Local Democracy, Rural Community, and Participatory School Governance

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This article considers the indigenization of democracy in India by conceptualizing participatory deliberative decision-making practice as a tool to strengthen the functioning of local schools and to enhance democratic responsiveness within communities. Drawing on case-studies of bottom-up approaches to school governance, this study examines an array of innovative participatory governance practices that have emerged in diverse rural settings to make the state more responsive and accountable to the education of marginalized children. The author argues that these practices have enabled a fuller realization of people's rights and have enhanced their ability to influence larger institutions and policies affecting the schooling and life-options of their children.

Introduction

Since 1950, the Constitution of India has mandated free and compulsory education for all children until the age of 14. This national commitment was to be realized through the overall development of a more egalitarian, inclusionary, and equitable public education system. Yet, the goal of universalized elementary education continues to be elusive, both in qualitative and quantitative terms, in spite of much-publicized education reform efforts of the 1990s. Nearly 14 million children in India do not attend school. Of these nearly 14 million children, 52-55% are girls. Further, most children leave government primary schools without gaining basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic (Pratham, 2007).

It is not difficult to discern the identity of these children: they are children of communities at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, largely located in rural and poor urban areas. Educational statistics (Government of India, 2006b) indicate the extent to which non-enrollment and discontinuation of education are associated with particular social groups and locations. Rural girls belonging to disadvantaged groups like Scheduled Castes or Dalits and Scheduled Tribes or Adivasis[1] illustrate this phenomenon with 50% and 56% respectively having dropped out of school. Male-female differences are highest among the poorest quintiles of the population in both rural and urban areas. Educational

[1] In terms of social status, the Indian population can be grouped into four categories: Scheduled Castes (SC) or Dalits, Scheduled Tribes (ST) or Adivasis, Other Backward Classes (OBC), and Others. The generic term "Dalit," originally meaning "broken, ground down," has been taken as a summary term for those groups otherwise designated as "Untouchables," "Harijans," or, more technically, "Scheduled Castes" or "Depressed Classes." They are persons of discrete sets of low castes who are excluded from social, cultural, religious, and other conventions of an elaborate hierarchical Indian caste system. As now used, it implies a condition of being marginalized and deprived of basic rights on account of their birth into low status social groups (Fuchs & Linkenbach, 2003, p. 1541).

participation corresponds to religious groups, as well. It is estimated, for example, that 25% of Muslim children in the 6-14 year age group have either never attended school or have dropped out (Government of India, 2006a).

Dalits ("untouchable" castes), Adivasis (tribal groups) and Muslims (a religious minority) represent the most poorest and disadvantaged segments of Indian society, with social and spatial identity as the central axis of their exclusion (Kabeer, 2006). Govinda (2007) delineates three major levels at which exclusion from school occurs: (1) non-availability of school; (2) dropping out during the initial years of schooling without achieving basic literacy and numeracy skills; and (3) acquisition of basic competencies but the inability to transition from lower primary to upper primary grades. Other factors that exacerbate social exclusion from education in India include underinvestment in resources for elementary education, discriminatory school practices, disjunctures between socio-cultural ethos of home and school, and institutional arrangements of public schooling that lack accountability and responsiveness (Jeffery, 2005).

Expanding and deepening community participation in the state's actions may represent one promising strategy to address these various factors that result in educational exclusion. Critical commentators like Sadgopal (2004, 2008) hold that the government and its varied organs have made education too dependent on over-centralized bureaucracies and uniform practices that overlook the nation's rich plurality. This has resulted in the systemic exclusion of teachers, parents, and community from taking part in the vision and creation of workable, effective and appropriate educational opportunities and infrastructure at the local level. At the same time, there is a growing corpus of informed research that attests to the potential of participatory structures and practices in advancing social and educational gains (Ramachandran & Jandhyala, 2007).

A paradigm shift must occur if meaningful education is to be made accessible to all Indian children for the purposes of equity and social change. In this new paradigm, the people would take the lead in moving toward Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE),[2] with the government playing a supportive role by making all the necessary resources available to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI),[3] the

local bodies for self-governance, and other people-directed initiatives for realizing the transformative potential of education (Sadgopal, 2004, 2008).

This paper has three main purposes. First, it proposes participatory deliberative governance as a way to reconfigure the relationship between state and people in a manner in which ordinary people, including the most subordinated, can experience empowerment by effectively participating in and influencing institutional arrangements that affect their life options. The framework is largely informed by works of Amartya Sen (2000, 2006) on democracy and social justice, Archon Fung (2003) on participatory governance, and the structural provisions made in the Indian Constitution for rural governance. Second, it examines the realization of participatory governance in the context of real educational settings. The transformative potential of education is seen as linked to the imperatives of critical democracy, a way to experience empowerment for the vast majority in a society marked by social inequality. The emerging meta-theoretical perspective, evolving from integrating critical strands in education and polity discourses, provides a rich theoretical backdrop for understanding the relationship between democracy and school governance practices. Third, this paper argues for the possibility of realizing social and educational changes under a system of governance in which particularism rather than universalism is a guiding factor in providing education.

Local Democracy, Participatory Governance, and Education

It is well established that social and institutional practices frame and reproduce systemic power inequalities based on gender, class, caste, and other location characteristics (Be'teille, 2008). Democracy is, however, envisioned as a means of constructing a more egalitarian society by redressing compounded forms of inequities and exclusionary processes. However, the persistence of social inequality, in spite of a democratic form of governance, has led social scientists to critically examine the realization of "conventional" democracies and their intended transformative potential.

For democracy to be truly empowering, it should be fully alive at the grassroots level. For Jayal (2006), local democracy is a way of enabling people to genuinely participate in and influence policies that affect their life options. It is premised on the belief that the quality of public life will be substantively transformed only when people

collectively debate and deliberate on issues of

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[2] Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) is the flagship program of the Government of India in the education sector. It was introduced in 2001 to ensure all eligible children go through eight years of schooling. In the first few years of the program, the focus was on improving access to schools, increasing enrollments, and reducing the drop-out rate of children from elementary grades. Increasingly, UEE is now focusing on quality of education in schools, including teacher presence and activity in classrooms; teacher training; and assessment systems.

[3] In the Indian context, through the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, the funds and power were devolved to the Panchayat institutions, the local bodies elected at the level of the village; the block; and the district. Refer to Jayal (2006) for further description.

common concern, and are provided with decision-making powers to give effect to their shared concerns. This is a much deeper and direct form of democracy than the rather minimal conception of it as implied in the idea of elections. (p. 2-3)

From this perspective, the innate problem-solving capacity that resides in common people can be nurtured and realized through the localized network of a socially integrated community, which collectively attempts to achieve its "common emancipation" by devising indigenized solutions to local problems.

Localism, as embodied in self-governance structures, signifies a way of nurturing and strengthening the capacity for problem-solving through collective action. From this perspective, grassroots movements initiated by peasants, tribals, Dalits, and women provide instances of collective transformative capacities of people to challenge the existing social order and state practices in order to claim their rights and basis of existence. The ongoing environmental movement against the construction of the *Sardar Sarovar* dam in the Narmada Valley illustrates one example of a rural community's struggle for non-compliance to a centralized model of development planning that fails to take into account concerns and interests of local people. Through such social movements, rural people have begun to articulate demands for space and voice in their government's decision-making practices. Kothari regards this relationship between state and society as a "non-party political process" (as cited in Fuchs and Linkenbach, 2003, p. 1551-52).

Amartya Sen's work on *Social Choice Theory* (2006) further enriches the framework of democratic governance. Sen argues that to meaningfully work toward realizing social justice in a sizeable and stratified society, people, especially those members of politically disadvantaged populations, should be regarded as situated agents, and the scope of their inclusion and participation in state's decision-making governance structures should be enhanced. Critically reflecting on this work, Fukuda-Parr (2006) holds that for Sen, people are not simply beneficiaries of economic and social progress in a society, but are active agents of social change. Sen's idea of agency in human development includes demanding rights in decision-making practices so that people can live in freedom with dignity, greater collective agency, participation, and autonomy. Democratic governance through institutional practices that expand participation, power, and voice and ensure the accountability of decision-makers is critical for gaining political empowerment of disadvantaged populations.

An empowered participatory governance orientation (Fung & Wright, 2003) thus emerges at the intersection of political, social and democratic theorizing (Cohen, 1997, 2003; Cornwall, 2004, 2005; Fung, 2003, 2004; Gaventa

2004, 2005, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Empowered participatory governance can be realized by reconfiguring the space between people and formal state structures through thecreation of intermediaries that have the potential to actualize people's participation in decision making practices. These intermediaries can emerge in the form of public forums or social associations, bottom-up structures designed to enable local people to marshal their indigenous understanding, and resources to respond to local exigencies such as failing schools, rather than relying on the uniform solution prescribed by a centralized top-down system.

Empowered participatory governance, then, approximates the Habermasian (1990) notion of the public sphere. This public sphere is a pluralist civic space constructed away from the state, in and out of civil society. It is the space in which people deliberate about common issues and concerns; it is a site of production and circulation of discourse that can in principle be critical of the state. The public sphere is not absorbed into the state, but addresses the state and the "sorts of public issues on which state policy might bear" (Pinto, 2006, p. 206). The public sphere can then be regarded as a countervailing force to the state's official space that, according to Fine (1997), rests on and is constituted by a number of significant exclusions. In government schools, these exclusions have been embodied by parents, community, and larger public interests. School, as civic space, then provides the context in which shared visions, textured solidarity, and ongoing struggles can be realized to construct a more participatory form of democracy.

The Study

The data for this article were drawn from the larger Programme for Enrichment of School Level Education (PESLE) Assessment[4] commissioned by the Aga Khan Foundation, India (AKF-I), an international non-government organization (NGO). The assessment study sites were spread across the states of Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra and included both rural and urban communities. In its pursuit to support innovative school-based education reform initiatives, AKF-I launched the PESLE Programme with the mandate to improve enrollment, retention, and achievement of children by reforming government school systems and practices. Disadvantaged children, especially girls belonging to economically weaker, socially-marginalized, and minority communities in urban and rural areas were the principal intended beneficiaries of the PESLE

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[4] Refer to The PESLE Assessment Study (2007) for larger study objectives, methodology, and overall findings, including details of PESLE-NGO partners, their ways of supporting school practices, and sites of intervention.

initiative (1999-2007).

The project objective was to bring together a consortium of civil society initiatives working in elementary education under the PESLE's umbrella for consolidating, scaling up, and mainstreaming the best school practices that emerged in their specific socio-geographical contexts. By building a rich collection of experiences, approaches, processes, and strategies to inform academic debates and discourse, the intended outcome of the project was to qualitatively improve the larger public education system.

Some of the positive PESLE Project achievements included mobilizing community and developing local perspectives on education, providing continuous professional support to teachers, evolving culturally relevant pedagogic practices to improve educational outcomes, influencing state bureaucracy with informed field realities, and building social bridges among all stakeholders. Children, teachers, parents, community members, state officials, and local social and political activists all were regarded as critical actors and stakeholders in the process.

The objective of the micro study reported in this article, a sub-part of the larger PESLE Assessment Study, was to probe into the ways through which previously marginalized groups increased their access and presence in school governance practices and the social and educational gains resulting from this enhanced participation in terms of student enrollment, retention, quality of education, and enhanced self-esteem of rural people. This study hypothesized that the local school would emerge as a potential site for realizing a more empowering form of democracy in a markedly stratified society.

Data collection efforts included direct observations, informal conversations, open-ended interviews, and focus-group discussions to empirically capture the dynamics of field realities. The children, parents, community members, teachers, government officials, and political and social activists were the primary focus groups. In addition, records of community meetings, parent meetings, school development meetings, and Panchayat meetings were examined to understand the nature and quality of deliberations and decision-making processes that took place in these forums in the context of school practices. School records also provided an insight into the patterns of enrollment, attendance, and retention. Operationally, a school and its alignment with other social actors such as children, parents, teachers, community members, social activists, and government officials constituted the unit of the study.

In consultation with the local NGO, those intervention sites were identified as a study sample that held the promise of offering evidence of discernable educational and social gains as realized through participatory practices. The purposively-selected sample sites were located in the rural settings of the state of Rajasthan, an educationally lagging Indian state with schooling outcomes skewed against girls, lower castes and religious minorities (Gold, 2002).

In this article, four rural community involvement projects are discussed: Gopala, Garhi Mewat, Talvarsha and Alipur.[5] Each case reflects the hard work of social activists, parents, community, teachers, and practitioners for strengthening people's presence inside the school and around concerns of education. Village education committees, parent-teacher associations, school management and betterment committees, mothers' groups, and other community-based organizations provided the rural community the platform to experience empowerment by participating in activities that support schools.

The Government Primary School, Village Gopala, Block Thanagazi

Gopala, a village in the Thanagazi block of Rajasthan, is primarily inhabited by *Yadavs*, a peasant community comprised largely of marginal farmers, cattle grazers, and agricultural laborers. *Yadavs*, a relatively well-off social group, is ranked as one of the Other Backward Castes in the social hierarchy. The village has 109 households with a population of 1,082 (549 males, 533 females). The average land holding pattern ranges from one to four hectares. Infrastructural facilities in terms of connectivity to paved road, water, and electricity are minimal. The village has a government primary school and a primary health center.

A school visit provided an insight into how the school has emerged as a site to realize the aspirations of the community in the last few years. It's 9:00 a.m. and most of children have arrived in school well before the scheduled time. They clean their classrooms, organize books and learning material, water plants, and clear the play area. Children earnestly wait for *Bal Sabha*, the morning assembly that announces the formal commencement of a school day. A group of girls sing, "*Hum honge kamyab ek din … We hold the belief that we shall be successful one day, all of us would prosper...*" After observing the classroom discourse and pedagogic practices for two days, a clear picture of the school's educational character emerges: the school is envisioned as an organic extension of the community; the classroom is seen as an evolving learning space; curricular experiences are linked to children's immediate social context; and teaching-learning processes are largely mediated through reflective practices. While talking with a bunch of energetic children, Shanti, an eleven-year-old class-five student, proudly says that of all the siblings her father trusts only her in reading and understanding the state's official correspondence. She also keeps an account

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[5] Pseudonyms are used for all names of villages and persons.

of her family's monthly expenditures. Many such children's narratives affirm the value of a functional school in building enhanced self-concept and esteem.

The emerging scenario looks promising considering that, until a few years ago, the government primary school in Gopala was largely dysfunctional in terms of student enrollment, retention, and level of educational attainment. The state educational bureaucracy was too distantly located to support the rural school on a continuing basis. However, with devolving of some of the state's functions to local bodies, the community began to recognize the instrumental value of education in terms of enhanced representation in local power structures at the Panchayat and block level, greater social mobility, and improved livelihood opportunities. As Jairam, an elderly villager, articulates,

> Earlier we never used to consider the issue of schooling our children seriously. As we were slow to pursue educational opportunities, we, the Yadavs in Gopala, began to lag behind the others, economically and politically. With education, Thakurs, Rajputs and Meena children have done very well for themselves in the last 8 to 10 years. We need to catch up with them.

The community started viewing an effective school as a prerequisite for gaining academic competencies for widening life's options. In the Gram Sabha, a general body meeting of the village, it was resolved to get all the children of the village into school and ensure that they further their education. The community approached the local NGO to strengthen the school's functioning and reconstituted the defunct Village Education Committee (VEC), a formal state body, to seriously investigate problems of the school and develop effective ways to redress them.

The community started placing those issues on the agenda of the monthly held VEC meetings that had never been previously considered: analysis of school enrollment and retention data, teacher absenteeism, quality of midday meals, comparisons of the school's effectiveness in terms of its teaching and co-curricular activities with other government and private schools, and auditing of school maintenance funds. In response to high incidence of girls missing school because of childcare responsibilities for younger siblings, the VEC decided to set up a pre-school/day care center in the school premises. This partially relieved the girls of their family responsibilities during school time. The community initiative was ably supported by the local NGO that trained a mother teacher, a female volunteer from within the community to look after and prepare young children for formal schooling. The NGO also provided meaningful pedagogic resources for realizing

the community's educational goals. Many village elders like Jairam have assumed the daily responsibility of tracking absentee children and bringing them back to school.

The Village Education Committee also drew on its own political and organizational network for fixing school problems. For instance, it convinced the Block Education Officer to transfer an underperforming teacher and hire a more committed teacher. These collective efforts resulted in the government primary school in Gopala becoming the first school in the entire rural Thanagazi block in 2004 to realize a 100% enrollment rate. All stakeholders, including parents, community members, local social activists, politicians, teachers, educational officials and the District Collector (the highest state official), celebrated this achievement, the first of its kind. The proactive community petitioned the District Education Officer to upgrade the school to the secondary level and create a residential hostel for adolescent girls. The demand is likely to be met, according to the Block Education Officer.

With Gopala, the belief that systemic change can be realized through grassroots collective action has been strengthened more broadly. Bhopala, Krasaka and other neighboring villages also initiated processes of taking ownership of government schools and making them more functionally accountable in terms of enrollment, retention, and quality of educational outcomes. Ram Pal Sharma, Block Education Officer, observes that "through Gopala, we realized that people-based school governance arrangements are an effective alternative. I strongly advocate enhancing community participation in school's functioning." These observations clearly indicate a discernable positive shift in the mindset of state officials for supporting community based efforts in realizing greater accountability.

A strongly-felt need and realization of benefits accruing from education steered the community to own the school and support it in myriad ways. The emerging possibility of change is voiced by Radha Rani, a mother:

> I used to think that my daughter would also tread the fatalist path akin to that of mine, there is no other way. However, with functioning of the school on a regular basis, hope for leading a respectful existence appears to be a realizable possibility for my daughter.

Rani's optimistic outlook serves as an auspicious sign for future female literacy in a society enmeshed in a web of brother favoritism, gendered sex roles, and child marriage.

The Government Primary School, Village Garhi Mewat, Block Deeg

Garhi Mewat is a remote habitation in the Deeg block

of Bharatpur district in Rajasthan. It is largely inhabited by Meo-Muslims (*Meos*), an ethnically unique tribal community that practices Hindu and Islamic customs, traditions and beliefs. After embracing Islam in the 14th century, the community retained its distinctive Hindu heritage and lineage. Once a warrior tribe, the *Meos* are now marginal farmers with nominal land holdings. Over the years, closely knit *Meos* became socially alienated from the larger, mainstream society that is itself marked by distinct caste, religious, and ethnic fault lines. The literacy rate among the *Meos* is abysmally low, and less than 10% can barely read and write.

A mismatch between the historically held religious traditions of *Meos* and formal school's methods of organizing curricular experiences had pushed the enrollment rate, especially of *Meo* girls, to an alarmingly low level. The community interpreted the educational character of the school, especially the use of Hindi as a medium of learning, pictorial representation of certain phenomena, and singing and dancing activities as anti-Islamic. The influential local clergy advocated *din-e-taleem*, the study of religion, as the only form of education that was permissible to girls. Shaina, a 14-year-old girl who has never been enrolled in school, shared with me that Maulvi*,* the local clergy, advised her, "don't go to school, say your prayers and learn Urdu for reading the Quran." Her parents complied with Maulvi's dictate. Non-availability of girls' schools and female teachers further exacerbated the state of educational deprivation of *Meos* in the Mewat region.

Both community and school, driven by different sets of values and priorities, had reached an impasse and were unable to acknowledge each other's perspective. The local NGO intervened to break the deadlock. It dialogued with the local religious leaders and Muslim intelligentsia on one hand and appealed to the Block Education Officer to take a more informed view on the issue. A platform, '*The Stakeholders Forum'*, was created where the state officials, government teachers, parents, community, local clergy, political leaders, and social activists all converged.

Through this monthly platform, key stakeholders exchanged information, broke barriers, appreciated each other's views on school practices, and evolved more informed choices through deliberative processes. Muslim women and local clergy were envisioned as critical stakeholders in enabling girls to attend school. I was the participant observer in one such Stakeholders Forum meeting that happened during the field visit. In the meeting, school data were analyzed for enrollment trends, retention, and quality of educational outcomes. The framework of a forthcoming teacher training program was presented, monthly plan of action was finalized, and the dynamics of cultural resistance to education in some hard-to-reach households were discussed. Khushiram, the Block Resource Center Facilitator concedes that, "educational structures and practices are not always supportive of desirable educational outcomes. The system should have in-built flexibility to be responsive to varying contextual needs and aspirations."

Staggering government school timing to enable children to attend religious education in the local Madarsa, offering Urdu as a medium of learning, and appointing female teachers were some of the measures that were initiated through the platform to bring the children back into the educational fold. The *Meos'* rich oral history and traditions were integrated in the school's pedagogic discourse. A meaningful interface between religious and formal school education was created wherein both systems of education were seen as more complementary than as adversarial to each other. As a result, an appreciable gain in student enrollment and retention, especially among girls in the government school of Garhi Mewat, has been realized. According to school records, about 56% of girls of 6-10 years of age and 72% of boys of the same age group are currently enrolled. It is a healthy gain considering that resistance to girls' education is stubbornly ingrained in the community's social fabric. The change would have not been possible without the support of Maulana Mir Quasim of Meel ka Madarsa, a respected religious figure in Deeg.

To gain entry into the closed *Meo* community, the local NGO employed a multi-pronged strategy. At one level, women were mobilized around the issue of reproductive health of pregnant and lactating mothers. On the other level, men were organized into self-help groups to undertake vocational training. With such practices, community trust was won and an enabling context was created for building a consensus on the schooling of children, especially that of girls. Motivated *Meo* youths, progressive clergy, and educated Muslim women were taken on board to create wider ownership of the process. School visits affirmed the educational gains.

A group of twenty young girls were playing *Pattu*, a game designed to promote numeracy skills. A huge flower petal, containing various number combinations, was drawn on the floor. The teacher randomly announced numbers, and girls had to identify the correct answer and hop on to the petal containing that specific number. Observing those girls singing, jumping, and talking confidently was, indeed, evidence of the freedom of expression they were enjoying. The girls told us with great pride that they commuted by bicycles and were keen on pursuing higher studies, even if they had to travel far distances. Little Farida can't say how old she is, but clearly articulates, "I want to grow up to be like you, a teacher." The girls have begun to envision career options in their limited lived realities. Nazneen, Farida's

mother, says that her familial dynamics have changed since the day all four of her children started going to school. Asif, her functionally literate husband, comes home early to oversee their children's studies.

The Garhi Mewat case raises the possibility of resolving conflicting perspectives in a reasoned way. In a culturally diversified society, the interests and concerns of indigenous ethnic groups are likely to be either overlooked or subsumed in the state's uniform practices. From the perspective of Social Choice Theory, collective decision-making emerging from a process of democratic deliberations is a more constructive alternative to any generalized prescription. Sen (1999) argues,

> the practice of democracy gives the citizens an opportunity to learn from each other, and to re-examine their own values and priorities, along with those of others… guaranteeing of open discussion, debate, criticism and dissent are central to the process of generating informed and reflected choices. (p. 3)

The Community Primary School, Village Talvarsha, Block Umrein

Small and scattered hamlets or *dhanis* are typical of a Rajasthan village. Often, these hamlets are inhabited by a single social group or are divided into clusters of differentially ranked social groups. Conventionally, spatial distance between two clusters signifies the extent of their social separation. The hamlet located farthest from the main hamlet is usually inhabited by the lowest ranking social group (Jha & Jhingran, 2002).

The village Talvarsha has distinct hamlets of social groups: *Thakurs* and *Rajputs,* the dominant upper castes; *Gujars*, *Kumhars*, and *Nais*, the Other Backward Classes; *Meenas* and *Dhankas*, the Scheduled Tribes or Adivasis; and *Reghars*, *Chamars*, and *Balmikis*, the Scheduled Castes or Dalits. Historically, leather curing, scavenging, and subsistence agriculture labor is the main ascribed occupation of Dalits; upper castes are engaged in farming and cattle grazing activities. To escape social denigration and exploitation, many families migrate to cities in search of better livelihood options. The government school located in the main *Gujjar* habitation is physically inaccessible to the far-off hamlets of the *Regars* and *Balmikis*. The spatial exclusion[6] of Dalits further exacerbates their traditionally-

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[6] Walker and Walker (1997) conceptualize "social exclusion" as a multi-dimensional, inherently "dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political or cultural systems that determine the social integration of a person in society. Social exclusion may, therefore, be seen as the denial

held exclusion from various social formations at the community and Panchayat levels.

In *Talvarsha*, the local NGO created a forum, *Samudayik Bethak*, the Community Meeting, for all social groups, upper castes and Dalits alike, to collectively engage in analyzing the local issues - social, political, ideological, and educational. Through a series of deliberative discussions that lasted over a year, participants reached a consensus to set up a school in the village that would cater to the educational needs and aspirations of all social groups. With the civil society initiative, a school was set up on the common community land in 2001 in a *Reghar* hamlet. Initially, only Dalit children got enrolled in the school. Gradually, on the basis of school practices and outcomes that were far superior to the state school, children of upper castes also started enrolling. In regularly-held school-community meetings, all social and gendered groups, including the most disempowered, participate in school decision-making practices. I was a participant observer in one such meeting. The issue of low enrollment of *Balmiki* children, the most dispossessed subjects in social hierarchy and the growing absenteeism among older girl children, was discussed at great length.

The process of consensus building among different social groups has its own dynamics and requires both time and advocacy, not only to convince people of the need to educate their children, but, also to overcome internal dissentions. Devidyal, a community coordinator for several years, observed that in his initial years of work, *Chamars* could not access water from the water source located on *Gujjar Dhani'*s land. If *Reghar* women came, then the *Thakur* women said they would not come. Devidyal reminiscences that it took considerable time to bring varying social groups to a point from where they began to appreciate that education is essential for their children:

> After a year of sustained discussions and negotiations with various social groups, consensus was arrived at to construct a school that is equally accessible to all children irrespective of their social origin. In a specially convened village meeting, it was decided to locate the school in a Dalit hamlet. This was the major achievement.

(or non-realization) of the civil, political and social rights of citizenship" (p. 8). For Byrne (1999), "exclusion happens in time, in a time of history, and 'determines' the lives of the individuals and collectivities who are excluded and of those individuals and collectivities who are not" (p. 1). Traditionally, the exclusionary tendencies have entered the education system to influence its character. Regulating the access to schooling experiences of the equitable quality is one of the conventionally held ways to maintain the ascribed social order.

Situating the issue of education in a social perspective, Chunnilal, a *Reghar* Dalit and President of the Bhujan Samaj Party (BSP), explains,

> Until recently, education never figured as an agenda in our caste and village Panchayat meetings, it was largely seen as an upper caste entitlement. With political mobilization, awareness about education is spreading. Unfortunately, a section of Balmikis, still do not recognize their right to education. It feels good when the upper caste children and our children share the same physical and social space.

BSP is a political organization that mobilizes Dalit masses on issues of rights, identities, and aspirations. In recent times, the BSP has emerged as a powerful counter force to dominant political and social configurations. Chunnilal's views succinctly point to changes in perception that are taking place in firming up of caste-based power dynamics in local democratic structures and the political necessity of taking Dalits along in decision making practices. Interestingly, the school is also emerging as a site in which to assess this politically warranted agenda of social inclusion and integration.

Effective pedagogical practices, awareness of one's constitutional rights and construction of a common perspective on school paved the way for sustainable social and educational changes to take place. Mohan, Radha, Mahesh, and other such children of migratory families have stopped accompanying their parents in their seasonal hunt for livelihood. They stay back to be in school. As Mahesh articulates,

> I always envied school-going children. I hated going with my parents to a brick-kiln factory and sharing a crammed room with many others like me. The very thought of leading a life akin to that of my parents scares me. I am studying hard to become a police officer so that others would respect me.

Her grandmother, Memwati, holds that with education Mahesh can pull the family out of vicious cycle of poverty, deprivation, and social denigration. She sees education as a path to success and for gainful employment in government service.

Presently, most children in the catchment area are enrolled in school, older children have ceased to migrate with their parents to brick-kiln factories, and Dalit parents have started participating in existing village governance structures to voice concerns about their children's education. This shift suggests that education has created a context to re-experience democracy as a struggle over exclusionary societal practices and subordinated social relations. In a society that is deeply entrenched in a feudalist, caste, and gendered mindset, school has emerged as a potential site to seek and realize social justice, rights and entitlement. However, the process for these educational and social transformative processes to evolve and mature is long.

The local NGO played a critical role of change agent in the community. On the one hand, it mobilized and mentored different social groups to construct a common perspective on the value of education, and on the other, it dismantled traditionally held beliefs about social separation and caste purity by evolving a democratic culture of collective reflection. Banwari, a local NGO worker observes,

> When an effective people-collective is in place, local leaders and other socio-political actors try to align with this people-collective as the community has given them this 'other' identity of a Sarpanch (Village headman), Wardpanch (Ward leader)… In a democratic set-up, people have the power to define and shape any socio-political formation. Hence, needs and aspirations of people cannot be ignored for a long time.

The Government Primary School, Village Alipur, Block Deeg

Alipur, a remote village situated at the foot of the Aravali range is predominantly inhabited by Gujjar families. It is a small village, with 41 households and a population of 310 (165 males, 145 females). Cattle rearing and farming are the main occupations. Basic amenities such as a water tank, electricity, primary health center, and connectivity to the paved road do not exist. In 2003, the Alipur primary school was on the verge of being closed down as the retention rate dipped below 10%. The school was virtually dysfunctional due to the prolonged absence of a regular teacher. The local NGO facilitated the village community to articulate and raise their concern at the Panchayat and block-level forums. As a result, the non-functional absentee teacher was transferred, and Mohan Shyam, the newly appointed teacher, was given the charge of reactivating the school system. The local civil society initiative also supported the teacher in strengthening school's functioning and pedagogic resources. To date, all children are enrolled, and the retention rate is improving. As Mohan Shyam, Government Teacher, Alipur, articulates,

> When I joined the school in 2005, [it] was in a state of disarray. Children though enrolled, did not have the habit or urge to come to school. For initiating the process of re-energizing school, I decided to

stay back in the village and be available to children to build their faith in education and compensate for "missed out" schooling experiences.

Besides locating himself in the community, the teacher adopted a series of measures to reach out to children. School timing, structures, and pedagogic practices were made more flexible. Children's everyday experiences were incorporated into the curricular practices. Girls who were unable to attend full day school were allowed to log into school at their convenience, even if that meant coming for an hour. The gap was subsequently bridged by the teacher in evening. The community lent a helping hand to the teacher in making available pedagogic resources such as an abacus, a wall clock, maps, and science models.

Other visible gains include a community of vibrant children who are earnestly engaged in processes of learning and knowing, and the emergence of a people's collective rallied around the common agenda of school ownership. The community is becoming an active partner in the processes of planning, monitoring, and evaluating school activities through regularly held school-community meetings, and educational functionaries are visiting the school on a regular basis. The teacher has started the process of influencing the larger system of a teacher-collective by sharing the success of this context specific initiative in resurrecting a failing school.

A school visit affirmed the gains in this geographically isolated village. Class-four children were well versed in map reading, their conceptual understanding of mathematical abilities was firmly in place, and they could fluently read and comprehend textual material. They were equally knowledgeable about local flora and fauna, cattle rearing, and farming methods. Emerging from an interactive session with children was their steely resolve to overcome geographical challenges to realize their distant dream of gaining higher education, which entails treading a rocky stretch of four miles to the nearest high school. The rural children and their families see education as a way out of poverty and a means of enhancing their life chances.

Discussion

Prospects and Dilemmas for Change

This paper examined some of the possible ways, both theoretically and practically, through which the potential of ordinary people drawn from the lowest strata of the society, can be mobilized in a concerted fashion to influence larger institutional practices that affect schooling and life options of children. These participatory efforts were largely informal collective arrangements that evolved naturally, in different ways, in response to exigencies of the local situation, rather than passively relying upon a top-down institutional arrangement that fails to take into account contextual needs and specificities. An additional gain was that people initiated into politically deliberative culture, through these intermediaries, have started demanding the same consultative mode to be practiced in state bodies such as the village education committee, the school management committee, and other social and political arrangements.

The intrinsic value of these efforts, though of modest scale, speaks of people's potential to re-construct school as an organic extension of the rural community, enabling communities to press for accountability in ensuring effective school functioning. These concerted efforts gain significance against the backdrop of the state's traditional framework that conceptualizes school as a stand-alone, rule-bound system alienated from the rural community's social realities. In this traditional framework, the school is largely managed by controlling teachers through an inspection-based supervisory system, and the community's participation is limited to a token nomination in largely defunct state bodies. The study also brought to the fore the role of NGOs in creating spaces that challenged existing practices and instituted more equitable practices for leveraging voices that might have otherwise remained unheard.

A more inclusive and participatory framework of school governance also signifies that in a socially stratified society, education can act as a potential site for realizing democracy as an ongoing struggle to seek more equitable school experiences and life options. It emerged as a "struggle over values, practices, social relations, and subject positions that enlarge the terrain of human capacities and possibilities as a basis for compassionate social order" (Giroux, 1997, p. 28).

The concluding section draws out a web of possibilities that emerged during the study for reforming school and social practices. These possibilities assume an added significance as the Indian state struggles to meaningfully resolve dilemmas between centralization and decentralization, institutional and local context of education, regulatory and participatory form of school governance, bureaucratic structure and democratic culture, and singular and collectively evolved vision.

Dialogical Relationship between the State and the Rural Community

The governance of education is largely a state held welfare activity. However, the state's conventionally assumed role is changing in response to emerging economic and political trends. In neo-liberalist statecraft,[7] is widely

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[7] Bulpitt has defined "statecraft" as "the art of winning elections and, above all, achieving a necessary degree of governing competence in office" (as cited by Brown, 1997, p. 401).

promoted as a major instrument for deregulating and disaggregating state functioning by opening up space for multiple other actors, primarily the market, the state's own "delivery agency" model of public education,[8] and the others to intervene. Krishna Kumar (2008) cautions that the neo-liberal perspective is often invoked within education discourse to cover up the inefficiency of the Indian state in providing quality education to all children. An instrumentalist notion of the state "poses a grave risk for the role of education in harnessing the intellectual and creative potential of society" (p. 10). The author argues that in a traditionally unequal, rural and sizable society like India, the space vacated by the state does not necessarily translate into genuine public participation. Rather, in absence of a strong alliance between state and rural community, chances of it being usurped by market forces are amplified. From this viewpoint, a more nuanced theory of the state is needed than is usually available from the liberal state-versus-market debate.

In order to fulfill its constitutional mandate of providing free and compulsory education to all children until the age of 14, the Indian state needs to be positioned in a way such that it is strong enough to offset the impact of supranational forces on the one hand, while on the other, it can also strive to evolve a framework of governance in which all stakeholders feel sufficiently empowered as their concerns and interests are systemically addressed. To realize the intended transformative potential of education, it is then imperative that the state-society relationship be reconfigured in such a manner that the state continues to be the major provider of equitable quality of education to all children, builds a democratic culture of public participation and deliberation in education, provides some coordination in the face of externalities across social locations, and organizes the field of possibilities for maximal social and educational gain. The task of everyday conduct and governance is devolved to the people for strengthening the local school's functioning. It is envisioned that synergy between a strong state (not necessarily decentered) and an empowered community would have the potential to move toward universalizing elementary education, ensuring equitable distribution of institutional resources across different strata of the society, and keeping market forces at bay.

[8] Ravi Kumar (2006) argues that in wake of the economic reforms of 1990s, the Indian education policy became tilted against the poor masses and in favor of a selected few who could afford to buy it. Within the government school system, there are layers of schools or education delivery models that regulate student intake on basis of their economic positioning. In the emerging scenario, non-formal schools or centers are promoted as alternative ways of delivering education to deprived social groups. This educational approach then contravenes the constitutional mandate of equitable quality of schooling to all children.

The field data also suggest that improved functioning of the government school led to the closing of the private school in Gopala and the resurrection of the government school in Alipur. The author came across many similar instances during the study. These findings also gain significance because a dysfunctional school is likely to impact poor people with greater force as they lack meaningful alternatives. With meager economic and cultural capital, the choice of purchasing private schooling does not exist. If governance space is reconfigured from the people's perspective, then community emerges as a decisive force by virtue of the self-steering ability inherent within it. The emerging reflective community is not a residual to the state or market as assumed by many political theorists.

Making the Institutional Context of Education More Inclusive and Participatory

The institutional context determines, to a greater or lesser extent, a group or individual's capacity to make informed choices, and then transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. There is a burgeoning literature to support the observation that compliance to the regimental culture of bureaucratic arrangements or to dominant social ideology does not enhance school functioning. Rather, it stifles the inherent ability of teachers, parents, community members and other social actors to act innovatively in the challenging conditions (Govinda & Diwan, 2003; Ramchandran & Saihjee, 2006; Subrahmanian, 2005).

The effective schools in the present study were those that either developed active public spaces or energized the existing institutional and social forms by infusing them with a collegial culture of democratic decision-making. These concerted efforts ranged from creating or invigorating deliberative forums at the level of community, local government institutions or state. At the most inclusive end of the spectrum, people were able to influence the decision to set up a school in Talvarsha, analyze school performance in terms of students' achievement in Gopala and realize the transfer of an underperforming teacher in Alipur.

These participatory efforts set into motion a chain of change processes, albeit slowly. Collegial and deliberative culture was established in school to improve its functioning, a more inclusive community-school forum created an avenue for strengthening local social networks, an enabling familial context was created for girls to attend school, and state machinery became more responsive and accountable. These change processes were realized by instilling the habit of deliberative decision-making tied to action among those common people who have been hitherto attuned to a system of top-down decision making. In this dynamic process, a more critical consciousness and sense of agency was gained by women, landless laborers, Dalits and other social groups

that are often locked into a cultural framework in which they perceive their disempowerment to be a naturalized and just social act.

Merely promulgating constitutional changes does not necessarily translate into genuine community empowerment as envisioned by the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Indian Constitution. A set of enabling conditions have to be created for institutionalizing the practices of self-governance; otherwise, common people would flounder due to lack of capacity, knowledge, or internal conflict. The holding assumption is that capabilities for self management among the community members would evolve through practice rather than prescription. This belief is consistent with the recent policy initiatives to universalize elementary education by promoting community ownership of the school system (Government of India, 2000).

Building a Wider Ownership of the School

The constitutional mandate of an independent India envisioned education as a vehicle for personal progress and empowerment on one hand, and as a means of attaining social equity and justice on the other. However, exclusionary tactics of the bureaucracy stifled the realization of any such intended transformative possibility of education by rejecting or undervaluing the vision and voices of women, landless laborers, marginal farmers, tribes, Dalits, and other social groups - historically the most subordinated. The centrally-imposed vision, singular voice, and paternalistic culture, an integral part of the administrative machinery, countermanded any process whatsoever of changing and improving school. With the recent constitutional amendments and policy initiatives, a space has been created for building collective vision and wider ownership for reforming the school governance practices. The challenge lies in the ultimate choice between enhancing genuine empowerment and solidifying administrative control.

In the context of the present study, active civic engagement, collaborative working relationships, joint problem-solving capacity, shared decision-making, and interpersonal trust emerged as the core values for supporting school governance practices. An effective marshalling of the community's social capital (Putnam, 2000) has led to enhanced teacher commitment, reduced probability of student attrition, higher learner achievement, and better utilization of school facilities in Gopala, Alipur, and Garhi Mewat.

Degree of Freedom of Social Choice and Ownership

The study also provides insight into emerging trends in degree of ownership as linked to freedom of social choice. In socially homogeneous communities such as Gopala (*Yadavs*) and Alipur (*Gujjars*), the educational change was easy to realize, and strides were rapid. In socially heterogeneous community of Talvarsha (*Thakurs*, *Gujjars*, *Reghars*, *Mali*), it took time to build social consensus and synergy. Interplay of local power structures and traditionally held social conventions may retard the process and degree of ownership. Building trust and ownership for a state institution in a socio-culturally alienated group as in Garhi Mewat (*Meos*) was challenging as change in community's mindset has to proceed before gender equity in education can be realized. Thus the greater the freedom of social choice, the greater the ownership of school governance practices. However, caste and gender continue to be dominant factors in influencing social choice, social identity, and life trajectories.

Concluding Observations

The data collected from disparate rural sites provide evidence that participatory school governance can enhance local empowerment by better enabling communities to raise concerns, hold the state accountable, set agendas, build social capital, and evolve indigenous solutions to local problems. These people-centric efforts further gain significance as they emerge against a backdrop of enduring inequalities and asymmetries embedded in the mainstream educational and social systems. However, in the absence of a supporting context, these school renewal practices run the risk of either withering away or degenerating into piecemeal measures for crisis intervention, leaving neither a legacy of empowerment nor a hint of systemic change.

For sustaining and scaling-up these micro-level practices, a two-pronged strategy is suggested. First, further consolidation and expansion of the participatory base can help create a wider 'ownership' of the local school, build the capacity of the local rural community in terms of knowledge of their rights, roles and responsibilities in the changing scenario, strengthen the practice of collective decision-making, and facilitate the emergence of a more inclusive and representative leadership at the grass-root level to support a culture of accountability and transparency. Second, the state-level administrative bureaucracy should be encouraged to engage with local rural communities, and the state must adopt more flexible structures that have a built-in space for community participation, joint planning, and accountability in managing schools.

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