

The Pursuit of Equality and Quality in Education

The Legacies of Rousseau, Ambedkar and Gandhi

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Abstract

In the Indian context, the term 'quality' has come to stand for a variety of meanings and approaches that attempt to describe, evaluate and reform the state of education in terms of the nature of its provision (institutions), curriculum and textbooks, the professional competence of teachers and the learning outcomes of students. While these are significant indicators of the health of an educational system, this paper argues that engagements with the idea of 'quality' in education must be contextualised in the light of a society's ideas on what constitutes the desirable human life as well as the role of the State and education in that enterprise. The arguments of Enlightenment philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau are reprised in this context, considering his influence in shaping the discourse of 'inequality' and its political and educational solutions. The amelioration of inequality was very much a part of engagement with the idea and identity of the India by nationalists during the first decades of the twentieth century. The philosophical positions adopted by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi on what constituted an equitable and sustainable social order are examined in this regard. While their visions were diametrically different (especially regarding the nature of the State and the kind of education that was required), revisiting and negotiating with their ideas offer us scope in reordering our priorities with regard to how we conceptualise and locate 'quality' in the public education system.

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INTRODUCTION

The terms of 'quality' discourse have become a familiar terrain for Indian educationists in the past two decades, especially in relation with formulating norms and standards regarding the nature and contexts of the provision and processes of education. However, these norms and standards gain meaning as benchmarks through what they represent in terms of a worthwhile or meaningful educational experience for an individual learner. The issue of what is 'worthwhile' or 'meaningful' needs to be understood with respect to what is valued as the aims of education.

The three thinkers who are the focus of this paper have been selected because they grappled with questions of social justice and the role that education could play in transforming an iniquitous social order. In their exploration of the aims of education, they also help us refine and reformulate the concept of 'quality' associated with it.

Our present ideas of 'equality' and the place of education in pursuit of a socio-political utopia were first forged in the European context during the Enlightenment era and Rousseau as a philosopher played an important role in shaping some of our assumptions about this subject. At the turn of the twentieth century, there was considerable engagement with the idea and basis of the Indian nation. The philosophical positions of Ambedkar and Gandhi are important in their contrasting positions on the role of the

State and the kind of education that was necessary to build an equitable social order.

In bringing together their arguments, I hope to reclaim focus on defining and measuring the 'quality of education', in terms of what J.P.Naik in 1975 called, 'its capacity to create a new social order' (1975:61).

ROUSSEAU: RE-FASHIONING 'EQUALITY'

The marriage of the two ideas of 'equality' and 'quality' were historically accomplished in what we now call the 'liberal' point of view, which is based on an idea of desirable human life as one that is concerned with the development and self-fulfilment of an individual. In this context, the Enlightenment philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), deserves credit for reshaping the assumptions that were held till then about the role that education could play in shaping a just social order. His treatise, *A Discourse on Inequality*, is the object of my focus, because philosophically it sets a precedent for how we argue against inequality in favour of the individual. This was an essay written in response to a competition organised by the Academy of Dijon in 1753, on the question, 'What is the origin of inequality among men and is it authorised by Natural Law?' Ironically, Rousseau's seminal piece failed to win.

In this seminal essay, Rousseau explores the conditions required

for individual flourishing. Within the context of a conjectural and evolutionary history of humanity from the state of nature to that of civilisation, Rousseau flags tension between the individual and the society. On one hand, individual flourishing requires a stable social support and context where all members have equal opportunities for improvement, while on the other, the demands of social living ultimately lead individuals to draw their sense of worth from their comparative place in the social order. In his analysis of the trajectory of civilisational development, he argues that there has been a corruption of individual consciousness i.e., what he calls the conversion of *amour de soi* in the state of nature to the hubristic *amour propre*. The psychological price which sociality exacts on individuals is central to Rousseau's conception of 'equality' and 'liberty'.

The way the *Discourse* resolves this conundrum is what makes it seminal. Rousseau argues that differences between individuals i.e., social inequality are a result of conventions that emerge through cultural and historical relationships, rather than through 'natural or physical inequalities' such as 'differences in age, health, strength of body and qualities of the mind or soul' (Rousseau. 1754:77). In other words, Rousseau sets the precedent for arguing that if the present social order is a human product, then this can also be altered by human initiative. In his view, the need to

contain and limit human violence, while allowing human flourishing, is at the heart of maintaining a certain social order. It is accomplished by the development of a system which will limit violence while allowing a certain concert between the polity and the economy. This system is the State. Rousseau imagines a particular relationship between the individual and the State as 'a social contract' in his eponymous work. He sets forth his political perspectives in greater detail in *The Social Contract*, where he argues that if individuals voluntarily renounce their natural rights and join to create a social contract as the basis of civil society, then all can find space for personal flourishing and yet remain free. Individuals are protected from being arbitrarily subordinated to the will of the socially powerful. When the law represents the general will of the populace, it secures their voluntary obedience and, therefore, it preserves civic morality. However, Rousseau is clear that this civic morality has to be bolstered and supported by careful education through a civil State. This is an argument that he develops in greater detail in works like *Emile*. *Emile* argues that a conscientious commitment to education is required in order to at least partially restore to human beings that was lost in the progression from nature to civilisation i.e., independence, equality, compassion and happiness. Therefore, Rousseau presents a powerful vision of the role of the

'State' in resolving the question of individual development without compromising individual integrity and social stability.

What is radical about Rousseau's picture was the notion that every individual has a particular way of being true to one's self, which has to be discovered by him or her (Taylor, 2009). This discourse of 'individualism' then becomes the basis of the exploration of suitable forms of social organisations. The revolutionary challenge to the primacy of a social order based on birth, privilege, religious affiliation and communal identities in the eighteenth century Europe (France to be specific) and in colonial North America was undergirded by this discourse of 'individualism'. This was paralleled by the socio-political transformation of institutional arrangements and conceptions of property, profession and office during the period. Increasingly, primacy was given to the individual over community.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE STATE IN PRE-COLONIAL AND COLONIAL INDIA

In the Indian context, it must be remembered that the individual was not the 'basic social unit' of the traditional social order. Additionally, individual atomism was also not considered desirable. For example, the traditional worldview of Hinduism as described by Sudhir Kakar in *The Inner World* (1981), is explicitly oriented towards the fusion of the self with others. This is the fundamental

ideal of *moksha*, which is considered the aim of one's existence. This is reflected in traditional Hindu upper caste child rearing practices, which seeks to undo what non-emic theories of psycho-social development would see as the normative individualistic trajectory of ego development, i.e., the gradual constitution of ego boundaries. Arguing that one of the greatest cultural anxieties of the Hindu culture is the isolation and estrangement of the self from others, Kakar holds that this leads to a cultural ideal of the personality characterised by discouragement of autonomy and the development of a strong sense of dependency on others (primarily one's extended family and one's caste group/*jati*). Kakar's analysis helps us to see the extent to which the discourse of individualism was novel in the Indian context, especially in the pre-Colonial period.

Sudipta Kaviraj (2010) Provides a political analogue to Kakar's psycho-social exploration by demonstrating how the Hindu worldview legitimised the subordinate claims of the individual to that of the family, caste and community in the *Manusmriti* idea of '*danda*' or order. Within this worldview, the political power represented by the 'king' or ruler was separate from the moral and social authority embodied by the Brahmin as the 'upholder of *danda*'. Therefore, the 'sovereignty' possessed by the ruler did not include the ability of radically altering social customs and practices,

even though they could collect rent and tributes as well as protect their territory militarily. The demands for justice and redistribution were also often routed through channels other than the king. This separation was also not disturbed with the advent of Islamic kingdoms founded in India from the eleventh century onwards. Islamic rulers also implicitly accepted this kind of limitation of their political power. The Mughals, for example, were considerably influenced by the Aristotelian traditions of Persianate Islam, which recommended that a ruler must provide conditions for the flourishing of his subjects, irrespective of their faith. To such conditions, the added uncertainty of frequent inter-state clashes and conquests was not conducive to the development of the kind of 'political belonging' presupposed by the modern nation state i.e., 'the firm identification between people and a form of politicised space' (ibid: 214).

In such a context, the institutions of the State created by the British were radically different in conception as well as influence. However, the British did not conquer India in one swoop, the processes by which power was ultimately annexed by the British crown were gradual and based on governmental practices of administration such as 'mapping territory and enumerative practices for the levy of taxation, the creation of an army for territorial control, the gradual exposure of a limited native segment to modern

European education, etc' (ibid.). The subsumption of India under modern administrative protocols eventually laid ground for the state's incursion into the realm of social authority, thereby, overriding the caste-based logic of governance. Therefore, their policies and practices created space for a new discourse on individualism and the concomitant endorsement of the ideal of equality. New English institutions like, courts, civil service, university, schools, etc., along with new conceptions of property (like, land rights) and profession, created possibilities for self-development, distinction and mobility based on the idea of individual merit. These were embraced, not just by the upper castes but also by the elite among the lower castes, who gained concrete benefits from this opening up of education and employment (Beteille, 1983; Omvedt, 2004; Kumar, 2005).

At the same time, the tension between the colonial identity of being a 'subject' versus the promise of 'individual development' played a crucial role in shaping anti-imperialist sentiment and various incipient 'nationalisms' as a response to it. The opportunity which the anti-Colonial struggle offered with respect to imagining the identity of the nation was taken up by a diverse range of stakeholders. Prescient national leaders — be it Gandhi, Ambedkar or Nehru — had realised that the colonial transformation of the country created space for a language of 'nationalism', which could treat India not as a

primordial reality, but as a project which had to be developed. This was an opportunity to imagine the kind of social organisation which could ameliorate inequalities and unleash the potential of the people who had been suppressed both by culture and colonisation. The relationship between the individual, the nation, the state and education was explored in contrasting ways by Ambedkar and Gandhi.

AMBEDKAR: INSTITUTIONALISED INDIVIDUALISM

In the Indian context, Dr. Ambedkar played an important role in using this emergent discourse of individualism to highlight the tyranny of caste-based inequality. The main text that I use as a reference for Ambedkar's thought is his book the *Annihilation of Caste* (1936).

Ambedkar interpreted the traditional caste-based Hindu social order as a system of governance in general and as a system of production, organisation and distribution in particular, which was based on social and economic rights that were fixed, unequal and hierarchical. Simultaneously, the rigidity of this system was bolstered and reproduced by strong instruments of social and economic ostracism along with a philosophical justification in Hindu religious texts. Additionally, a key factor of what sustained the caste system and *Brahminical* power in this context was the denial of access to knowledge. A series of penalties

against the study of the *Vedas* by the deprived castes was instrumental in perpetuating illiteracy and ignorance in secular life. Since reading and writing became incidental to the study of the *Vedas* in this system, the ramifications of the restricted access to the scriptures for the deprived castes meant the denial of opportunities to develop human capabilities through education (Thorat and Kumar, 2008). This was more repulsive for Ambedkar because his very idea of liberty as articulated in the *Annihilation of Caste* was the freedom to formulate one's purposes in life, without having to accept it from another. The fixation of rights and its continuance by heredity left no scope for individual capacities or choices. Moreover, the absence of social mobility along with isolation and exclusion prevented an experience of true 'fraternity'.

In contrast, the ideal society that Ambedkar delineates in the *Annihilation of Caste* is based on free and open communication. This creates 'real' relationships based on sharing of purpose and resources, leading to 'like-mindedness'. Democracy for Ambedkar was primarily 'a form of associated living', rather than just a form of government.

The test for an ideal society was the extent to which it permitted what he called 'social endosmosis' (ibid.). Endosmosis is a scientific term, which describes the inward flow of a fluid through a permeable membrane toward a fluid of greater concentration.

Arun Mukherjee (2009) traces how Ambedkar borrows this term from his teacher at Columbia University, John Dewey, who in turn changed its original appropriation by Henri Bergson and William James to describe the interaction of the human mind with nature and applied it to describe the interaction between social groups in 'Democracy' and 'Education'. While Dewey himself only used the term once, Ambedkar frequently drew on this 'fluid' metaphor to describe his vision of democracy where the privacy and integrity of individuals could be preserved and nurtured, but not enclosed and isolated in impermeable social categories.

This understanding of endosmosis is critical in Ambedkar's refusal to countenance claims that India was already a nation, claims that derived from the foundation of a Hindu civilisational identity and assumptions about how various groups cohabited in the past. For him, the nation was a project which had to be consciously undertaken with attention to proper processes of social amalgamation (Omvedt, 2004). Only in such an exercise could a secular basis be found for social organisation and the destruction of caste-based exclusion and discrimination. The State was instrumental in establishing and maintaining institutions which would critically engage with how to realise democracy as a form of 'associated living', while ensuring and protecting

the proportionate representation of all members of society through penal sanction.

It is within this paradigm that Ambedkar approaches the place of education in the nation. He placed great importance on State-sponsored schooling in being instrumental in enabling children from the deprived classes opportunities for modern education and avenues for individual mobility, and thus, group mobility. Secondly, in terms of curricular specifications, Ambedkar gave priority to scientific and technical education, which would enable its beneficiaries to critically evaluate their social backgrounds as well as participate in the unfolding processes of building an industrial nation (Thorat and Kumar, 2008). As early as 1924, he helped establish the Bahishkrit Hitkari Sabha, which among other things started industrial and agricultural schools, libraries, social centres and study circles for students of deprived classes. In 1945, he founded the People's Education Society and schools and colleges under its aegis (Siddharta College of Arts and Sciences in 1945, and the Milind College of Science in Aurangabad in 1950) (Kapoor, 2004). Thirdly, he advocated the provision of reservation for students from Dalit backgrounds in institutions for higher learning.

In the context of this paper's discussion, Ambedkar's contribution lies in how he envisaged 'access',

which was an important front on which the battle for equality in 'education' was fought. However, 'access' was not figures of 'enrolment' for him. Rather, access was part of the process of endosmosis which he hoped that the school would facilitate by fostering the 're-socialisation of once socialised attitudes...In place of the old, it creates a new like-mindedness, essential for a harmonious life, social or political...' (quoted in Mukherjee, 2009). Though Ambedkar refrains from entering the processes within the school which must ensure the kind of 'endosmosis' that he imagined, especially pedagogy, engaging with his ideas reminds us of the critical promise embodied in the State, especially in the context of growing disillusionment with the government in our country.

GANDHI: LIBERATING THE INDIVIDUAL

In contrast to the liberal egalitarian vision, which Ambedkar embraced as potentially liberating for the socially marginalised, Gandhi represents a different tradition of radical thought in the early twentieth century. This was a socio-political opposition to the Colonial rule, which took the form of a deeper critique of the 'civilisational, cultural and epistemic domination of the Modern West' (Yadav, 2010). Gandhi's unique contribution to political and philosophical thought lay in his emphasis on the individual as the site and target of change, especially the internalisation and cultivation of those dispositions

which would enable the individual to critically engage with and fight social, political and economic injustice and exploitation. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909) was his most elaborate exposition of this position, in relation to several other competing ideas on how to accomplish political and social change in India (including constitutionalism, revolutionary violence, ethnic nationalism, religious separatism and so forth).

While political autonomy, economic self-determination, etc., were important external aspects of '*swaraj*', Gandhi argued that 'true *swaraj*' had to be first experienced by an individual as inner spiritual freedom and autonomy. An individual had to continually strive to be independent of external control and regulation through 'self-discipline and self-transcendence' (Parel, 2009:xix). Self-discipline was to be cultivated by constantly regulating one's actions through dispassionate assessment, correction and self-reliance. Such discipline would lead to the kind of self-transcendence, which would express itself in the 'disinterested service of fellow citizens without regard to their gender, religion, caste or class' as well as the strength to incur personal suffering against the abuses of authority.

This context is essential in reading Gandhi's critique of English education in *Hind Swaraj* because it reflects his conviction that the educational model it represented was ineffectual in creating individual

dispositions required to desire and work for a just social order. Therefore, he felt that English education merely contributed to knowledge of letters but tended to make its beneficiaries self-absorbed in their own futures, rather than considering their duty towards others. Secondly, those who had no access to this education were alienated from the institutions of governance, which regulated their lives. Thirdly, the lack of emphasis on the importance of instruction in one's mother tongue further de-rooted an individual's ties and continuity with his community.

Gandhi does not provide an alternative paradigm of education in *Hind Swaraj*, primarily because his views on what constituted an equitable social order were also in the process of being formulated during his sojourn in South Africa. His reading of John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* and his correspondence with Tolstoy shaped his experiments with organising and living in a rural commune, first at Phoenix Farm which was established in 1904, and later, at Tolstoy Farm in 1910. He was already moving in the direction of concluding that a self-sufficient rural lifestyle, which recognised the dignity of manual labour was the one which best fostered a life and society of peace, freedom and non-violence. The idea of the productive school emerged through these endeavours. Gandhi came to appreciate the pedagogic importance and success of organising the teaching-learning

activity in children's real participation and contribution in various activities involved in the running of the farms. These experiences would shape the project of basic education, which Gandhi would propose nearly 20 years later, when the Congress ministries came to power in the provincial elections of 1937.

Basic education's innovation lay in its introduction of productive handicrafts in the school curriculum and in doing so, Kumar (1993) argues that Gandhi radically overturned some aspects of the education system. It challenged the 'symbolic meaning of education' prevalent in the Indian society, which represented it as mental labour as opposed to manual labour. Gandhi's analysis of the prime cause of caste discrimination being a differential valuation of work underlay this plan. In exposing all children to a curriculum around craft knowledge, which had been the purview of the lowest and often untouchable castes, Gandhi created a unique opportunity for pedagogy of the upper castes as well. Secondly, emphasis on training children for productive work and creating dispositions, which were conducive to living in a co-operative community, were also in line with this vision for India's villages. The empowerment and development of the village community as well as its protection against the imperatives of indiscriminate modernisation was a crucial aspect of what freedom from Colonial rule meant for Gandhi. Thirdly, basic education represented

a concept of learning that could not be implemented fully using textbooks, so there was considerable space for the teacher to exercise creative autonomy in transacting the curriculum. In trusting the teacher's competence and creativity, Gandhi was also simultaneously distancing himself from over-involvement of the State, which he did not trust. Through these aspects, Gandhi saw the possibility of ingraining in children sensitivity, resilience and self-reliance, which would enable them to participate in the construction of an equitable social order.

In so far as this, it represented a radically new way of envisioning the transformative potential of education, a number of concerns were raised in its implementation. For one, those who saw education as a source of mobility like Ambedkar believed that this plan limited options for members of the lower castes if they wished to leave their occupations. Another inherent problem with Gandhi's framework was that because it favoured the rural child from the lowest social strata, many assumed that basic education was a programme that was meant only for the poor, leading to the upper and middle classes dissociating themselves from this endeavour. There was also discomfort with the idea of self-financing and productive school as promoting child labour, with the added suspicion that children from backward classes would end up doing all the work (Sykes, 1988).

However, as Kumar (1993) demonstrates, despite the range of interpretations that Gandhi's proposal received and despite imaginable administrative and financial problems, the scheme of basic schools was implemented on a considerable scale in several parts of India post-Independence. Whether we evaluate it as a success or failure, it nevertheless remains a bold testament to a completely different model of pursuing social equality and quality of life outside the liberal tradition.

CONCLUSION

We began with Rousseau's contribution that one should consider both the creation and perpetuation of inequality historically, institutionally and individually. With Ambedkar, we moved towards bringing together considerations of equality, especially in terms of access, with 'endosmosis' bringing a quality dimension to the educational experience which was to be safeguarded by the State. For Gandhi, 'equality' had to be internalised as a principle for action, rather than just an ideal or a legal provision and he provides inspiration for an idea of 'quality', whereby an educated person would be judged on the basis of his social commitments and willingness to contribute to social development.

The aim of using the discourse of these thinkers was to highlight a critical absence in current discussions of 'quality' and 'equality'

in education, i.e., the absence of a moral language which engages with the question of what kind of a society we want to become. This absence is all the more critical because the effects of education in the lives of individuals and communities unfold over long periods of time.

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