Disaggregated statistics reveal a multi-tier or hierarchical education system in which caste,

class and gender determine access to quality education. Relatedly, the data shows disproportionately high drop-out rates amongst poor and subaltern social groups including: Dalits, derogatorily referred to as the Untouchables and part of the Scheduled Castes in official demographic classification; Adivasis, (indigenous communities referred to as Scheduled Tribes); Muslims, girls, and rural students.

Within the first three groups, less than 10-15% of students reach tertiary education on average. This data points to the enduring nature of institutionalised inequality in Indian schools and society as well as the questionable commitment of the capitalist developmental state towards establishing an equitable and just system of public education.

In a scathing 2012 essay entitled ‘Capitalism: A ghost story’, Indian novelist Arundhati Roy writes that “the capitalist development model has exacerbated the unequal distribution of wealth, environmental destruction, as well as inclinations towards individualism, unapologetic consumerism, casteism, sexism, communalism¹, and territorialism”. It is in this context of shrinking collective or public spaces that my research on social mobilisations is located. In this paper, I explore and analyse constructions of the relationship between schooling and social inequality amongst activists engaged in collective struggles to strengthen and expand public education. These

¹ In the Indian context, communalism refers specifically to conflicts between religious groups, particularly between the majority Hindu and minority Muslim communities. See Bénéï’s (2008) study of schools as sites for the production of exclusionary nationalisms and Krishna Kumar’s writings on education and conflict in India more generally.

activists are members of a progressive coalition called the All India Forum for the Right to Education (AIF-RTE). Many of them are also part of other ongoing and interlinked struggles for economic and cultural justice related to the commodification and exploitation of natural resources (water, land, forests etc.) and discrimination and violence against subaltern groups including women, Dalits, Adivasis, disabled, religious or linguistic minorities, women, transgenders, as well as displaced, migrants, nomads, and denotified tribes (AIF-RTE 2012). In addition to positing education as a site where subaltern groups engage the capitalist state, I show that activists construct knowledge in different ways depending on the contexts and relationships in which knowledge production occurs. This discussion focuses on understandings and representations of unequal education amongst activists and the implications for building a social movement in support of free and quality public education.

I come to this research project as an intersectional and transnational feminist migrant academic. I am currently located in Australia but was born, raised, and schooled in India and completed PhD studies in the USA. My search for alternatives to capitalist development first led me to the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil (Thapliyal 2006) and South Africa (Thapliyal, Vally and Spreen 2013). I ‘returned’ to India when I learned about the AIF-RTE in 2007; one of the few spaces within Indian civil society to initiate a sustained campaign for free and equitable public education. Through the internet and on my visits home, I began to contribute to AIF-RTE mobilisational activities in the western state of Maharashtra in 2007 (through

translation support, website support, street protests etc.) In July 2012, the AIF-RTE asked me to present a paper at their All-India Conference about struggles for public education in Brazil (with a focus on the MST, the Landless Workers Movement) and the United States. At this conference, I met activists from Karnataka Jan Shakti (KJS, Karnataka People Power) who invited me to visit and document their stories and experiences. I spent three weeks living with members of KJS in central Karnataka in January 2013. On their request, I made multiple workshop-style presentations about the MST as part of the ongoing systematised internal educational processes of KJS. Some of the data presented here comes from conversations with KJS activists who were nominated to speak to me - all are leaders of a kind within the organisation. All the activists rejected anonymity and requested that I inform as many people as possible about the work of KJS. I also draw on relatively more formal and shorter interviews with members of the national leadership of AIF-RTE recorded in the past year. These interviews are part of another commitment to construct a systematised history for the AIF-RTE. I provide this background information about the activists and myself with a view to situate the analyses presented here.

Cultural politics of education: Quality for a privileged few

An in-depth history of inequality, the cultural politics of public education, and social mobilisations in postcolonial India is beyond the scope of this paper. In this section, I encapsulate this history

using a 'broad strokes' approach with a focus on the historical relationship between the developmentalist state and subaltern groups - at the national level and in the state of Karnataka.

The Indian state which emerged from the nationalist struggle was a 'coalitional' state (Kamat, Mir, Mathew 2004) where the state drew its mandate from multiple forces. They included mainly Hindu, male, upper-caste and class elites alongside a mobilized stratum of subaltern communities that constituted the struggle for Independence. This coalition dissolved by the end of the sixties with the demise of the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru along with his particular vision for a scientific, socialist and liberal India. By the mid-eighties, the Indian state had abandoned any pretense at redistributive, anti-poverty and social equity-oriented policy in favour of structural adjustment for an unregulated market economy. Ray and Katzenstein (2005) posit that meaningful anti-poverty politics have been successfully displaced by nationalist, pro-market voices and only endure in some spaces within women's, environmental, and Dalit movements.

The education system has always been controlled by upper caste and class elites. Independence from British rule did little to change the established multi-tier system in which children of the colonial and indigenous elite were mainly schooled in exclusive urban private English-medium institutions and to a lesser extent, in a small number of well-funded government schools reserved for the children of civil servants and military personnel. Access to these two groups of schools continues to be highly restrictive and thus central to

the reproduction of social status and opportunities for social mobility. (In other words, neither the public nor the private education sector is homogenous.) The education system as a whole reflects the segregation and stratification produced by interlinked structures of caste-class-gender-geography and maintains the hegemony of the ruling class which today includes the new and aspiring middle-class(es) (Fernandes 2006).

The practice of 'quality for a privileged few' was first legitimised by educational discourse centered around interlinked agendas of human capital and nationalism / national security; and, more recently, by global capital-oriented discourses of macroeconomic stability and managerialism². Progressive tendencies and alternative discourses to colonial and capitalist education by indigenous thinkers such as Gandhi, Tagore, Aurobindo, as well as those inserted by globalisation (e.g. Right to Education, children's rights) have been symbolically evoked by the ruling class for legitimacy purposes and otherwise ignored (Kumar 2006). In 1986, the National Plan of Education officially institutionalised the unequal multi-tier system by promoting privately delivered, nonformal, low-quality educational programmes delivered by untrained and underpaid instructors under the flagship of DPEP (District Primary Education Programme), designed and funded by the World Bank (and other international agencies)³. Other so-called targeted initiatives

² Unlike many other developing countries in this region of the world, India spends roughly as much on her military budget as she does on her education budget – both in terms of GDP and national budget (Tomasevski 2006)

³ Less than 5% of educational budget comes from external assistance but international development agencies and discourses like Education for All enjoy disproportionate amount of influence in policy making . See for example the Tribunal on World Bank at <http://www.worldbanktribunal.org/education.html>

through 'public-private partnerships', included Model Schools and Hostels (residential schools for marginalised girls and SC/STs) that promised to deliver high-quality education to meritorious students in so-called backward areas. With a few exceptions, these programmes have been poorly implemented and have failed to significantly impact out of school children as well as completion rates amongst subaltern groups (Probe Revisited 2006; Saxena 2012). At the same time, the wholesale abandonment of government schools created conditions for the entry of a new actor - budget or low cost private schools which have mushroomed across the country in the last two decades. Since the government has steadfastly evaded demands to regulate the unaided private sector in any way, nobody knows the exact number of these schools let alone conditions within these schools (Mehrotra and Panchamukhi 2007).

One of the most recent formulations of state withdrawal has taken the form of urban municipalities handing over administration of government schools -wholesale to non-governmental organisations funded by a mix of corporate foundations, external donors, and local philanthropic societies (Kumar 2008). In addition, since 2010, the Congress Party-led central government has been trying to pass six Parliamentary bills in support of the privatisation of higher education. These reforms are intended to establish a legal framework that will invite global investment in keeping with the offer made by the government to the World Trade Organisation (WTO)

before the Doha rounds⁴. In summary then, the distribution of quality education can be imagined as an inverted, multi-tiered pyramid topped by a small group of exclusive private schools and selective government schools described previously. However, the vast majority of Indian children who live near to or in conditions of extreme poverty face a choice-less choice between barely functioning government schools, unregulated budget private schools, and nonformal education

It has taken more than sixty years for the government to provide a legal guarantee for the right to education. An in-depth analysis of the Act is not possible in this paper but I will identify a few key limitations. First, from a human rights-based perspective, the notion of rights in the 2009 Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act (hereafter referred to as the Act) is much diluted (Thapliyal 2012). For example, it only guarantees access for children aged 6 to 14 years. Moreover, it only guarantees access, not quality education for all. Instead of the expansion and improvement of government schools, the primary vehicle for universalisation remains nonformal education through SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Education for All), a repackaged DPEP. From a critical perspective, the Act is problematic because it reifies the gap between exclusive private schools and government schools and continues to perpetuate the discourse of quality education for a privileged few. Specifically, the Act requires private schools to reserve 25% of seats in Class 1 for poor and socially disadvantaged

⁴ In 2011 market-analyst reports by Anand Rathi and KPMG put the total value of the Indian education market between US \$ 45 - 50 billion. See also the recent collection of essays edited by J.B. Tilak (2013).

children living in the neighbourhood of the school. In what appears to be remarkably similar to ‘school voucher’ initiatives that have failed in the USA (cite Klees), the government will pay private schools the same amount of money which would have been spent on the child in a government school. The government has asked private schools to ‘bear’ the extra cost (or the wide gap) of educating these children as a form of social responsibility. The potential of this particular reform for remedying the equity gap can be questioned on multiple grounds beginning with the dis-connect between the number of recognised private institutions and the number of disadvantaged children. If we put the present reality of wide variations in quality aside, we must still engage with the historical relationship between private schools and these groups. That is to say, the majority of private schools have historically shown little inclination towards meeting their social responsibilities even when legally tied to the receipt of state subsidies (Juneja, 2005); and as I will show, their response to the Act continues to be dominated by resistance.⁵

Although one of the better performing states on economic and social development indicators (Gok, 2006), education in Karnataka reflects the same characteristics of exclusion and inequality found across the country. In a population of 53 million people (5 per cent of India’s total population), disaggregated data reveals that poor women,

⁵ Other significant reforms include the abolition of all examinations except at the time of school-leaving; the introduction of minimum norms and standards for recognition of all schools and teacher qualifications as well as child-friendly pedagogy and curriculum. In addition to studies cited here see also the Pathways to Access (PTAs) monographs produced by the Consortium for Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE-NUEPA). - <http://www.create-rpc.org/publications/ptas/>

Scheduled Castes (16% of the state population), and Scheduled Tribes (7%) have not enjoyed the fruits of the 'hi-tech' boom that has brought the state global attention ⁶. According to the Karnataka Human Development Report (Gok, 2006:312-313), there are significant and widening gaps in terms of education and income attainment between these three groups and the rest of the population.

The ruling nexus in Karnataka today consists of entrenched elites consisting of Hindu upper-caste and class, urban, English-speakers and the relatively new elites from landed peasant castes - the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats who are officially classified as Backward Classes . Readers should note that Caste groups classified as 'backward' are distinct from those classified as Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe but they also benefit from affirmative action policies - also known as reservations - some of which were introduced in colonial India. The landed peasant castes of Karnataka constitute one early such instance of a disadvantaged group that was able to organise to oppose Brahminical control over the colonial state apparatus. Through political mobilisation, they were able to get themselves categorised as Backward Class and therefore eligible for reservations and other forms of state subsidies and support (Kamat, Mir and Matthew, 2004). However, their critique of the caste system did not include discrimination against Dalits. This may help to explain - partially- why Dalit and Adivasi populations continue to live in extreme poverty and exclusion in a state with 200 years of reservation policies that have benefitted

⁶ Some readers may be familiar with India's Silicon Valley - the city of Bangalore which accounts for 40% of India's software exports (GoK 2006).

other historically marginalised groups (Manasa, 2000).

Since the late nineties, state-led development has been overtly oriented towards the rhetoric of economic globalisation through a discourse of IT-led growth, privatisation, efficiency, and competitiveness (Sarangapani and Vasavi 2003). Karnataka was one of the first states to secure very large loans from the World Bank in return for structural adjustment reforms; and, one of the first states to pilot the World-Bank funded DPEP in 1994.⁷ Since then successive state governments have promoted the neoliberal development model by slashing public sector spending and borrowing money to meet their social obligations (Sarangapani and Vasavi 2003:3406). The World Bank continues to be an important actor in state education policy and has influenced other reforms including standardised student assessment practices and state-corporate partnerships for education delivery.

AIF-RTE and Karnataka Jan Shakti: Mobilisations for the improvement of public education.

The AIF-RTE is a coalition of educators, public intellectuals, concerned citizens and organisations who advocate for the expansion and improvement of the public education system. AIFRTE was officially constituted in 2009 in response to the Act. Constituent members are located in 19 different Indian states and include community-based

⁷ See Sarangapani and Vasavi (2003) for an explanation of the indirect and informal ways in which the World Bank influenced every aspect of DPEP from funding norms to teacher training, textbooks, measurement of learner achievements, and programme evaluation as a whole.

organisations, not-for-profit NGOs, and student and teacher unions. While specific goals and strategies are state- and context-specific, key elements of the common platform set out in the 2012 Chennai Declaration include: expansion of public provision of quality basic education to include early childhood and secondary education; significant and progressive increase in spending on public education; opposition to the privatization of education; and the creation of a common or neighbourhood school system to bridge the growing economic and social divide (AIF-RTE 2012). While the AIF-RTE strives to be open and inclusive to all those interested in protecting and strengthening public education, it has articulated one condition for membership: members cannot receive foreign funds tagged with neoliberal policies (Interview with Ramesh Patnaik, January 8 2012).

As I have previously mentioned KJS is a member of AIF-RTE. It also consists of a coalition of progressive organisations active in the state of Karnataka for several decades. Efforts to build KJS were initiated in the mid-2000s in response to the intensification of privatisation and communalisation in the state when the right-wing Hindu fundamentalist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, Indian People's Party) came to power. After a year of intensive, state-wide consultations and deliberations, the coalition platform was formalised at a conference in Bangalore in February 2012.

An Approach to the study of Activist Narratives.

This analysis begins with the premise that public education in capitalist society is a site for contestation. For the capitalist state, mass education serves dual and contradictory functions: the enhancement of capital accumulation as well as maintaining the legitimacy of the democratic capitalist state. The legitimacy function of mass education helps us to understand why the domain of public education in capitalist societies is imbued with relatively greater openings and possibilities for transgressive participation by subaltern groups (Torres, 1990; Shirley, 1997; Anyon, 2005; *Rethinking Schools*, 2012).

In order to study social mobilisations, I adopt a cultural politics approach wherein the constructions of meaning and representation embedded in activism are understood as inherently shaped by culture as well as political and economic interests (Alvarez, Dagnino, Escobar, 1996). As is pointed out by social movement scholars Jeffrey Rubin (2004:107) and Wendy Wolford (2010:31), in order to understand how political actors form, how social mobilisations work, the places where politics occur, and the meanings that lie at the heart of political conflict - you have to ask the people who join mobilisations. Since neither mobilisations nor activists are static, stories are likely to change. Even stories that seek to essentialise the movement or activism in any sense, are fluid and contingent on multiple interests, time, space, and place (Rubin 2004).

I also draw on the work of Francesca Polletta (1998; 2006) who argues that the relationship

between activist stories and politicisation is complex. Activist narratives as situated in socio-historical contexts and cultures of story telling. As such, these stories hold the potential to expand contestation by rendering 'the familiar strange'; and also sometimes to constrain possibilities for protest because they are unable to go beyond culturally proscribed rules about story telling.

Finally, I use the words, stories, narratives, accounts, and testimonies interchangeably here to refer to activist representations of themselves and their lived experience. Relatedly, I use official and everyday knowledge communicated to me by the activists. I think of official knowledge as what is communicated to me by those in formal positions of leadership as well as positions adopted through formalised internal processes and manifest in movement writing/documents. Everyday knowledge refers to representations of lived experience and location - both considered and unthinking - that emerged in interviews with all the activists.

As other contributors to this journal Special Issue have argued, social movements are sites of knowledge production. Activist narratives constitute one of the many ways in which individuals make meaning and collectively construct and disseminated meaningful knowledge. The stories activists tell are integral to their own politicisation as well as wider politicisation processes within the movement. Therefore, I do not present these narratives with a view to making simplistic cause-effect linkages between story and action. Given the above, I approach activist accounts as representations of oppositional consciousness that have individual meaning - as well as strategic acts of

counter-story telling that challenge dominant representations of reality and are relevant to the collective goals of the movement.

In the next section, I explore the different ways in which AIF-RTE activists responded to my question: Why are you in this struggle for public education? I begin with activist testimonials about lived experiences of educational and social exclusion. The following section examines activist accounts and analyses of the impact of pro-market education policies in Karnataka and the country as a whole.

Personal experiences of government school

Personal experiences of government school featured in several activist narratives - in Karnataka as well as amongst members of the national leadership who were schooled in other southern Indian states⁸ in the sixties and seventies. In this latter group, government schools were represented as institutions that provided quality education in students' mother tongue and enabled individuals to overcome other disadvantages such as a rural background. For example, Professor Haragopal, a founding member of the Andhra Pradesh Save Education Committee that has opposed privatisation for more than two decades, remembers his schooling as providing him with the skills to succeed in a competitive system.

I come from a rural background. I completed Higher Secondary education in a village school

⁸ Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala are typically referred to as southern states.

in Telegu medium [which is] my mother tongue. Then I moved to Hyderabad to do my graduate and post-graduate studies. When I look back our village school was good and somehow we could compete in this competitive system. (Interview with Professor Haragopal, February 2 2013).

Another member of the national leadership schooled in north India, Professor Anil Sadgopal devoted a significant part of his narrative to describing his part in reforming the teaching of science education in government schools in the central and impoverished state of Madhya Pradesh. His efforts to introduce experimental or 'hands-on' methods of teaching science eventually led to a comprehensive transformation of science curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in the state and beyond ⁹. For Sadgopal, it was important to make the point that government schools did have the capacity to improve given adequate support and resources from the state (Interview with Professor Sadgopal, January 8 2013).

The narratives of KJS activists schooled in the eighties to the present day stood in stark contrast to these positive representations of government schools. The following excerpts point to a pervasive and entrenched culture of discrimination against Dalits and women particularly those living in extreme poverty and/or in rural areas.

Kamla was in her mid-twenties and had lived her entire life in one of the poorest slums in

⁹ He is one of the founders of the Hoshangabad Science Center in the seventies and later Eklavya in the eighties - two highly-respected non-governmental organisations that worked intensively with rural and poor government schools to make curriculum and pedagogy more active, relevant and meaningful.

Mandya. She was married with two children aged six and three years. She first became an activist as a teenager to speak out against the violence against women in her family and community. Now a full-time member of KJS, she has also participated in other protests including those against communalism and the destruction of forests by multinational corporations. In her short life, she has witnessed domestic violence, been beaten up by the police at street protests (including during the time she was pregnant) and gone to jail on suspicion of being a terrorist associated with the Naxalite movement. She is much admired by her KJS comrades for her fearlessness and leadership abilities despite her petite stature. However, talking about her experiences in school was the most emotional part of her interview.

When Kamla was in primary school, her family went through very difficult times. Their father abandoned his wife and children leaving her mother to support the family. Her grandmother was ill and needed medicines that cost Rs 500-600 per day. There was not enough food in the house for them to take to school for lunch. She remembers being so hungry that they would eat pieces of coal that had fallen on the ground from railway wagons. Their teachers would stop them and share their own food with them. Some even offered to send her to a hostel but her mother refused to let her go. Eventually she left school to help her mother. She took care of the household while her mother went to work. After a year, one of her teachers came to talk to her mother because she was a good student. She was able to go back to school for a year. But she stopped for good in Class 6 when her grandmother's condition

worsened. (Interview with Kamla, January 19 2013, translated.)

Despite showing academic ability, Kamla had to discontinue her education to help her all-female household survive. Her story speaks to the enduring linkages between gender and extreme poverty which combine to restrict educational access and opportunity for girls. Although Karnataka has relatively high rates of female literacy and school completion compared to most other Indian states, these aggregated statistics conceal the persistence of embedded patriarchy and sexism. This disproportionately disadvantages the educational opportunities of extremely poor girls from subaltern groups.

Another activist nominated by KJS to speak to me was Siddharaju - a Dalit man in his mid-thirties. He sat down to talk to me with hand-written notes prepared as he listened to my conversation with one of his comrades. Through the translator, he told me that he would prefer to tell his story first and then answer any questions I might have. He considers himself a full-time activist and member of the KJS. He is also President of the Slum Dweller Federation in his hometown of Mandya and resident in one of the poorest slums in the town. In addition, he works daily as a loading worker - someone who loads and unloads trucks and other forms of heavy transportation. His story began with how his experiences in school played a direct role in his journey towards becoming an activist.

In 4th standard, Siddharaju started to question casteism, untouchability, and the inequality between his family and others. It made him angry. In school, he was separated from other students.

This made him think about why there was a difference between himself and the other students. His teachers told him to clean toilets and dirty drains. They made him miserable. His peers did not treat him this way but the teachers and village elders abused him all the time. So he left his village and came to Mandya town to study. He refused to go back to the village with his parents even though his grandmother pressured him. He felt comparatively better. There was less of the village-kind of casteism in Mandya. But he had to leave school in Class 7 because his father was a drunk. He had to work to pay of the loans and debts his parents had accumulated. He did construction work, toilet cleaning, all kinds of “downtrodden work” and earned Rs 900 per month . He gradually paid off the debts totaling Rs 50-60,000. Then he contacted the main DSS (Dalit Struggle Movement) person in his neighbourhood and began to participate as an activist (Interview with Siddharaju 17 January 2013, translated).

However, as previously discussed, caste-class social hierarchies are reflected across the education system. Higher education is a key area for KJS youth activists, many of whom are currently first-generation college students themselves. Many but not all are also Dalit. Here, one of the youth leaders, Krishnamurthy describes a recent campaign to reverse a state government decision to stop subsidies for university examination fees which primarily affected low-income and SC/ST students.

Examination fees range from Rs 850 in government colleges and Rs 3000 in private colleges. Without the scholarships, poor

students cannot sit for these exams. We [the youth activists] visited campuses in 3 cities and were given permission to talk to the students. We gave a 5 minute presentations about the order and distributed pamphlets. We also organised lamp-light marches which were attended by 70 to 150 people in each city. The government revoked the order after 26 days including one week when we organised daily protests. (Interview with Krishnamurthy, 16 February 2013)

In the next section, I discuss a broader range of state pro-market policies that have exacerbated educational and social inequality in Karnataka.

Educational politics in Karnataka: Caste, class, and market

KJS activists spoke to other manifestations of the marketisation and commercialisation of education in Karnataka that they have had less success in opposing. Mohan who has been an education activist for several decades provided the following historical sequence of events:

English education started with liberalisation. In each taluka [district], one or two convent [schools] came up for better-off students in rural areas. Then private schools appeared everywhere. Even sheds are being converted to schools in rural areas, And the students are leaving government schools for so-called English education. Now only very backward, Dalits and girls come to local schools. Two years

ago, the state government decided to close 3800 Kannada-medium schools in the name of education and opportunity. And to start Model Schools in all talukas - English-medium schools run by the government. We (KJS) took the position closing schools is a blow to the people – they have to be educated and in their mother tongue. This way the government is forcing parents to send children to English schools. Instead the government should be training more teachers to fill the vacancies. But first the parents abandoned the schools and then the government. (Interview with Mohan, January 4 2012)

Mohan identifies the deliberate ways in which the state has withdrawn from the provision of education and created conditions that promoted the entry of private actors. The closure of rural schools is integrally connected to the teacher shortage - a crisis that began to build in the eighties - a period of stagnation for development in Karnataka (Vasavi and Sarangapani 2003). Structural adjustment conditionalities that restricted the hiring of government school teachers (and expansion of the public sector) intensified problems with teacher quality, recruitment, and retention to a point where the state was able to close schools using the rhetoric of economic efficiency, choice and merit.

We are also fighting with the BEd/DEd organisations¹⁰ for two things: don't close the schools and recruit more teachers. There are seven lakh teachers in Karnataka. We worked

¹⁰ Teacher education institutions

with them - about 50000 teachers in solidarity for one year in 17 districts. Because if you recruit teachers students will come to schools. But the government has not responded. Particularly the BJP government. In the last four years, they have recruited only once. (Interview with Muthuraju, January 20 2013).

Thus, the role of the state in privatisation of the education sector takes the form of both deliberate action and inaction. At the same moment that rural schools were closed, it opened Model Schools in so-called backward districts; government schools with selective admissions procedures supposedly based on merit (as opposed to equity). The terminology of developmentally 'backward' districts exposes underlying and pervasive assumptions of deficit that are associated with extreme poverty, Dalit, and indigenous communities. Moreover, the haphazard implementation of these Model Schools in Karnataka belies rhetorical references to equity. Media reports indicate that these schools are reported inside government schools, staffed by contractual teachers, and yet to receive any of the 'special' facilities (Deccan Herald, September 6, 2012¹¹). In 2013, despite poor conditions and low enrolments, the state government announced it would open more schools in backward blocks. The schools will be administered by selected private entities and charge fees for students in Class 8 and upwards (New Indian Express, March 27 2013¹²). It would appear here that the rationality of state provision of 'quality

¹¹ Retrieved <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/276985/an-adarsh-school-only-name.html>

¹² Retrieved <http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/karnataka/article1518910.ece>

for some' has been replaced entirely by the imperative of privatisation.

Teach English: Colonialism and cultural capital

As I have previously discussed, access to English-language education has always mediated access to socio-economic mobility in India. In independent India, the state and ruling classes have steadfastly regulated access to English and related forms of cultural capital¹³ that distinguish the privileged lives of the 20% from the other 80%. Rooted in colonial education, debates about language of instruction have not diminished in independent India. Historically, a multi-lingual region¹⁴, the post-colonial state of Karnataka has been the site of particularly intense contestations around official state language(s) as well as medium of instruction. The state government declared Kannada the 'sole' first language in 1982 and has allocated significant resources to the revitalisation of this language particularly through educational institutions. The introduction of mandatory instruction in Kannada has prompted opposition (including legal action) from a diverse range of groups. Simplistic representations of the debate tend to position pro-Kannada traditionalists against pro-

¹³ These include not only fluency in English language fluency but a certain pronunciation and a vast amount of related classed cultural knowledge. For an in-depth discussion of the ways in which schools produce classed identities, subjectivities and opportunities, as well as the lengths to which differentially positioned (by caste, class, gender, rural) social groups go to acquire cultural capital, see the growing body of ethnographic research in Chopra and Jefferey (2005) and Baviskar and Ray (2011).

¹⁴ Languages spoken here include Maratha, Urdu as well as Kannada. A relatively little known fact is that Kannada-speakers are not a numerical majority in the state. It is however the language of the politically dominant Lingayat peasant caste (Gavaskar 2003).

English, urban, middle-class ‘modernists’. However, for KJS activists like Mohan (quoted previously) and Muthuraju (below) the language debates are about caste as well as class.

We are against privatisation and commercialisation of education. We are fighting for a common school system, for a real education - not an education to serve the capitalist system. Mother tongue instruction is a very big issue in Karnataka but there are a lot of ideological differences in our coalition. So we [KJS] are focusing on fighting against commercialisation and building public sector schools. (Interview with Muthuraju, January 20 2013)

While KJS, as a coalition, has avoided taking sides in the language debates, member organisations are free to engage as they deem necessary. Thus Muthuraju, as a Dalit youth activist, has also participated in ‘Teach English’ mobilisations:

“In Mandya we protested for “Teach English Well” in front of the VC’s office [we laugh]. Many students said this is very good we will join you. We want to learn good English so that we can pass exams. So many students fail in English in Mandya. For example [points to his friends and laughs]. I just passed. I get good marks in Kannada, History but I dont get above 40 in English.”(Interview with Muthuraju, January 20 2013)

Dalit activists have actively sought Western-style, English-language education as the road to individual and social emancipation for over two centuries¹⁵. In Karnataka, they occupy a range of positions on the language debates, not least because not all Dalits in the state speak Kannada as their mother-tongue. Pro-English Dalits argue that in an education system that has always controlled by upper-castes, English is the only way out of extreme poverty and social disadvantage.

Moreover, the necessity of English has become even stronger with structural adjustment reforms that put an end to recruitment to the public sector which formed the backbone of the state economy. Readers should recall that affirmative action policies do not apply to the private sector. Even though the opportunities in the public sector tend to be restricted to the lowest (and menial) government positions, the private sector prefers not to employ SC/STs at all (Manasa 2000; Teltumbde 2008). Thus, English-language proficiency functions as a proxy for quality education, and continues to determine life trajectories and whether members of subaltern groups are able to break out of the vicious cycle of poverty and discrimination. Siddharaju provided this eloquent description of the structural roots of inequality.

“All the labourers live in slums and slave in the city for rich people. Carpenters, construction workers, scavengers, domestic servants,

¹⁵ Under the guidance of their leaders who include Jyoti Rao Phule - a 19th century social reformer, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, and more recently, Chandra Bhan Prasad.

loading workers, plumbers, painters, street vendors, drain cleaners. They don't have proper wages. They can't save money. they don't get treatment in government hospitals... This society has removed education far away from labourers and scavengers... Children of labourers and scavengers become labourers and scavengers without proper education. The system is changed by privatisation. Poor people cannot go to private schools because they don't have money. If you don't have money you can't go for higher education. That is why they are far away from education.” (Interview with Siddharaju 17 January 2013, translated)

It is in within this complex context of the cultural politics of English-medium instruction that we can situate the official AIF-RTE (2012) position on medium of instruction. While recognising the role played by English as a language of colonisation and social stratification, the AIF-RTE does not rule out the teaching of English. The Chennai Declaration (AIF-RTE 2012:13) advocates for a ‘multilingual environment’ where multilinguality refers to proficiency in the “the languages spoken in the child’s neighbourhood, kinship, and family” and for greater support for linguistic minorities including Adivasi, Braille and sign language(s).¹⁶ This articulation resonates with the perspective that language and the medium of instruction are not just debates about cultural identity and social mobility but also complex fields of social power (Anderson 1990, in Fernandes 2006).

¹⁶ For a more detailed statement see the AIF-RTE Discussion paper on Language and Education prepared in January 2011 for a national workshop on this subject.

Building a movement: The challenge of demystifying private schooling

In the previous section, Muthuraju provided an example of the way in which English proficiency functions as a barrier to successful completion of higher education for Dalit students. In the following excerpts, members of the national leadership comment on the connotations between English-medium instruction, quality education, and private schools.

Professor Haragopal remarks on the strength of this perception amongst all Indian parents despite the complex reality that private schools, particularly low-cost private schools differ widely in terms of quality. He also identifies the challenge of changing these perceptions as central to the mobilisational efforts of the AIF-RTE.

There are powerful market forces. Education is most lucrative. No investment is required except land and building. You can just advertise and start making money. They may not have infrastructure but they can advertise, government schools cannot. People make choices based on information they have according to rational choice theory. There is no way for the public sector to compete with private schools. Not all private schools are better. We have done a research study about who does well in government schools and who doesn't. What we noticed is not public-private difference but where the mother is educated, the child does well. But private schools are

taking the entire credit for the educated mother. Government school teachers are highly qualified but lack infrastructure. So you have to demystify the private sector. But frankly I don't think we have succeeded. Parents think private school and English language is better. They think they can go to America and earn the dollar. Otherwise they will be confined to the local. These are external factors but they are critical. People trust us but we don't have so much information to make a difference. So the challenge is what we do when public opinion is so hostile to the public sector (Interview with Professor Haragopal, February 2 2013).

Prof. Gupta, a historian by training, concurs and provides a socio-political context to understand the social construction of these perceptions.

The whole idea of a public-funded system of education is something which people really expect, understand, appreciate and are ready to struggle for. But when they reach that level – that moment only comes when you can explain the whole issue to them. How historically speaking we are at a diametrically opposite contrast – where earlier even things which were not brand government were always despised. And now anything that is government is inefficient. How that scenario has evolved is something people do grasp – but it needs explanations. It is not just a class phenomenon– a mass phenomenon. (Interview with Professor Gupta, February 2, 2013).

The language used by both of these intellectuals suggests that the way forward for the AIF-RTE must include transforming public discourse around government schools. More specifically, as Gupta articulates, the movement must support subaltern groups to articulate their demands and vision for free high quality public education. I have all ready provided a historical overview of the cultural politics of public and private schooling in India and identified some of the forms of cultural capital required for social mobility – in addition to credentials. I will now briefly examine the most current version of the ‘quality for some’ approach as constituted by the 25% reservations mandated by the 2009 Act.

Four years after the passage of the Act, elite/exclusive private schools steadfastly continue to delay and undermine implementation of this clause. Implementation was first delayed by a legal battle which concluded in a 2012 Supreme Court ruling that required all private schools (except religious minority schools which include exclusive private residential or boarding schools started by Christian missionaries) to implement the reservation policy immediately. Two years later, elite private schools continue to turn eligible students away. The level of discourse within this domain of society is such that private school principals have gone on record in the media to disparage, ridicule, and otherwise undermine the reservation policy. Perhaps it is no coincidence that one of the more notorious examples of derogatory remarks comes from the President of the Karnataka Unaided School Managements’ Association (KUSMA) (The Hindu,

July 20, 2012¹⁷). The role played by local education bureaucracies in abetting this willful lack of compliance must also be noted. The vast majority of unaided private schools remained unrecognised and unregulated and few state bureaucracies have made meaningful efforts to disseminate the Act.

These forms of outright hostility and discrimination have not yet dissuaded relatively disadvantaged parents from trying to give their child a better education notwithstanding the social and emotional cost to families. Needless to say, the majority of parents who have the confidence and know-how to challenge private school - bureaucracy nexus - do not come from the poorest subaltern groups. Nevertheless, these are the complex cultural and political conditions in which the AIF-RTE has undertaken to transform 'brand' government or discourse on government schools. They have decided to do so by formally adopting a multi-tier strategy through the 2012 Chennai Declaration. This strategy has evolved out of sustained processes of internal consultation and debate about the situated ways in which educational mobilisations have emerged across different parts of the country.

The Chennai Declaration identifies every part of the education system from 'KG to PG' (preschool to university) as an area of struggle. It also encourages members to mobilise simultaneously at the micro- (individual schools, districts etc.) and the macro-level (state, central government and international actors). What is relatively new to the movement narrative (as represented by official documents like the Declaration) is an explicit stance on

¹⁷ Retrieved <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-karnataka/dss-demands-action-against-kusma/article3660763.ece>

transforming educational processes as a whole. In addition to the medium of education, the Declaration (AIF-RTE 2012:12-14) discusses curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher education in varying length for the first time:

Discrimination and exclusion takes place not only because of the prevalence of a multi-layered school system but also because of the nature of the dominant curriculum and pedagogy. Rooted in middle class and upper caste values and norms, especially patriarchal, the curriculum and pedagogy are entirely alienated from the social reality, life experiences, and ways of learning of the vast sections of society... and increasingly influenced by the requirements of the global market...The Constitutional values ...call upon the state to engage with hegemonic influence of class, caste, race, patriarchy, language, and 'normal' body while formulating the curriculum...wherein the plurality of values, knowledge, productive skills and lifestyles of "We, the People" would have legitimate space for influencing, tilting, and eventually transforming the school in their favour...it is imperative that a new kind of teacher would have to be prepared who would be culturally transformed to relate with the children of the downtrodden and dispossessed classes and castes, especially girls and the disabled, with dignity and respond to ... the challenge of drawing upon their life experience and knowledge in the classroom.

Conclusion

Public education is always enmeshed with other policies because education issues are always about society's normative pressures; the basic problems of schools reveal and are caused by crises in the system at large (Anyon 2005; Quinn and Meiners 2009:9). In summary, I have presented a partial and situated picture of the historical 'juncture' in which the AIF-RTE is situated and situates its activism for public education. Individual activists articulated their constructions of public and private education from a range of vantage points including personal experience and movement-sanctioned ideology(s). Activists based in Karnataka provided a day-to-day account of their systematic exclusion from the fruits of capitalist development. Activists in the national leadership spoke to their motivations for joining the struggle and their assessment of the strategic challenges facing the AIF-RTE.

Together, these narratives provide a partial mapping of the depth and breadth of educational exclusion and inequality in India. They also identify the developmentalist state as a key but not the only actor and enabler of the reproduction of cultural and economic discrimination. In response, the AIF-RTE has set itself the challenge of redressing unequal education through economic redistribution as well as claiming cultural recognition and relevance for subaltern groups.

The coherent, unified narrative here stops here as the movement grapples with the challenge of building a mass movement in a deeply privatised political and educational culture. The AIF-RTE is

attempting to claim guaranteed rights from the state as well as frame new claims that disrupt existing social hierarchies. It is thus engaged in the work of constructing new imaginaries about education and development. How precisely it will do so remains to be seen. The scope of its vision combined with conscious efforts to construct an internally democratic and pragmatic politics of engagement 'from below' as well as 'from above' bode well for the future.

From my perspective as a researcher of anti-privatisation mobilisations, it is precisely this sense of ambiguity and fluidity that imbues this particular space for mobilisation with power and possibility. While there is a long history of critique, dissent, and alternatives within the domain of Indian education, the AIF-RTE is attempting to build organised dissent against capital and colonisation in a way that we have not seen (Kumar, 2006). Moreover, it is doing so in a political milieu where anti-capital(ist) and anti-imperialist politics have been significantly diluted and fragmented. In his analysis of short-lived urban mobilisations, Ravi Kumar (2008) takes hope from any mobilisation, however 'small and effervescent' given the power and control exercised by the hegemonic forces of liberalism and private capital through state and non-state institutions. The AIF-RTE is neither small nor effervescent.

It is not my intention to romanticise or otherwise simplify these mobilisations. Or the politics of studying these mobilisations. I do hope that this discussion has provided some situated insights into the strategic and particular ways into movements as discursive spaces with a multiplicity

of meanings and meaning-making processes which support contestation.

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