

A School by Any Other Name...

Rahul Mukhopadhyay & Archana Mehendale



World class universities in India might still be a distant dream, but there is a world very close to us populated by the Oxfords, Cambridges, and Stanfords that strangely pitch for uniqueness not through their singularity but through their multiplicity. This very same space is also dotted with anachronistic public figures – Vivekananda, Martin Luther, Max Muller, Aurobindo, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Indira Priyadarshini, Nehru, Mother Teresa, Isaac Newton, Alfred Noble, Rajiv Gandhi, Annie Besant, including the one which seems tinged with an ironical overture towards our current ‘medium of instruction’ predicament – Macaulay. Yes, indeed, these are the names of private schools that dot the educational landscape of Bangalore city and its nearby areas, as we found during a recent study.

Though ‘globalisation’ is still to prove itself in terms of its trickle down effects for the ‘bottom of the pyramid’, its symbolic value is undeniable in our everyday lives and private schools sprouting in our neighbourhoods are not blind to this knowledge. ‘Global’ and ‘International’, thus, not only become the primary or secondary descriptors in names of private schools but also the means through which parental aspirations can be channelised towards the promises of ‘globalisation’. Often, these very same aspirations are manifest in names that are unambiguous about how the schooling process will inevitably orient the students to become citizens of the ‘New Millennium’ towards a ‘Bright’, ‘Brilliant’, ‘Excellent’, ‘Magnifique’ (as if our obsession with English was not enough!), and ‘Confident’ ‘Future’. Sometimes, though, the force of the ‘global’ is not deemed to be adequate on its own, and is hence balanced with appeals to sentiments that are aligned to religious and nationalistic revivalism, with co-descriptors such as ‘Gurukul’ ‘New Bharath’ or ‘Jai Hind’ that are supposed to invoke images of our glorious past and its achievements.

The ‘global’, unfortunately, does not help us overcome our colonial hangover – both in terms of the language that has become the means to economic and cultural ‘capital’ in recent decades, and in terms of our continuing homage to the

colonial symbolic order. So, even private unaided schools which have secured recognition by their endorsement of Kannada as the medium of instruction, have ‘English’ or at least ‘Convent’ alongside their vernacular titular roots, in complete deference to the language of the markets. It is, therefore, not difficult to find a ‘*vidyapeetha*’ supposedly upholding the best of Indian traditions – ‘*bharatiya samskruti*’ – in its name, attaching itself simultaneously to the now desired language of the markets – ‘English’. Similarly, many private schools do not shy away from the tag of ‘public school’ in their names, though one would often be at a loss to find any obvious characteristic of ‘public-ness’ in their orientation or everyday operations. The essence of this signification of the ‘public’ lies in the British public school system, a univocally private school system catering to an elite minority population. It is not surprising that the postcolonial state, which has been unable to effectively democratise the instructional medium in our schools, has also failed in its efforts to erase such markers of ‘exclusiveness’ in our school system.

Private schools across the country draw upon a range of strategic nomenclature strands to distinguish themselves in the rapidly proliferating world of such schools in both urban and mofussil areas. In the new education marketplace, a school name goes beyond the mere necessity of defining an institutional identity. In fact, it functions as a tool that establishes a brand identity, so essential to woo the confused but eager consumer-parents. Given a general lack of systematic, complete, transparent and reliable information available in the public domain about schools, the school name becomes a tangible proxy for judging school quality.

Indeed, the desire to mark out a unique character is what provides private schools a justification to straddle diverse appellative strands. The choice as we saw is unlimited, from more identifiable substitutes of the ‘global’ or direct appropriation of names of educational institutions of world-class repute, to names of political figures and statesmen of diverse persuasions – national, international, regional, and sectarian. It is interesting to juxtapose

this enormity of ‘choice’ in naming of private schools to the two primary descriptors that characterise the names of most government schools, these being ‘government’ to show public ownership of these schools and the name of the ‘locality’ in which the school is situated. A couple of things stand out in this comparison.

First, none of the private schools have ‘private’ as a descriptor in their names, and can even dissimulate their ‘private’ character through the invocation of ‘public’ – a descriptor with a slippery etymology when we come to its usage in the Indian school system. On the other hand, the public ownership of government schools, which could have been built through bottom-up accountability mechanisms to the local community, has been shortchanged in the dominance of the ‘government’s’ top-down control over its schools. Second, the ‘choice’ open to private schools in naming such schools is nothing but a notion of ‘choice’ guided by market mechanisms, a notion reinforced in the social streaming that such schools invariably result in, and a notion that market advocates endorse as desirable for the revival of our current school system. Government schools, conversely, are forced to grow and sustain within the limited scope of the ‘locality’ without the freedom to appeal to other imaginations that might make such a school distinctive – culture, personalities, or even history. But it is this lack of imagination that can also be read as the non-exclusive character of ‘public’ institutions which are created for and cater to public interests, although the full potential of the ‘locality’ probably lies unfulfilled in the thwarted dreams of the common school system.

Probably it is time we start asking what it means to be ‘public’ for the ‘private’ schools, a question that the 25% provision under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009 tries to raise, when these schools are everything but ‘public’ in the ‘virtues’ they embed and propagate. It is probably time we also start asking what it means to be ‘public’ for the ‘government’ schools, a question that arises from the widespread concern over its capacity to deliver quality education for the children of the country. Perhaps, it is also time to ask how the varied choices, preferred ideals, and exclusive identities established by private schools seek to balance the ‘public’ and ‘private’ aims of education in our contemporary globalised society. With a little change, these wonderfully evocative lines from the master writer of nonsense verses Sukumar Ray might have something as an answer:

‘They claim the (name) is mine—as though it’s something you can own!’

The (name) owns the (school), my friends—that’s how (schools) are known.’ⁱ

Undeniably, names have symbolic significance that transcends ownership by individuals or institutions. But, the significance in the choice of school-names lies in the possibility of drawing upon either material values aligned to the market or cultural values that resonate with the understanding of education as a ‘public’ good. Schools in India, both private and government, seem to have a lot of re-thinking to do on whether a school by any other name would serve the purposes of education as well.

ⁱThe lines in the original translation from *Mustache Thievery* by Sukumar Ray read: ‘They claim the mustache is mine—as though it’s something you can own! The mustache owns the man, my friends—that’s how we all are known.’

This particular translation is from: http://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/translations/poems/sukumar_mustache.html

Rahul Mukhopadhyay is a member of the Faculty at Azim Premji University, Bangalore. His research interests are in the area of sociology of education, education policy and sociology of organisations. He may be contacted at rahul.mukhopadhyay@apu.edu.in

Archana Mehendale is a Professor at Centre for Education Innovation and Action Research, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. She may be contacted at archana.mehendale@tiss.edu