

## Some Disjointed Reflections on the Private and the Public

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In the late 1990s I went to the US for graduate school. As young graduate students, experiences are often similar between people- the same classes inspire, the same anxieties about life and the same adventures arise and we often deal with them in similar manner. My fellow graduate students came from places like Canada, the UK, China, Europe, Korea, Turkey and, of course, the US. The enormous energy and vitality that sprung from those encounters continue to reverberate in my life more than a decade later. I did not find myself better equipped in any way to face life than them. Only years later when talking to one of them did I realize that there was only one deep structural difference between my fellow graduate adventurers (one that was not evident at all in our engagement with our work and life) and me: they were educated in public schools, while I, like almost all the South Asians there, was educated entirely in a private school. As it happened, I married one of my fellow graduate students who, throughout her life, from kindergarten to PhD, was in the public system.

Many years later, when my son joined school in the US, it was in a public setting, in one of the most notoriously 'difficult' school districts in the state. Certainly his first year had challenges. But there was never a time that I felt that the school, or more accurately the human beings in the school, were failing in the deep purpose of educating him. To a person, the teachers were loving, kind, engaged and pedagogically sophisticated. They interacted with the students with much the same degree of affection and concern that I recall my teachers providing me decades earlier.

Thinking back on these facts in the light of the debates on private and public schooling that rage in the US and India, I wonder if the public/private dichotomy is worth obsessing about in terms of what can be achieved in educational outcomes. My gut, unresearched, instinct is that the more relevant difference is to the extent that there is an engaged, able and responsive community responsible for education, and that this community remains flexible and empowered to deal with differences. In the public school district where my son went,

parents were engaged, tolerant and supportive of teachers and, most importantly, had a sense of social belonging and community capacity. Although it was a racially mixed neighbourhood with a mix of richer and poorer, there was a real sense of collective responsibility for the children.

Why then is that not replicated en masse in India? Here perhaps, one can take a broader view that this is a feature of Indian society and not just merely the Indian educational system. Some of the difficulty possibly lies with our overall sense of social collectivity and our stop-start, indigeneous and incomplete modernity. In this lack of a genuinely felt inclusiveness, education is not the sole casualty, of course. We are lacking in public provisioning in many spheres. The ways in which individuals imagine and interact and identify with 'the public' form a core area of enquiry in social science. Nowhere are these questions more complex, varied and interesting than in the Indian context.

It is not an exaggeration to claim that the notion of equality within India as a felt sense of a collectivity, is still highly fragile. Despite the democratic upsurges of the nineties and later that established political footholds for the marginalized, the idea that we (by which I mean the middle classes) can and should be collectively responsible for our whole society is a notion that is looked upon with some degree of scepticism. The joint failures of society and the state in providing basic minimum quality of amenities, public infrastructure and administration continue to impede our notions of what is possible (which is why periodic appeals to 'good governance' are so attractive). Relatedly, the boundaries of the community to whom one has obligations remain quite circumscribed. The notion of an equality of personhood for everyone continues therefore to be very thin. Put another way, if our major (perhaps only) locus of collective identification remains limited to Bollywood and cricket (as we sometimes celebrate), it is a very thinly veneered basis for empathy indeed.

Having noted this, it is not an argument for 'turning peasants into Indians' to mangle Eugen Weber. The creation of a public in the relatively homogeneous

European states of today was based on two sets of strategies: first, through vicious ethnic cleansing, violent boundary adjustments and forced assimilation of minorities, and, second through a concerted effort at building state capacity, national identity and getting rid of landlords and other feudal elite. We have thus far managed to make some headway into the latter approach, while not completely adopting the former set of strategies. If the public is to be built on exclusivist grounds, it is not something to be desired, especially given our current polity, which is a hair's breadth away from the worst excesses of majoritarianism.

How can we then think of provisioning of collective goods like education and the creation of a public imaginary that supports such goods? This is a challenge given the lack of success in previous efforts and the dangers of the ways in which it may be promoted in the present zeitgeist. I'm not sure what concrete policies to espouse, but some things seem apparent. The notion that state provisioning is doomed to failure, whether in education or other realms and that therefore privatization is the way to go is an error that has come to be seen as an irrefutable (if politically incorrect) fact. We have plenty of evidence that this is not the case, and as my fellow graduate students taught me, public education is no barrier whatsoever to creating individuals who are sophisticated, capable and engaged.

This is not to soft-pedal the numerous weaknesses of public education and school in India, but merely to recognize that one may not be comparing like to like when making comparisons. Certainly, to the extent that the middle class in India can afford to pay for the human and infrastructural resources in better schools, their children will be provided a better education. But when like is compared to like, private schools do not perform better than public schools. This is especially the case with low-fee private schools whether you look at a recent randomized trial in Andhra Pradesh (Muralidharan and Sundaraman, 2015, Karopady, 2014) or the more extensive work of Prachi Srivastava (for a review, see Srivastava, 2013). The more relevant differences between schools will tend to be in

community engagement and overall resources.

The legal theorist Roberto Unger has often called for what he calls 'democratic experimentalism', by which he means that human social organization should not be confined to rigid and predetermined institutional arrangements such as the state and private sector but needs to be left open to experimentation and revision. In the Indian context the possibilities for such an approach are endless. One can imagine very many forms of institutional and curricular organization and practice that can serve the fundamental human purpose of education, and indeed, there are many such experiments taking place, whether through social policies like RtE or alternatives such as the Lokavidya approach. In all cases, however, the necessity is for a committed and engaged group of people who see these experiments to educate a body of young human beings as something for which the whole community is responsible.

During the same initial years of graduate school, I also read the following quote from the Italian intellectual, Antonio Gramsci: 'How many times have I wondered if it is really possible to forge links with a mass of people when one has never had strong feelings for anyone, not even one's own parents: if it is possible to have a collectivity when one has not been deeply loved oneself by individual human creatures'. (Quoted in Fiori 1965) That quote has remained with me through these years, and seems apposite to summarize my thoughts. If one is to create a real and meaningful sense of the public, one needs to begin with love and care. It is to that purpose that education should be aimed, and whether it is achieved through the private or public is of secondary importance.

#### References:

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