

Primary Education in India: Empowerment of the Marginalized or the Reproduction of Social Inequalities?

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Although major progress has been made with regard to school education in India in the last two decades, access to quality education is still highly uneven. It can, hence, not be assumed *a priori* that school education is capability enhancing. It certainly is for some children, but for many others it remains a disempowering and dispiriting experience. Is education in India, hence, mainly a system that reproduces already existing social inequalities?

It is this question that has been at the centre of our work during the last few years. In two Indian States, Andhra Pradesh in the south and West Bengal in east India, we have done extensive fieldwork to find out how social inequalities are reproduced in Indian schools, but also how that is contested in different ways.¹ We explored this theme at various levels, ranging from the educational system as a whole and the policy level, to the classroom and the textbooks. This paper cannot do justice to all these processes, mechanisms and counter currents that exist at various levels, but it will summarize some of the arguments.²

The paper starts with a short review of two broad schools of thought regarding the social role and purpose of education: one that sees education as a tool for social domination and control, and the other that regards education as a liberating force and a correlate of social justice. After framing the debate with the help of these two alternative positions, we will proceed with three sections that discuss the Indian situation. The first focuses on the hierarchies and divisions that exist between different kinds of schools; the second analyses how teaching and learning processes themselves help to reproduce social inequalities between children within one and the same classroom; the third describes some of the anomalies and counter currents, particularly focusing on some forms of civic activism that work towards a more equitable school system. The paper concludes that both interpretations outlined at the beginning are, indeed corroborated. Schools reproduce social inequalities, but it is also possible to find examples that illustrate how education

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² For a more elaborate discussion and analysis, see Majumdar and Mooij (2011).

can contribute to empowerment of the marginalized. In other words, while the school system and its underpinning values serve primarily the reproduction of an unequal social order, the possibility of processes doing exactly the opposite is not foreclosed. The argument that we make in the last part of this paper is not just that both perspectives are relevant and that it is an empirical question which of the two is more practically adequate in explaining a particular situation. Rather, we stress that it is in a social process that education is *made* a tool in the reproduction of an unequal social order, or an instrument that advances freedom and social justice – or something in between.

1. Education as Control and Education as Freedom

There is a rich literature on the idea of educational development, its political purpose and the practices of advancing it. Many scholars, using diverse theoretical perspectives, have framed these issues in different ways, and have developed different interpretations as well as normative and political positions. There is no way in which this section can do justice to this debate. At the same time, as a way of framing this paper, it is useful to start by contrasting two broad schools of thought: one that sees education as a tool for social domination and control, and the other that regards education as a liberating force and a correlate of social justice. The proponents of the first view hold that the purposes or promises of education are not straightforwardly benign or equitable, let alone the policies and institutions that claim to actualize them. This view foregrounds the power structure within which educational programmes, institutional delivery, and even the education discourse are framed and highlights the processes through which education is rendered as a tool of cultural and ideological domination. The advocates of the second view, on the other hand, see mainly benefits – intrinsic and instrumental – of education. At the individual level, education leads to an expansion of human capabilities. This may be liberating or empowering; it may also lead to more job opportunities and a higher income. Collectively, this expansion of human capabilities can lead to benefits such as, for instance, a healthier population, economic growth or a more democratic society.

The first school of thought includes seminal writings by Apple, Bourdieu and Passeron, Bowles and Gintis, Illich, Kumar, and Willis. In different ways, these authors argue that educational institutions play an important role in the reproduction of an unequal social order. They prepare children/students to become workers in a hierarchical and stratified capitalist production process (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977). Schools discipline and control, and therefore make young people lose their capacity to think and act independently (Illich, 1970). They define what is valuable knowledge, and hence ‘whose knowledge is of most worth’ (Apple, 2000; Kumar, 1991). Because they impose the same standards and criteria to all students, they not only reproduce but also justify existing inequalities, exactly because it is much easier for elite children to meet these so-called objective, neutral standards than it is for children of less privileged backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

The second school of thought, drawing upon authors such as Nussbaum and Sen, regards education, in principle, as a positive force. Nussbaum (2005, 2008) and Sen (1999,

2009a) have conceptualized education in terms of human capabilities. Being knowledgeable and having academic skills is itself a capability that can enrich people's lives. Apart from that, education is important for the expansion of other capabilities. Being well-educated helps people to make better choices with regard to nutrition and health; it can also help them to participate more meaningfully in public debates and democratic processes. Good and just societies, according to these authors, should therefore contribute to the expansion of the capabilities of all people – irrespective of gender, caste, class or other divisions. For Sen, capabilities do not necessarily lead to certain outcomes. His point is, rather, that they open up possibilities, and therefore create more freedom, to decide what kind of life one values and wishes to live. Education, in this approach, is hence fundamentally linked to both social justice and freedom. This capability framework goes well together with the idea of education as a human right. Because education is so important for developing human capabilities, every child has a right to decent education – irrespective of whether this education pays off economically.³

Implicit in these positions about the social function and purpose of education are different conceptualizations of the role of the state. The idea of education for social and political control focuses squarely on the power dynamics operative within and around the state apparatuses. The education policies of the state are, therefore, not considered to be straightforwardly positive or even neutral. Instead, it is argued that apparently egalitarian policy rhetoric and actions to spread education for all are usually fraught with contradictory intents, and even if not, are bound to have outcomes that are basically reproducing the status quo. The idea of education as a progressive force, on the other hand, assumes a more benign state working more or less in the general interest, or in any case the possibility that societies, through a process of democratic deliberation, can decide what kind of schooling they value, and how that should be provided.

Both perspectives have limitations. The first view, focusing on control and hegemony, is often somewhat silent about whether and what kind of counter-forces may emerge – say, in the form of public action or policy activism. It assumes not only that education is a powerful tool for socialization into a given social milieu or position within that milieu, but also that state institutions have the capacity to shape and mould educational institutions to the extent necessary. In other words, the hegemonic potential of educational institutions is taken for granted, and the possibility of counter-hegemonic forces remains underemphasized and under-theorized. The capabilities framework, on the other hand, may lead to a somewhat unsuspecting and benign view of the role of the state or the democratic process. This framework comes with a risk to take insufficient notice of the power dynamics operative within the education apparatuses, in its policy framing and in the processes of implementation. So, while dominance may be taken as sheer predominance in the first school thereby foreclosing any possibility of a democratically

³ A more difficult question is whether education should be a compulsory right. For adults, the idea of compulsion clearly goes against the idea of freedom. For children, however, since their ability to make well-informed decisions about their own well-being is more limited, 'compulsory education makes perfect sense from a capability perspective', according to Robeyns (2006:79) – provided this education is of high quality and meaningful.

informed school reform, the second may easily overemphasize the feasibility of such transformation.⁴

Having outlined these two contrasting positions, the paper now moves on to the Indian context. Which of these two perspectives is primarily supported by empirical evidence?

2. Diversities and Hierarchies within the Indian Schooling System

On our trips to village schools, it sometimes happened that we saw groups of young children in school uniform waiting at the bus stop. They were on their way to another school, outside the village. Gradually, it became clear to us that there is a large group of children who commute on a day to day basis to a nearby town, or who live with family members elsewhere in order to attend a school outside their village. In urban areas, we came across families with different children admitted in different schools, or children who had been taken out of one school to be admitted in another one. School choice is, hence, an empirical reality: there is a growing number of schools, which has led to a diverse 'supply' – with schools varying in terms of provider, medium of instruction, quality, reputation and cost.

Diversity itself is, of course, not a problem. What we are interested in here is whether, and if so how, these diversities produce hierarchies between different types of schools and inequalities in access to quality education for different categories of children. In other words, is the educational regime only internally variegated, or also segmented and divisive?

One of the main distinctions between different types of schools has to do with their management: schools can be run by the government; they can be government-aided; or they can be private. Schools in the first category are publicly financed and managed by the government, i.e. the state government, the district administration or an elected body at district or lower level. Government-aided schools receive maintenance grants from the government, but are privately managed with varying degrees of government intervention. Private schools are privately managed and usually financed on the basis of fees or corporate grants.⁵

⁴ We must admit here that our interpretation of the two perspectives is only one of the possible interpretations and hence not beyond scrutiny. More importantly, the two overly simplified perspectival archetypes that we present here do not fully capture the nuances that scholars on both sides introduce to their main arguments. For example, Apple, Kumar, and Willis take due cognizance of the factors that can challenge, if not neutralize, the hegemonic potential of education. Sen, on the other hand, alerts us to be wary of social and economic divisions that plague the school system when he writes (2009b:16) that '[s]chooling can be a major force in breaking down class barriers, and we have to be especially careful that instead of doing that, the education system with differential facilities does not end up perpetuating the rigidity of class boundaries'.

⁵ By far the majority of all school-going children at the primary level still go to government (including local body) schools. In 2008-09, this was still 74 per cent (NUEPA, 2010), while about a quarter of the children would go to government-aided or private unaided schools. The number of, and enrolment in, private unaided schools is, however rapidly increasing. Moreover, in reality, the number of private schools and the number of children enrolled in private schools is considerably larger than what most statistics show.

The first division between different categories of schools, hence, is whether they are publicly or privately managed. In reality, however, this distinction between public and private schools is not only about management: it is also about medium of instruction, school costs (and therefore exclusiveness) and resources/facilities. Most (though not all) private schools claim to offer English-medium education. All charge school fees; many offer better or more up-market facilities (libraries, air-conditioning, etc.) than government schools. And, finally, teacher absenteeism is lower and classroom activity often more intense than in many government schools.⁶ All this does, however not mean that private schools are always of better quality than government schools.⁷ The diversity within both categories is so large that such generalizations are unwarranted. Moreover, such assessment also depends on one's conceptualization of quality. There is, however, no doubt that private schools are generally *perceived* as of better quality than government schools, and that many parents would prefer to send their children to private schools if they would have the opportunity. In our research, we came across very negative expectations of government schooling held by people who have no first hand experience whatsoever. Similarly, it has also been reported that parents who do not have any first hand experience with private schools are convinced that these are superior to government schools. Subrahmanian (2006:69) refers to this as the 'culturally hegemonic language around the failure of government schools'. We may fear that this language itself can have an effect on expectations and school choice, and thereby might become a self-fulfilling prophesy. In any case, there is little doubt that these perceptions themselves, irrespective of their accuracy, create already a hierarchy between different types of school.

Further divisions exist within the public and private school categories. Within the private sector, there are schools which are fully recognized by the government (actually a school board), and there are others that are partially or fully unrecognized.⁸ The latter category of schools often cater primarily for relatively poor families. They are often referred to as Low Fee Private (LFP) schools: their fees vary usually between Rs. 50 and 150 per

This is because most official surveys only include schools that are recognised by the government, while there are a large and increasing number of unrecognised schools. On the whole, these schools are more concentrated in urban areas than in rural areas, but there is no doubt that they are also coming up in several rural parts of India. According to a national survey in 20 States, about half of all private rural primary schools would be unrecognized (Muralidharan and Kremer, 2006). Another study in seven districts of Punjab revealed that about a quarter of the approximately 10,000 schools was unrecognized (Mehta, 2005: 8).

⁶ See, for instance, Muralidharan and Kremer (2006), Shukla and Joshi (2008:60) and Shiva Kumar et al, (2009).

⁷ Several studies are very sceptical about the quality of private schools, especially of private schools that cater for the poor. According to Shiva Kumar et al (2009: 92), these schools 'are not very different from government schools'. According to Shukla and Joshi (2008: 60), these schools tend to concentrate on the more visible dimensions of quality: colourful and freshly painted classrooms, continuous activity in the schools, claims of English-medium instruction, homework for the children (even when they are very young). These authors refer to these features as 'staging education' rather than as expressions of real quality.

⁸ Separate recognition is required for sections 1-5, 6-8 and 9-10 in Andhra Pradesh, and 1-4, 5-8 and 9-10 in West Bengal. It may, hence be that schools have a recognised primary section, but that their high school section is unrecognized.

month.⁹ Many of these schools are small, with less than 20 children in class 1-4 together. They are sometimes run in one or a few empty rooms of the house of the owner. The school principal and the owner are often the same person. Despite the low fees, and although officially profit making in education is illegal, these schools are run for profit.¹⁰ The salaries of the teachers in many such private schools are very low, often between Rs.500 and Rs. 1000 per month. Teachers frequently top up their income by giving tuition classes, sometimes to the same students as they have in their regular classes. These schools often have an overcapacity, and they compete for children with each other and with government schools. Government schools are free of costs; these LFP schools are not. The reputation of the government schools is, however, often so bad that the LFP schools have an immediate advantage. Other factors that give LFP schools a competitive edge over government schools are that the former claim to offer English-medium education and that they admit children at a much younger age than government schools do.

The recognized private unaided schools often cater for a different clientele, namely the children of the middle class and elite. The fees in these schools can vary from, say Rs. 200 per month to Rs. 8000 per month. In addition, there are often additional costs, including (compulsory but illegal) donations to the schools. School uniforms are obligatory, and many of the children also attend coaching classes or individual tuition before or after school hours. At the top end of this category, we find some very well endowed so-called international schools, with large campuses, swimming pools and other sport facilities, AC coach services to and from the school, sometimes with residential facilities. These schools are for the upper classes, and children of non-resident Indians. The salaries for the teachers in many of the schools within this segment are higher than in the LFP schools, but only 30-50 per cent of what teachers earn in a government school.¹¹ Like the LFP schools, also these middle class and elite schools operate in an intensely competitive environment. Unlike LFP schools, however, they do not have to compete for students. In fact, they can be choosy themselves. Quality and reputation play a large role in this competition. This expresses itself in a concern about exam results and a subsequent effort to restrict admission to students with good academic potential or competences. Most of these schools therefore conduct an entrance exam, even when children are admitted at LKG or UKG level. Sometimes there is also an interview with the parents, in which the educational background and social milieu of the parents is assessed.

Also the government school system is internally diverse. The main distinction here is that there are regular schools that fall under the responsibility of the department of education, and there are 'informal', 'bridge' or 'alternate' schools, for tribal children, in areas in

⁹ As a rule of thumb, low fee private schools are sometimes defined as schools whose monthly fee is comparable to a day's wage of a daily labourer (e.g. Muralidharan and Kremer, 2006). There are approximately 50 Indian rupees in 1 US dollar.

¹⁰ Tooley and Dixon (2003, 2005), who investigated the profitability of 15 LFP schools in Hyderabad, concluded that the average annual surplus of these schools came to more than Rs. 200,000 (almost 5000 US dollars, about 3200 UK pounds). This was 23 per cent of their income.

¹¹ Moreover, in some of these private schools, teachers are paid only for ten months a year (while parents may have to pay school fees for twelve months per year!).

which there are no regular schools, for children who are over-aged etc. Schools within the latter often operate with the help of ‘volunteers’, i.e. untrained teachers who get a salary of approximately Rs. 1500 per month. Sometimes these schools follow different syllabi, and they are often seen as temporary arrangements.

What we have described here is not only that the schooling system is internally diverse and variegated, but rather that schools are segmented in a hierarchical order. This is so because children are not randomly distributed over different schools but segregated in separate streams leading to unequal opportunities in the rest of their lives. The most important phenomenon in this regard has been that the elite have opted out of government-run schools. This phenomenon of ‘elite flight’, coinciding not accidentally with the large-scale entry of children from less privileged backgrounds in the educational system, reflects more than just frustration with the quality of government schools: it indicates an ambition to be exclusive. Many private schools reproduce this exclusiveness, by charging high fees and by administering admission tests and interviews to assess cognitive skills as well as social capital. All this has also contributed to a widespread belief that private schools are preferable and that government schools are a poor men’s choice. Unfortunately, often, government schools are, indeed, not very good schools, but this is as much a consequence of the elite flight as a cause. With the departure of the more well-to-do and educated parents, government schools lose the kind of clientele that could monitor school quality and complain in case they are dissatisfied.¹²

3. Interactions in the Classrooms

As part of our study, we conducted many classroom observations, usually in class 4 or 5, and primarily in government schools. These observations taught us that a large part of the teacher-children interactions revolve around mechanical and routine exercises such as teachers reading out from textbooks, giving dictation to students, asking them to copy from books, children repeating in chorus and so on. We observed little group work or arts and crafts activities. A lot of the teaching we observed can be described as ‘going through the motions’, with teachers who do not seem particularly interested in teaching and children who are not particularly inspired. Teachers usually focus on those children who perform well but often neglect those who lag behind. A large number follow the ‘chalk and talk method’. They stand at the board and address students in an authoritative or even intimidating tone, quite unmindful of whether the children are able to follow what is explained. As long as children can chant or memorize the lesson, it seems OK. To illustrate

After lunch, the teacher returned and began his history lectures. ‘What is our mother tongue? What do we mean by the mother tongue?’ He wrote on the

¹² Unlike private fee-charging schools, free-of-cost government schools have no in-built accountability mechanisms. As part of an effort to introduce accountability in government schools and to improve their quality, school- or village-based participatory management committees have been established in many States. Their effectiveness in securing quality education in government schools has, however, been limited (Narayan and Mooij, 2010).

blackboard. The children were to write the correct answers in their notebooks. The same pedagogic practice was followed in the next class on natural science: 'How do we define planets and stars? Write down their names'. This was followed by another set of question on geography: 'How many districts are there in West Bengal? Write down their names', instructed the teacher. Some children wrote names of countries instead of those of districts. The teacher wrote the names of districts, perhaps for the nth time, on the blackboard, taking the help of a notebook. Everybody started copying the same again, also probably for the nth time. Teaching and learning seemed an endless process of writing and re-writing some information, which the children kept on forgetting as the teacher himself admitted. And hence followed his directive: 'Memorize, whatever you write'.

School observation, Srirampur-Uttarpara, West Bengal, December 2004)

Some degree of memorization can, of course, not be avoided. All efforts to pursue knowledge and insights come with some amount of routine training, some standardization in the teaching-learning process, some training of the memory.¹³ What struck us was not only the extent to which this rote learning was *the* predominant form of education, but also the active discouragement of other forms of knowledge. Children are sometimes instructed to give precise, one-line answers and strongly rebuffed when they try to answer in their own words. Clearly, there are set questions to which teachers expect set answers, strongly discouraging students to think creatively and independently. An illustration of this point is how children in grade 4 learn mechanically to insert mathematical symbols between two numbers, but when we asked them 'If you come to school at 10 in the morning, and go home at 3 in the afternoon, how much time do you spend in your school?', no one had a clue.

These observations stand in rather sharp contrast with current policy language that emphasizes that education should be enjoyable, creativity-enhancing and promoting the all-round development of the child. The flagship programme SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Education for All) for instance, claims that it

will make efforts to take a holistic and comprehensive approach to the issue of quality. Reducing the load of non-comprehension by facilitating child-centred and activity-based learning will be attempted. Learning by doing, learning by observation, work experience, art, music, sports and value education shall be made fully integral to the learning process. Appropriate changes will be made in the evaluation system to make it more continuous and less threatening. Performance of children will be constantly monitored in consultation with parents but shall not be restricted only to cognitive areas.

(GoI, n.d.: 70)

¹³ We sometimes wondered, however, about the relevance of all the facts that children have to memorize. In Class 3 of a private school in a suburban area of West Bengal, we were witness to another question-answer session. A wide range of questions was asked, many far removed from the immediate environment of the children, but the children replied with ease, thanks to ceaseless grinding and coaching on trivial information passed off as 'general knowledge'. 'In which year did India win the IFA shield?' 'In which year did India win the World Cup Cricket?' 'How is the rainbow formed?' 'Why is the colour of the sea blue?' 'Which day is celebrated as the International Labour Day?' One can be struck by the efficiency of the 'drill'.

These ideas have been translated into extensive in-service training programmes for teachers. Many of the teachers whom we met during our fieldwork had attended such trainings. Some teachers had become inspired by the ‘new methods’, but many others were very critical. One teacher, for instance, said that ‘Old is gold. The new method may help the child to identify a letter or a word, but he will not be able to write it correctly’. Others stressed that ‘the new methods are good for class 1 and 2, but from the 3rd grade onwards, the children have to learn how to read and write’, suggesting that this would not be possible with the help of what they called ‘play-way’ methods. Or they would say that these new pedagogies ‘are based on the competencies of urban children’ and are less appropriate for rural children. Many mentioned that these methods are nice, in principle, but unusable in the context of overcrowded classrooms or multi-grade teaching.

As part of the SSA programme, teachers are encouraged to make use of teaching and learning materials (TLMs) other than textbooks and blackboards. They all get Rs. 500 per year to buy or prepare TLMs and in the trainings they are encouraged to do so. In many schools, we found that teachers had prepared wall charts or had bought globes or other materials. Often the self-prepared items were made of paper, carton and glue. More sophisticated craftsmanship (for instance by blacksmiths or carpenters) was never involved. Most teachers who had prepared TLMs were proud of their products. But by and large, the materials were stored in cupboards or exhibited on open shelves. The result is that of all teaching and learning materials, textbooks are the most predominant ones. They define what counts as valuable knowledge, and teachers are, in fact, not more than extensions of the textbooks.

Tests and examinations are the dominant, if not only, mode through which learning is assessed. And given their close correspondence to the textbooks, it is the students’ ability to reproduce textbooks truths that is tested rather than their genuine understanding.¹⁴ Moreover, high test scores have become almost the sole objective of the learning process itself. Even though there is an automatic promotion in most of the Indian primary schools, tests and test scores are central to the experience of school children. Subject matters that are not included in the exam are seen as less important. The latter was nicely – but tragically – expressed in the words of a parent: ‘Why should my child have to learn

¹⁴ That this is also true for the so-called best and elite schools was established by Educational Initiatives (EI) that focused exclusively on the schools that are deemed to be very good. Based on a public opinion survey, EI had prepared a list of the fifty top schools in five metros in India (Mumbai, Kolkata, New Delhi, Chennai, and Bangalore). The study, which focused exclusively on these top schools, started from the notion that ‘learning is more than rote learning’ (EI, 2006:3). Hence, it tested students not only on their ability to reproduce mere information, but also on their ability to apply insights and think creatively. The study found that many of the schools that have a very good reputation and serve as role-models for other schools, do actually not do well at all. ‘Students seem to be learning mechanically, and are able to answer questions based on recall or standard procedures quite well. However, their performance on questions testing understanding or application is far below what we consider acceptable levels. The student performance suggests that they are unable to tackle questions that appear to be a little different from what they typically find in textbooks or in the class’. (EI, 2006: iii). The test included also a number of questions from an international assessment study. This part of the study brought out that the average performance of the Indian students of these top schools was below the international average for all the eleven (all science and mathematics) questions.

so much of Bengali grammar when only 8 marks are allotted to this portion of the lesson in standard examination papers?’ And even out of school, exam preparation continues in private tuition, often justified as a necessary practice to improve chances to pass or get high marks.

This exam-orientation enjoys widespread popularity. Many people, including teachers, parents and the wider community, believe that the system ‘has rigour’ and that ‘professional emigrants do so well abroad’ due to such ‘salutary’ competition. Teachers, for instance, mentioned that they saw regular tests as a component of quality education. In one school, for instance, we heard that ‘in order to improve quality’, the school had decided to conduct weekly exams. The result of all this is, however, that ‘what ought to be an educational experience’ is turned ‘into mere qualification-earning, ritualistic, tedious, suffused with anxiety and boredom, destructive of curiosity and imagination; in short, anti-educational’ (Dore, 1976: ix, as quoted in Little 1997).

Although ‘chalk and talk’, memorization, a textbook-focus and an exam-orientation are the main principles of the pedagogy observed in the classrooms, we also came across instances in which even these principles were not implemented seriously. We came across examples of sheer lack of interest, a complete absence of the ambition to make children ‘listen, write and remember’.¹⁵ Some teachers seem to have resigned to yet another belief about educational quality, namely that it is not primarily their own effort that matters, but the availability of infrastructure, the pupil teacher ratio and especially the students themselves. As one headmaster in Andhra Pradesh said, ‘bright students go to private convent schools. The children coming to our schools are of a very poor background and less able to concentrate’. In this view, it is mainly the ‘quality of students’ that determines the ‘quality of education’.

Unfortunately, in some schools where ‘chalk, talk and memorize’ was implemented without genuine interest and ambition to stimulate the children, we found that active ‘de-learning’ was taking place: children being socialized to become less curious and inquisitive; children encouraged not to answer in their own words but to just repeat standard phrases. What happens here can be called a ‘brain drain’ – though obviously of another kind than the elite flight to foreign countries.

¹⁵ In one instance, our classroom observation (5th grade) coincided with a quarterly exam. The teacher was reading all the questions (mathematics), and was explaining and answering them one by one. When she was through, she asked the children to fill in the question-papers. Some of the children did this. Some did it for a short period of time, and some did not do anything at all. A few girls were very serious about the whole exercise. Some of them asked for some advice or confirmation from the teacher about their answers, while she was walking around. Some girls made groups to do the exam together. Eventually, the teacher said that they had to work individually, which they did for a short while before they started to group again. In the afternoon we observed a lesson in mathematics. We then understood why some children had not shown any interest in the exam at all: the subject matter that the teacher tried to explain in the afternoon was at a much less advanced level than the subject matter of the quarterly exam! When we asked the teacher about this, she said that she was well aware of the problem, but since she usually relied on question papers available in the market (bought through the funds meant for new teaching and leaning material) instead of making her own problem sheets, things like this could happen, she explained. (School observation Nandyal, Andhra Pradesh, October 2004)

The question is how the observed pedagogical practices are instrumental for the reproduction of inequality in society at large. We believe they are, for at least two reasons. One is that passive learning and parrot training will create passive minds, and thereby an uncritical disposition: social apathy rather than an urge to take one's own life in one's own hands. Here we agree with Tagore, who argued already more than a century ago, that an educational system that demands a docile slavish attitude is unlikely to lead to citizens who are dynamic, creative and in command of their own development (1907).¹⁶ A second reason is that, although nobody benefits from poor and standardized education, children from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds suffer even more than others. In case of a seriously failing educational system, the privileged have a shortcut to material success due to their cultural capital. But those without these resources depend on the available education. A system that allows for plurality and flexibility in the curriculum, that gives opportunities for an interaction between the creative mind of the child and the knowledge system, that includes the representation of the cultural heritage of Dalits and India's tribal population, would make it easier for them to come up and benefit from their years in school. Excessive standardization, on the other hand, means that, unaided by all kinds of middle class home support, children from underprivileged sections of society are less able to put up with 'the burden of non-comprehension' and eventually many of them drop out of the system. The deadweight of an unimaginative mainstream falls more heavily on the margin.

4. Educational Inequality Challenged and Contested

The previous two sections have highlighted several features of the Indian educational system that reproduce already existing inequalities: children of different socio-economic backgrounds are streamed into different schools, and within schools, the pedagogical practices do not stimulate children to grow up into critical independent minds – something that can less easily be compensated in the case of children who grow up in resource poor environments than for children living in a more privileged context. These two features are just two of the structural mechanisms that make the educational system basically an instrument that helps to reproduce the existing, unequal social order.

Despite the forceful existence of these (and other)¹⁷ mechanisms, we have come across several counter examples, however – examples of children who had remained lively and curious despite the daily drill; of teachers who had gone out of their way campaigning for their school, raising additional funds and mobilizing parents; of schools that work with

¹⁶ To quote Tagore (1907:539; authors' translation), '[a]n [education] system that is lifeless, devoid of joy and freshness, not even offering an iota of space to move and grow, is doomed to dead, dry rigidity. Can such a system ever nurture the child's mind, expand her horizons, and elevate her soul and character? Will this child, once she grows up, ever be able to figure anything out on her own, overcome hurdles using her own resources, stand on her own two feet with head held high banking on her own natural fire? Will she not be given to mindless copying [from others], cramming [without comprehension] and slavish servitude?'

¹⁷ See Majumdar and Mooij (2011).

alternative pedagogical visions and refuse to prepare children ‘for the mainstream’.¹⁸ Here we will focus particularly on some activist groups, notably the MV Foundation and the Pratichi (India) Trust that we studied in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal respectively. Both movements are impressive. They have an impact on everyday practices of schooling and educational governance, and they have been able, to some extent, to refocus the educational discourse towards empowerment and the political potential of mass education. Yet, just as the individual examples of children, teachers and schools, they remain counter-currents that have to find their way in a context of entrenched social inequalities.

The Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation (MV Foundation or MVF) was established in 1981. While it started as a research initiative focusing mainly on issues of social transformation, it gradually turned into a social movement aimed at empowering local communities, with its main focus on child labour. Central in the MVFs approach is an effort to build a social consensus in children’s right to education. Such a consensus, according to the founder of the organisation, Prof. Shantha Sinha, was missing. In 2005, she wrote that

there is no unanimity on the issue that children must not be subjected to exploitation and the drudgery of work. It is incessantly argued that poor children’s labour makes a contribution to the family income, without which they will not survive and therefore children’s work is indispensable. The prevailing notion is that ‘poverty’ is the root cause of child labour, which requires children to be out of school and hence any attempt at univerzalisation of education is futile. Arguments against the desirability of providing education for poor children are also made – that for some sections of society, classroom teaching is irrelevant and children are better off working and learning skills outside the classroom.

(Sinha, 2005: 2571)

In order to counter these arguments, and to establish a new normative framework, the MVF has formulated a series of so-called non-negotiables: all children must attend full-time formal day-schools; any child out of school is a child labourer; all labour is hazardous and harms the overall growth and development of the child; there must be total abolition of child labour; and any justification perpetuating the existence of child labour must be condemned. The prime activity of the MVF has been to bring children back to school, by fighting child labour and facilitating work-school transitions through bridge schools, rather than to improve the inner workings of the school system and its institutional apparatuses per se. This is not to say that the MVF has completely dissociated from activities to improve school but the main emphasis has been on awareness raising and creating a demand for schooling.

¹⁸ To illustrate, in one of these (small, NGO-run) schools in a slum area in Kolkata, we interviewed a young, firebrand teacher who refused to accept that ‘his task is to supply English-speaking young hands to shops like Pizza Huts’; rather he saw it as to transform the existing social order.

The Pratichi (India) Trust was established in 1999 by Amartya Sen with his Nobel Prize money.¹⁹ From the start onwards, its main objective has been to advance primary education and elementary health care in the State. With regard to education, this research-cum-action enterprise aims to build up a society-wide public discourse on primary education as well as to foster concrete public and policy action for the improvement of the school system and its institutional delivery. As the Trust itself proclaims, its work 'is a combination of departmental monitoring and social collaboration of parents and teachers which is pivotal to the governance of the basic institutions such as primary schools and SSKs'²⁰ (Pratichi Trust, 2009: 94).

Although the focus and mode of operation of these two organizations is not exactly the same, and although they operate in rather different contexts, there are also similarities. One is that both organizations are inclusive in their strategy. The MVF is conscious not to polarize social relationships, but to include high caste and class (e.g. landlords) people within its movement. The Pratichi (India) Trust has, from the start onwards, made an effort to reach out to teachers unions. With repeated conversations and joint research meetings, it has managed to overcome some of the initially hostile reactions of the teachers unions to the work done by the trust, and has managed to get quite a few teachers on board. The second is that both organizations are conscious of the necessity to engage ordinary people in their endeavour, and therefore that mobilization is essential. Grassroots activists are, hence, crucial in both movements. In both States, we encountered inspiring examples of these activists. In one of the economically depressed villages in Birbhum (West Bengal), for instance, we met a former panchayat²¹ member running an evening education centre along with a few local young boys and girls. One of the santhal²² volunteers is a school graduate; another is an 8th grade completer. The value of their work is recognized locally, even by school teachers themselves. In the words of one such teacher, 'If we are to define the truly educated, these people are the ones. When they could have easily spent their time chatting or gossiping, they are working here. When we get educated, we only work for our own family and its betterment; but with their educational resources, however limited, they are thinking about their community'. In another village in Birbhum, a couple of elderly persons from each hamlet have taken upon themselves the duty of keeping a close watch on children not attending school. The school in this village is at the centre of the upper caste habitation; children of Dalit or Adivasi background walk to the school from their respective hamlets. These hamlets do not have electricity, making it difficult to study in the evening. Free evening tutorial centres have been opened up in four locations in this Gram Panchayat; these are run mainly by a handful of motivated youth, some high school or college drop outs, who have been giving their voluntary labour for the past five years.

¹⁹ At the same time, Sen also founded the Pratichi (Bangladesh) Trust.

²⁰ SSK stands for Shishu Shiksha Kendra. These are informal educational centres established in West Bengal by the government especially in areas and for people with poor access to regular primary schools.

²¹ The panchayat is the village elected council.

²² The Santhals are a large tribal community living mainly in the Eastern part of India. As most of the tribal population, also the Santhal population is generally socially and economically deprived.

Admittedly, these volunteers are not the most competent of teachers or trained professional personnel suited for tutoring the children of these villages. Also, the study centres perhaps function like other tutorial centres in that they make children go over their home work, learn by rote, etc. The initiatives may not be easily replicated elsewhere, and may even sometimes lack sustainability since the youth running them are themselves in search of a decent job or employment opportunity. Nevertheless, such interventions seem to serve a crucial purpose of ensuring that children survive in school and that their 'school life expectancy' (UNESCO, 2005) is improved. More broadly, such collective efforts keep alive the educational imagination of a community. The teachers of the local primary school have sometimes been part of these joint enterprises, and they support and encourage the village youth. Villagers add their share of commitment and assistance in the form of donations of labour, resources such as small plots of land on which a makeshift tutorial home stands, or proceeds from the sale of some trees that can help to buy lanterns. Some adult villagers, especially mothers, have expressed a keen interest in attending these evening classes. It is the collectiveness of this effort that distinguishes these study centres from other commercial tuition centres and that may guarantee a longer-term viability.²³

All in all, both forms of educational activism have not only led to concrete improvements at the village or school level, they have also influenced the overall discursive climate. By continuously emphasizing the links between universal quality education and issues of social justice, the movements have strengthened and reinforced the idea that education can be empowering and that quality education should be available to everybody. Sure, there is no reason to romanticize the initiatives of these grassroots activists. Their work is faced with opposition, sometimes indifference, and may be poorly resourced. The activist counter currents that we have described here are certainly not smashing down educational inequalities and hierarchies in a big way. But they are certainly calling them into question.

5. Conclusion: the Multiple Capabilities of Education

This paper started with a description of two different frameworks: one that conceptualizes education in terms of 'reproduction and control', and a second one that is based on a 'capability and freedom' perspective. We then proceeded with two sections highlighting various mechanisms in the educational system and classroom practices that led, indeed, to the reproduction of existing inequalities. This was followed by a section describing some

²³ Unsurprisingly, the work of these grassroots volunteers is not trouble-free. Local politics may also creep in. In West Bengal there are teachers, especially at the high school level, who do not see much hope in the educational prospects of the Santhali children who are being trained by the free and public tutorial centres. In some localities alternatives to the free community teaching centres have been set up by individuals close to the local elites, receiving support and resources from local party leaders as well as district authorities – while the tribal volunteers who have piloted such centres do not receive any official assistance. In one village, the youth working in the coaching centres were lured away from their voluntary work by oil mill companies who offered them some advance money and a job. Needless to say, there is no dearth of political and economic disincentives to working as grassroots education activists, and no reason to romanticize the success of these micro-level initiatives.

counter currents, particularly two educational movements that mobilize people at the grassroots level around an educational vision that centers around universal quality education.

What we can conclude is that, although the school system and its underpinning values serve primarily the reproduction of an unequal social order, the possibility of going against this main stream is not foreclosed. It remains possible that there are smaller or larger pockets in which school education enhances basic human capabilities and freedoms, even though, more often than not, such freedom may fade quickly owing to a myriad of forces of power and hierarchy that define the social context and content of education. Our understanding is not just that both perspectives are relevant and that it is an empirical question of which of the two is more practically adequate in explaining a particular situation. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the social construction of reality: it is in a social process that education is *made* a tool in the reproduction of an unequal social order, or an instrument that advances freedom and social justice – or something in between.

By scrutinizing some of the mechanisms that play a role in the reproduction of inequality, and by highlighting some of the ways in which educational inequalities are challenged, our analysis aims to contribute to an understanding of how the liberating force of education can be achieved. We do not assume – and here we differ from most EFA activists in governments, NGOs or international organizations – that this potential is automatically present, that it only needs to be actualized or uncovered. Rather, it is the result of contestation, democratic jostling, social justice activism – forms of ‘positive power’, in the terminology of Apple and Christian-Smith (1991:7), which sometimes have the potential to challenge the ‘negative’ powers that be.

Ours is, hence also a political standpoint: that education *can be* liberating, that schooling *can* contribute to social justice and greater equality, compels us to comprehend how this can be achieved, that is how the second perspective *can be made* more real. In other words, whether the movements and alternative experiments will become sites and processes that will genuinely challenge the power of dominant classes and whether or not the latter will try to ‘dismantle’ such sites is not given. Teachers, parents, officials, elected politicians and others involved may remain firmly entrenched in the graded societal structure of power, but they may also react otherwise. And it is the existence of larger political movements– such as the Pratiche (India) Trust and the MV Foundation – that may make a difference in this regard.

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