RESEARCH NOTE

Quality, Employability and Capabilities:
The Enduring Elusive Triangle in Indian Education

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Summary
India is historically known for its caste system and ascriptive social stratification. Inheritance-based ascription permits a small percentage of the population to be at the top of the social hierarchy and enjoy economic privileges. For this reason, the intersection between caste and economic factors often reproduces the "underclass" (MacDonald 1997). This is largely due to the country's socio-historic underpinnings. Although caste-specific sociological representation has been well established in the mainstream literature, this paper analyses the intersectional aspects of caste and class dimensions. Its analysis of the social underclass is based on interviews with educated unemployed youths in southern India. As the paper has been conceptually influenced by capability approach (Sen 1999), its main aim is to highlight the dualistic interaction between human agency and social structure. To this end, reflexive insights were collected from an ethnographic restudy of Sripuram in South India. Sripuram, a classic sociological field site, was first studied by renowned Indian sociologist André Béteille in the 1960s. He conducted fieldwork on caste, class and power dimensions in this village. By revisiting the same village five decades later, the author of this paper has attempted to analyse the caste, class and education of the poor.

> [...] education is one of the toughest problems that Man is called upon to handle. The effort must however be made because, in the last analysis, it is education alone that stands between Man and Catastrophe. (Naik 1979: 185)

Introduction

Educational reality in India lies between two extremes today. On the one hand, there are official documents that often celebrate the increasing "achievements" of school education, while on the other, enrolment rates have been decreasing at state schools over the years. With this background in mind, the present paper analyses the quality of education that deprived children and unemployed youths have obtained in southern India and how it has affected their employability and capability. These two groups of people have been identified as poor since their daily lives are spent on the

margins of society. The analysis has been conceptually influenced by capability approach (Sen 1999), and the main purpose of it is to highlight the complex interaction between human agency and social structure.[1] The reflexive insights it contains have been collected from ethnographic fieldwork in Sripuram.

Sripuram, a classic sociological field site in Tamil Nadu, was first studied by the renowned Indian sociologist André Béteille in the early 1960s. He conducted fieldwork on caste, class and power dimensions in this village and published his findings extensively. By visiting the same village nearly five decades later, the author of this article attempted to analyse the caste, class and education of the poor today. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, the paper examines the role of quality in education, the employability of poor school-leavers and its implications on their capability across diverse social groups.[2] Observations of the everyday interactions and "coping strategies" of the poor in their socio-economic spheres provided precious insights on education and poverty in Sripuram. The paper highlights the sociological implications of the correspondence between rising unemployment and the inferior school education provided by the Indian state.

Sripuram

Sripuram is a multi-caste village in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Its name is actually a pseudonym for ethnographic reasons. The village is known for its ancient religious heritage in Tamil Nadu. It lies about eight miles away from the city of Tanjore, alongside the sacred north bank of the River Kaveri. The village is a "well-selected village community" (Nandy 1966: 730) and is currently undergoing rapid and radical change mainly due to diverse socio-economic processes, including education. The author was introduced to the original location by Béteille.[3]

In his work, Béteille categorized the caste composition of the village into three major groups: Brahmans, non-Brahmans and the Adi-Dravida (Pallar). These segments have been characterized by distinctive styles of life often expressed in ritual terms (Béteille 1965: 76). Although there has not been any significant change in his caste scheme up to now, one can nevertheless observe some modifications in the categorization of social class. In the 1960s, these three groups in Béteille's description generally corresponded with three principal economic classes, viz. the

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1   The concept of *structure* is defined in this paper mainly in terms of the patterned social arrangements which influence or limit the choices and opportunities that individuals have. The notion of *agency*, in contrast, is the capacity of individuals to act independently, making their own free choices in society.

2   The notion of capability in this paper refers to the competence or the life skills one learns as a result of one's education. This is primarily to understand the broader notions of freedom or the ability to take independent decisions. Consequently, the importance of capabilities has been analysed in light of its effects on the poor's ability to break the cycle of economic deprivation and social exclusion they face.

3   Apart from reading Béteille's classic sociological texts, the author has regularly exchanged views and information with him since 2008.

landowners (who were predominantly Brahmin), tenants (the non-Brahmins) and the labourers (the Pallar). Today, however, one can see that this scheme has changed, a phenomenon primarily due to education. The Brahmins have given up their absentee-landlordism for various socio-economic reasons. Education has been one of the primary factors over the years. This has altered the original scheme as the landowners are mostly non-Brahmins today. Although most of the Pallar are still dependent on these neo-*mirasdars* ("new" landowners), the essential reason for this change is the role of education. As it turns out, education is one of the predominant developmental avenues for socio-economic mobility at present.

Another significant factor is the physical structure of the village, which reflects its social stratification: the *agraharam* is inhabited by Brahmins, the *kudiana* by non-Brahmins and the *Cheri* mostly by the Adi-Dravida.[4] Although the residential settlement pattern still shows conspicuous features of segregation between the castes, Béteille underlined the nature of "[...] caste fusions between proximate segments [...] due to secularization and westernization [...]" (Sinha 1973: 294). The nature of change witnessed in Sripuram is remarkably different from earlier descriptions. The *agraharam*, for instance, is no longer the exclusive residential area of the Brahmins. The increasing emigration of Brahmins from the village is slowly allowing the entry of non-Brahmins (or the "Other Backward Classes", as they are known in India; see footnote 8). Thus, Béteille's description of Sripuram as an *agraharam* or a Brahmin village (Béteille 1965a: 76) no longer reflects social reality. The Brahmins' exodus and the non-Brahmins' arrival in their place have provided a new flavour to the community.[5] In addition, Béteille's use of the *kudiana* as an inclusive name for the diverse streets where the non-Brahmins live has also changed. Basically, this area now consists of seven different streets.[6] Thus, the *kudiana* is no longer a single residential area populated by non-Brahmins. Contrary to these sporadic changes, the *Cheri* is still populated exclusively by the Pallar.[7]

In addition, even the name of the caste has changed. This is due to the broader political economy of Tamil Nadu.[8] For instance, before Béteille's period of fieldwork

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4   The *agraharam* is the place where the erstwhile higher-caste men (the Brahmins) live collectively in the towns and villages of Tamil Nadu.

5   It should be noted that present-day interaction in the *agraharam* is more democratic than it was during Béteille's period of fieldwork.

6   These are Sivan Koil Street, Kali Amman Koil Street, Perumal Koil Street, Odakkara Theru, Uppukkara Mettu Theru, Pillayar Koil Theru and Kezha Theru (*theru* means "street" in Tamil).

7   The Pallars in Sripuram are the erstwhile "lower" caste who are on the scheduled list of the caste groupings due to their social and economic backwardness in Tamil Nadu. They are part of the collective social grouping of the Dalits or the Harijans in today's caste system and are also officially mentioned as the Scheduled Castes (SCs) or *ex-untouchables*. *Cheri* means "slum" in Tamil.

8   For instance, according to recent demographic figures for Tamil Nadu, nearly 70% of the total population in the state are OBCs, as opposed to roughly 23% of its citizens, who are SCs. In light of this demographic reality, where roughly 93% of the total population are non-Brahmins (which includes both OBCs and SCs), the broader policy decisions are made because of populist demands (see GoI 2011: 253).

began, the Dalits were called *Pallan* in Sripuram. The political structure of Béteille's period changed this to *Palla*; even Béteille describes them as such in his work. Today they are known as *Pallar*. The difference in meaning is based on the progressive idea of referring to the caste with respect. Nowadays, anyone who uses the earlier nomenclature, *Pallan*, may meet with disapproving looks or even be charged with slander. Hence, the nomenclature of threefold classification of the castes in Béteille's categorization needs to be updated. In light of this, the non-Brahmins, for instance – a cluster of castes in the middle layer of society – have been referred to in this article either as the "dominant castes" (in the sense used by M. N. Srinivas) or simply by the official expression "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs).[9]

The school as a local bureaucracy

A government-aided school has been run in Sripuram ever since 1925. Although originally established by a local Brahmin family, it has actually been serving the needs of all the social groups in the village. Due to quality issues in the state system and the villagers' own socio-economic reasons of emigration, it now only caters to the needs of the local orphanage. The orphanage is managed by another Brahmin family which accommodates deprived children from broken homes. Thus there has been a discernible change in the nature of two institutions which primarily serve each other's needs. This provides a picture of orphan schooling in Sripuram.[10]

The discussions that have taken place among academics could be described in light of this unique institutional structure. The mainstream writings on education strongly oppose neo-liberal entry into the education system.[11] The idealistic vision of considering education as an end in itself conceptually opposes the entry of private players in India. The everyday functioning of a normal school like the one in Sripuram, in contrast, is merely a bureaucratic matter. The teachers, for instance, regard themselves as government officials rather than knowledge constructors. This contrary self-image and Goffmanian "interaction order" questions the very notion of constructivism. The ideals of constructivism in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) have to be seen in light of the fact that local schools' daily operations are purely dependent on the "higher" authorities. This dependency syndrome is justified

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9   According to Srinivas, the concept of "dominant caste" is based on three central sociological factors, namely numerical strength, economic strength and political power in society. The term "OBC" is basically the official terminology used by the central government. In the present context, it includes the "Backward Classes" (BCs) and the "Most-Backward Classes" (MBCs) of Tamil Nadu.

10 The unique nature of orphan schooling has to be seen in light of the villagers' social distance. The distancing process is complex as it is both voluntary and involuntary. The quality predicaments in education push the poor out of the local school, for instance, which is involuntary in nature. However, in the orphanage's case, the social structure eschews the children due to their socio-economic deprivations. This is systemically overlooked as the orphaned children mostly do not have an assertive agency. See for instance Venkataraman (2012).

11 See Hill et al. (2011), Jha (2005), Kumar (2011), Nussbaum (2010) and PROBE (1999), among others.

amidst the policy of decentralization. Since the decision to decentralize itself is a centralized one, the ideals of constructivism in the NCF are far from reality.[12]

In addition to this, there is another layer of hierarchical "power relations" inside the school. This justifies the difficulty of celebrating schools as institutions of knowledge. Although the school management commands respect from the teachers and pupils, they are submissive to the district as well as state bureaucracy. This submissiveness makes the school merely an extension of bureaucracy in the village. For instance, visits by the Block Resource Teacher Educator (BRTE) often formalize the normality of their being in operation. The result is the cosmetic display of "discipline" without genuinely discussing issues and problems that need to be sorted out to improve the situation. In these hierarchies of officialdom, children are at the receiving end; their subjective notions of education and learning are hardly discussed at all. The children – who are relatively powerless in this hierarchy – are frequently taken for granted by the education bureaucracy. This is often reinforced by everyday school processes where their agential voices are ignored. As the teachers' knowledge interactions are mostly structured by standard bureaucratic guidelines, one hardly finds any innovation in the whole educative process. Even the formalities of school inspections leave the pupils to their "fate."

Furthermore, children are expected to play the role of peons time and again, either by serving tea or by carrying circulars and other official communications to all the classrooms in the school. These "anticipatory" adult roles are also gendered to some extent as the "harder" tasks like opening and locking the school buildings during the week are assigned to older boys. These institutional expectations about the pupils are often considered "normal" as peons are not appointed at schools to deal with such duties. At times, these activities are "officially" described as part of the formal socialization process. For instance, it is customary to see children buying or preparing tea and snacks for school officials. This form of socialization is often displayed without any remorse.[13]

Systemic limitation of this kind frequently pushes the poor out of education. It should be noted that the poor are increasingly abandoning free government schooling in Sripuram. The main reason for this is the notorious quality of education at the school. There are two general factors which need to be highlighted here, one of which is the dented image of the state in school education. An effect or even cause of this image can be seen in the establishment of private schooling of various types in Tamil Nadu. Although these "education shops" are run purely for commercial reasons, their public image is a very good one. This is apparent from villagers' increasing enrolment in them. Parents' voluntary enrolment of their children at private schools in Meenakshipuram is a deliberate shunning of the local

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12   For further details, see NCERT (2005).
13   For related incidents, see The Hindu (2013).

village school.[14] This, in the popular view, is where Sripuram's orphans go. Most of the villagers say that "only people who can't afford private schools attend the government school." Thus the essential point is the worsening reputation of the local school, which used to be "celebrated as a site of secular values in modernizing the village a few decades back."[15]

Educational outcomes

A caste-specific analysis of the school completion rate is crucial as it gives a picture of the educational outcomes at the local school in Sripuram. In addition, caste-wise categorization also describes the changing educational approaches of social groups. A disaggregated analysis of the school completion rate in the village over the last two decades revealed an increasing trend with respect to enrolment decline from the *agraharam* (see table 1). This was emulated by the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the period between 1990 and 2012.[16]

The first noticeable aspect of the completion rate is the gradual decrease in the number of children attending the local school. This tallies with similar trends elsewhere in India where enrolment at government schools has declined over the years.[17] The decrease, which has been especially conspicuous in the post-Reform period since 1990, confirms the macro-economic effects of the Indian government's Structural Adjustment Programme in education. In addition, although the figures on the Scheduled Castes (SCs) are relatively constant, the decreasing enrolment of the erstwhile higher- and middle-level castes in the village is being keenly observed by the Pallar today. Due to this, one can see that the economically well-off Pallar households are mainly sending their children to private schools in Meenakshipuram. This differentiating approach to education due to intersectional social factors – caste and class – often creates a new stratum of society, even among the erstwhile lower caste in the village. One can observe the voluntary social distance of the educated households in Keezhatheru today for this reason.[18]

The researcher's unannounced casual visits to the local school and orphanage provided him with a picture of educational quality in the village. An assessment of

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14 Meenakshipuram, which is also a pseudonym for a small town in the district of Tanjore, is one of the block headquarters. It is the nearest small town to Sripuram.

15 Personal communication with André Béteille, November 2, 2011.

16 It is important to note that the behaviour of the poor in turning away from the local school was actually involuntary; it was mostly due to the quality predicaments of the state education system.

17 See PROBE (1999).

18 This is where the SCs *exclusively* live in Sripuram. As mentioned earlier, even though the exclusivist residential areas of other castes (both Brahmins and OBCs) have started changing in Sripuram, it is still the same for the Palla *cheri*. These subtle changes over the years are mostly due to socio-economic factors. (Béteille discussed about the present day Keezhatheru using the nomenclature of *Palla Cheri*. Although the village elders remember this name, somehow the tag of *cheri* has been dropped in everyday use; *cheri* means "slum" in Tamil.)

Table 1: School completion rate (1990–2012) [caste-wise]

Year	Brahmin		Non-Brahmin (BCs / MBCs)		SCs		Total		Grand total
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	
1990	11	18	146	515	81	131	238	664	902
1991	11	11	147	374	100	123	258	508	766
1992	10	10	172	383	109	127	291	520	811
1993	3	7	185	386	94	133	282	526	808
1994	8	10	159	392	92	148	259	550	809
1995	6	8	174	445	90	145	270	598	868
1996	6	7	200	430	99	150	305	594	899
1997	5	4	221	396	99	122	325	522	847
1998	5	4	208	264	102	118	325	522	847
1999	6	3	219	268	99	110	315	386	701
2000	6	5	206	250	102	129	324	381	705
2001	7	5	214	237	97	123	318	384	702
2002	5	4	209	223	94	126	308	453	761
2003	5	4	208	224	80	98	283	326	609
2004	4	4	182	214	76	89	263	307	570
2005	6	2	186	208	70	80	262	290	552
2006	5	4	177	201	65	70	247	275	522
2007	6	2	182	203	69	68	257	273	530
2008	8	2	167	192	66	77	241	271	512
2009	1	2	146	181	79	85	226	268	494
2010	1	6	141	185	77	81	219	272	491
2011	0	4	127	157	58	57	185	218	403
2012	0	5	121	138	48	58	169	196	365

Source: school records in Sripuram (from 1990 to 2012). Key: BCs = Backward Classes, MBCs = Most-Backward Classes, SCs = Scheduled Castes.

the children's basic literacy and numeracy skills underlined the lack of quality in education there. This was based on simple tests by the researcher on (1) reading comprehension, (2) writing (dictation) and (3) numeracy skills. Although this assessment was conducted during various fieldwork periods, many children were seen to be failing in most of these areas. Despite the few exceptions there were among the children, it can reasonably be said that their failures symbolize the shortcomings of the education system in general. What's more, these shortcomings are overlooked by the teachers. Their disregard can be seen in light of their promptness in leaving the school as soon as "office hours" are over, irrespective of

any delays they experience in the morning that stop them from getting to school in good time. In addition, the state's "noble" all-pass policy manages to promote children to the next level of the education ladder without them having learnt anything significant.[19] While some of the teaching staff accepted the drop in quality, they also commented on their own inability to discipline children due to new regulations. At present, they primarily cite the recent government rule to prevent corporal punishment in education. In this context, one teacher metaphorically complained:

> Although the Government expects quality teaching from us, the regulations [they introduce] often tie our hands, even stopping us from using a piece of chalk! (from the author's field notes)

In view of this situation, the educational outcome seems to be an alarmingly poor one for many children in Sripuram. For instance, the failures of 8th-standard children are worrying in comparison to the junior classes as they are older and have become a negative reference point for the locality. It seems that their failure in education (mainly in terms of literacy and numeracy skills) is setting the stage for inferior "capability formations."[20] This has often been cited as the reason by educated unemployed youths. Most of the youths the author interviewed acknowledged that pupils from Sripuram often performed poorly in Meenakshipuram.[21]

This dual developmental deficit in terms of functionings and capabilities needs to be analysed in terms of intersectional social facts. As the system of education is mostly determined by class and caste factors, the extreme difference in quality often perpetuates the mainstream social order. Despite being a microscopic unit, Sripuram reflects the broader educational reality of the entire country; it seems that the notion of quality only exists in official reports. The voluminous reports on various aspects of education contain an endless amount of facts and figures, but fail to reflect the everyday complexities of the school education system. This complexity in the hierarchical system commands the process of teaching in which learning is subservient to the education bureaucracy.

Education quality and employability

The developmental demands of a post-colonial society like India's can largely be met by "certified" knowledge. As functional literacy becomes a pathway to salaried

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19 See Srinivasan (2012).

20 Since the concepts of functionings and capabilities are central aspects of the capability approach, it is important to know how they are interlinked. Functionings are "the outcomes or achievements, whereas capabilities are the real opportunities to achieve valuable states of being and doing" (Robeyns 2006: 78).

21 It must be added that the village only has a middle school, which caters to children's educational needs up to 8th standard, so the residents have to send their children to other schools outside Sripuram irrespective of their socio-economic status. Satsangh Higher Secondary School in Meenakshipuram is the preferred destination these days.

employment, education quality becomes crucial. The quality predicaments in education are primarily determined by the stakeholders. There are two central factors that need to be mentioned here. One is parental neglect due to socio-economic deprivation. This is involuntary in nature. The next is the bureaucratic apathy of the state, which is most often voluntary. In addition to these factors, the intersectionality of social forces in terms of caste and class plays a deterministic role in education. Although quality is a key determinant of employability, the system frequently fails the poor. As poor households are dependent on free school education for their children, the notorious quality of the state-run institutions gives them an education that will make them unemployable later.[22] The shortage of skilled people in India is actually mainly due to the lack of quality education available at state schools.

In this context, it is interesting to note the case of Iyappan, a 33-year-old man from the Pallar caste in Sripuram. He has several educational qualifications: a Bachelor's degree in Commerce (B.Com) and one in Physical Education (B.PEd), a diploma in Computer Applications (DCA) and one in Cooperative Management (DCoop), a certificate for passing a course in jewel appraisal and a post-graduate diploma in yoga. Despite the fact that he is an educated man with so many qualifications, his employment status is precarious, varying at different times when the researcher conducted his fieldwork. The volatility of Iyappan's employment status was obvious as he sometimes mentioned he was working in the informal economy in Meenakshipuram or he was just passing his time by helping others with a view to winning support for his aspirations in local politics.[23] When asked about the quality of education and its relevance to employability today, he said the following:

> **Researcher:** OK... As you've studied at so many different institutions, may I ask you their role in your career? I mean, what are their roles in making you successful (in your career)? [Trying to explain more as Iyappan did not understand.] [...] Their role in getting salaried employment... Is there any use from these institutions [...]?
> **Iyappan:** [No,] nothing [at all]... Whatever we get is simply by our [own] skill and smartness.
> **Researcher:** So can we say that you went to all these institutions just to get the degree certificates? Nothing else?
> **Iyappan:** Not really... but schools are useless. Our success depends only on our [own] effort. If you study well, you can [expect to] have a good life [one day].
> **Researcher:** Anything else?
> **Iyappan:** [No,] nothing [else].

In addition, there is a paradoxical side to higher education as the state institutions still project a respectable image of quality. Due to this, one can see reverse

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22 See Valeskar (2010), Kumar (2004) and Kumar and Sarangapani (2004), among others.

23 In the researcher's most recent fieldwork (in April 2012), he found Iyappan was working as a contract teacher at a nearby government school. Although it was only a temporary job under the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* scheme (SSA), he told the researcher he had been forced to bribe someone to get even this short-term assignment. He hopes to get a permanent position at the school eventually by "working hard."

immigration by the non-poor, while the poor and deprived often fail to get entry even after the reservation policy has been taken into account in higher education.[24] Frequently, the poor's inability to send their children to private schools and their exclusion from quality higher-education institutions due to competition from other households limit their options as far as the available alternatives are concerned. These adaptive preferences could be conceptualized in line with Sen's notion of the poor's complicity in perpetuating their deprivation.[25]

In times of heightened market capitalism, employability thus becomes a crucial factor in terms of the occupational outcomes in education. Although approaching education merely in terms of employability limits the concept of functionings (i.e. achieved outcomes), it is one of the stepping stones for broader capability formation in India. The ability to take independent decisions in addition to the necessary life skills, for instance, is mainly determined by individuals' earning abilities. Due to this, the occupational outcome becomes a key developmental factor in a functional analysis of the capability approach. The result is the unemployability of less well-qualified Indians at a time when employers' expectations are increasing due to the "culture of competitive aggressiveness" (Kumar 2004: 21). At this juncture, it is appropriate to present some more of Iyappan's views again:

> **Researcher:** You [said you] worked hard to get this [temporary] job even though you have a lot of qualifications. What hurdles do you usually face in your daily efforts to get a salaried job?
> **Iyappan:** [The] hurdles are mainly due to the large number of educated people trying to get a limited number of jobs; there's a high level of competition... Whoever is ready to make a bribe will get the best offer. This is the situation in Tamil Nadu today.
> **Researcher:** Is this [the case] for salaried employment in the government?
> **Iyappan:** Yes, it is.
> **Researcher:** Hmm...
> **Iyappan:** No-one appoints us simply because we have a suitable qualification for the job. [What counts is] the amount we bribe them [with].
> **Researcher:** Is that the same in the private sector?
> **Iyappan:** Not really. They don't need to be bribed.
> **Researcher:** What hurdles are there in that sector?
> **Iyappan:** I don't know...
> **Researcher:** Are English language skills necessary?
> **Iyappan:** Yes, they are. But they have an eye on our [other] "activities" as well [...]

The dimension of quality in education can be seen in the progressive changes in people's knowledge, behaviour, attitudes and values. These intangible aspects are

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24 India's reservation policy is often contrasted with the affirmative policies of the United States. There is a remarkable sociological difference in the nature of discrimination between the castes and racial exclusion in India and the US, however. In India's policy, the government reserves a certain percentage of places in the education and employment sectors for the erstwhile "lower" castes as well as for tribes in India. (See, for instance, Thomas E. Weisskopf's work for a comparative view on India's reservation policy and America's "Affirmative Action" policy.)

25 According to the literature on the capability approach, adaptive preferences are self-subordinating beliefs.

crucial for occupational outcomes (i.e. the functionings mentioned above) and also play a central role in capability formation. This sets the scene for approaching quality in education in light of employability. However, it must be reiterated that although there is a conceptual limitation in seeing education quality merely in terms of employability, the author of this paper is appreciative of the ideals of human capital and the capability approach in education. This is why the article considers employability in relation to quality in education, which also includes its usefulness for people's work and career domains.

In Sripuram, the educational approaches taken by the villagers are changing. For instance, although it is managed by men from the same caste, the Brahmins no longer perceive the local school as "their" school. This is in sharp contrast to the past where the school mainly used to serve the needs of Brahmin children. The employment-centric "quality" pressure from the macro-economy is pushing the non-poor to send their children to private English-speaking middle schools in Meenakshipuram.[26] In light of this, the visit to the local school underlines the fact that the inferior nature of education in India is mostly due to systemic factors such as incessant training, policy confusion due to political regimes changing and other institutional factors. This neither ensures an avenue for capability formation nor does it provide any basic skills. The result can be seen in everyday life as it is difficult to find even a handful of individuals in Sripuram who have been "economically" successful over the years. This institutional failure can be seen at the orphanage as well as the local school, where it is hard to find any successful person, at least in terms of obtaining salaried employment in the village.[27]

The systemic mismatch between education and employment results in fewer opportunities in life for the poor. Although this may also be due to weak social capital, the essential point here is the key role that education plays in reproducing the social hierarchy in Sripuram. For this reason, it is very difficult to find even one "well-placed" individual among the Pallar who has managed to leave the local school with good examination results. Even though the same situation exists among a few Brahmins, the different outcomes across the various social groups are educational reality. It seems that the individuals' unemployability on the formal job market is mainly due to the inferior quality of their education. This can be attributed to the education sector being "over-bureaucratized" and to its failure in addressing the demands of the labour market in India.

Thus one can infer that the inferior quality of free government schooling adds another burden to the poor's future. Being female and unemployable because of

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26 Most of the non-poor in the village are Brahmins.

27 The only caveat is that we can still find a few "successful" Brahmin youths who were from the local school in Sripuram. However, their success could mostly be due to the historicity of their (knowledge-centric) background. One should also bear in mind the growing drop in Brahmin enrolment at the government school over the years.

their poor schooling is a double burden for women in the village and consigns them to the poverty trap. The life history of Karuppaiah, a man from Sripuram, is worth mentioning here. He is economically poor and occupies an inferior social position in the village. He has six daughters, all of whom are highly qualified in terms of their schooling, having post-graduate degrees in Commerce and other subjects. They work in the informal economy in Meenakshipuram, however, and only earn a meagre amount.[28] Their continuous efforts to obtain salaried employment have failed over the years. The economic necessity of the family has driven them to look to the informal economy for sources of income. This is why none of them have got married despite being of a suitable age. As a result, they have become a negative reference point for those who ridicule the uselessness of education today. Despite them having various qualifications, the failure of Karuppaiah's daughters to find reasonably paid permanent employment confirms Coleman's observation that "children are strongly affected by the human capital possessed by their parents" (Coleman 1988: 110). The educational success of these young women has neither ensured broader notions of capabilities nor provided the skill to cash in on the employment market. This is negatively influencing their neighbourhood's attitude to education. Men who belong to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) often consider their cases to be due to the system's failure to support the poor. In contrast, most of the Brahmins view it as individuals' personal failure to acquire a good level of education despite their "degree-accumulation syndrome". This is true if we look at Iyappan's case as he has gained so many qualifications in vain.[29] Although his status of being un- or underemployed is not obvious due to his continuous "political" work in the village, his case does ring true here as individuals often accumulate "degrees without any freedom" (Jeffrey et al. 2010).[30] The "credential gap" neither allows them to be competitive nor does it convince them to go back to the ascriptive division of labour due to the caste system.

Some of the young people with whom the researcher spoke did take personal responsibility for their unemployed status, however. They rarely complained about the role played by state institutions in their failure to obtain permanent employment. They only provided a critical picture of the education system when the researcher

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28 This mostly includes the unrecognized private schools.

29 As mentioned earlier, he has obtained a Bachelor's degree in Commerce (B.Com) and one in Physical Education (B.PEd), a diploma in Cooperative Management, a diploma in Computer Applications (DCA), a post-graduate diploma in yoga and a certificate in jewel appraisal. He finished his last "degree of freedom" in 2009, but hasn't gained much occupational freedom as a result: he neither has salaried employment nor has he learnt anything valuable from the system as such in his continuous educational activities (which were between 1986 and 2009). He admitted this himself. (From the researcher's field notes.)

30 The term "degrees without freedom" refers to individuals' desperate educational efforts to find salaried employment. If these fail to provide them with any additional marketable skills, then the accumulation of qualifications they have actually becomes a hindrance to getting suitable employment.

probed them further by asking specifically about the quality of their education in view of their inability to find salaried employment. This may either be due to their inability to perceive the influences of macro-level socio-economic forces in life or due to the influence of neo-liberalism, where failure is often regarded as an "individual case" by the state.

In the neo-liberal social reality, the employment-centric notions of education influence society. The shrinking employment opportunities in the village and the changing nature of the political economy often facilitate this reinforcement in Sripuram. The result is increasing enrolment at private schools for quality reasons, even by the poor. This aspect has been analysed in the mainstream literature in terms of a systemic comparison between private and government schools.[31] In light of the intersectional educational facts, one can assume that there is a connection between rising unemployment and the inferior educational provisioning of the government. Further research on mainstream employment still needs to conceptualize this. Furthermore, the trends of underemployment reflected by respondents like Selvam and others in Sripuram reveal that it is actually a form of hidden unemployment.[32] The systemic failures make them misfits with respect to their economic livelihood, which is due to the poor quality of the education they have received. This is mainly because education is mostly determined by the labour market since the definition of quality often includes the ideals of human capital today (Sen 1997). As a result, people are increasingly concerned with the rate of return (i.e. return on investment) and cost-benefit analyses applied to education. This largely stops them from putting the central tenets of the capability approach into practice in their daily lives. Thus, the individual agencies neither treat education in terms of the broader notions of capabilities nor do their employment-centric approaches assure them a well-paid, full-time job in the future. The primary reason for this dichotomy is a systemic one in which the relevance of quality plays a key role.

Education quality and capabilities

As we have seen, this paper considers capabilities as the accumulation of a diverse set of "functionings" by individuals. The central arguments for this have been developed on the basis of the author's ethnographic fieldwork in Sripuram. The educated unemployed youths from economically deprived families were essentially conceived as poor people. In light of this, it is pertinent to underline the importance of education quality in capability formation. As a child matures into an adult, it is

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31 Although the mainstream literature has been successful in focusing on quality, one can still find a vacuum in sociological insights in education research in India. (See Bajpai and Goyal (2004), Dyer (1996), Jain (2004), Kumar (2004), (2007), Mili and Kumar (2006), Muralidharan (2006), Naik (1979), Pandey (2006), Rao et al. (2004) and Velaskar (2010), among others.) Analysing employability and capability in light of this is another under-researched area of sociology.

32 Selvam has a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration (B.BA). He has failed to find any full-time employment and is therefore working as a casual labourer, doing odd jobs in Meenakshipuram.

strongly shaped by the educational institutions it attends. Any shortcomings there may be in the quality of the education system can have a negative impact on the capabilities the child develops. This is due to the intrinsic links between the evaluative spaces of functionings and capabilities.[33]

Like that of other states, the education system in Tamil Nadu generally fails in its intrinsic mandate of converting citizens' natural abilities into specific capabilities. In addition, the education system is expected to shape individuals' choices and preferences regarding growth and development. In this context, the capability approach "[…] honors individual choices and seeks to avoid authoritarian outcomes" (Jackson 2005: 103). The education system in India fails to even identify potentialities and capabilities, however. This may largely be due to the multitudes of institutional structures that exist. These neither provide the broader aspects of capability formation nor do they foster many successful outcomes in education. The state system, for instance, frequently fails in the process of providing a reasonable level of schooling to children. The inferior quality of the education provided has been systemically "ensured" by insensitive, unmotivated teachers, a programme-specific bureaucracy and lethargic parents.[34] The sufferers are naturally children whose personal agency is generally limited to making the best of the present rather than focusing on the future. For instance, although reading habits have to be cultivated among children, the local school in Sripuram does not have a proper library of its own or even a concrete plan to set one up in future. The management at the school merely has an old cupboard full of dusty books, which serves as its "library." For official purposes, the management maintains a register of books and other such materials, albeit with few recent entries. This highlights the fact that necessary functionings and the conversion factors for capability formation are weak here. These frail links are reflected in the everyday lives of the orphaned children and unemployed youths living in the village.

This situation raises an important question. Are poor individuals strong enough to exercise their educational functionings to develop their capabilities? Answering this question in today's neo-liberal state requires some complex analysis first. Over the years, the political economy has been "carefully" withdrawing from social-sector commitments in India. The poorest of the poor – irrespective of their caste affiliations – do not have any choice other than to send their children to government schools and keep them there. This dependency is harsh in view of the lack of quality education provided at such schools. In a broader context, social reproduction stabilizes the status quo in favour of the non-poor. The latter, who are mostly from the erstwhile higher castes in Sripuram, are able to send their children to private

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33 The notions of *functionings* and *capabilities* are the central "evaluative spaces" of the capability approach. See Gasper (2007), Nussbaum (2006) and Robeyns (2005).

34 By lethargic parents, I mean those who are unable to consciously monitor their children's learning outcomes. This is due to the factors of economic poverty and illiteracy.

schools in Meenakshipuram that obviously charge tuition fees. Although quality is often cited by parents as the reason for this decision, one can see how these institutions have adapted to labour-market demands and become more attractive to people. The popular image of Information Technology in Tamil Nadu is currently guiding parents' decisions, for instance, as computer education has now been introduced as a normal subject. In contrast, the local school in Sripuram is being "bombarded" with official guidelines, which often change, shifting to the tune of different political regimes. This neither ensures the avenues of capabilities nor is it a response to the job market. The result is the systemic production of misfits since functional illiteracy has now become reality. Such dysfunctionality can be seen in the unemployability of school-leavers.

This failure can also be recognised in terms of the region's teachers. In Tamil Nadu, entry to teacher-training institutes requires good school examination marks. Hence, only the candidates who obtain high enough marks at school are allowed to attend training courses at the institutes of education and eventually become qualified teachers at government schools. Most of the enrolments at these institutes are genuine, which is mainly due to the vigilance of civil society in this state. However, it is shocking to note that most of these "quality" students turn into bad teachers over the years. Although teachers employed at government schools earn relatively high salaries and enjoy various benefits in comparison to their colleagues at private schools, they often do not provide the quality of teaching one would expect in view of their training.[35] In fact, these teachers do not even enrol their own children at government schools.[36] The elite and non-poor have been turning their backs on government schooling, which leaves the poor and the marginalized to suffer alone under the government's inferior schooling provisions. Consequently, the latter get fewer opportunities in life out of education and do not experience the conversion factors that enhance one's personal capabilities and shape one's functionings.[37]

As the ability to realize one's own capability is mainly decided by education today, it is pertinent to conceptualize it in light of India's paternalistic social structure and the weak agency of individuals. This conceptualization has been undertaken for a range of aspects in Sripuram. Independent decision-making aspects, for example, can be seen in the villagers' lives in terms of taking up a career of their own instead of being guided (and restricted) by the conventional, ascriptive division of labour. The essential point here is whether such aspects are functional or not and bear the potential seeds of capabilities due to individuals' preferences and choices in life.

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35 Dyer et al. (2004) argue that the status and quality of teacher education is far from satisfactory in India, especially at the elementary level. For further details, see Dyer et al. (2004).

36 Ganapathy (2011) makes an intriguing point here: "It will be interesting to know how many people will accept if there is legal provision which states that only government-school children will be admitted to the government colleges" (translated from Tamil by the author).

37 According to the capability approach, the conversion factors represent how much functioning one can get out of a good or service. See Robeyns (2011).

Thus, one can see that capability formation in southern India is mostly conditioned by the intersectional factors of caste-class dynamics in addition to the wider socio-economic context of the state. The political economy of Tamil Nadu revolves around demographic figures: nearly 93 percent of the population consists of erstwhile "lower" castes. Hence, policy decision-making at the macro level in this particular state has more or less been accommodating caste-centric "social welfare." Although there is a genuine reason for this due to historical injustices committed against the erstwhile lower castes over the years, the central argument is the perceived fear of "the others". The erstwhile higher castes are mostly afraid of the diminishing role of the state. As said earlier, the policy of reservation in education practically reserves 69 percent of the opportunities in education and employment for the non-Brahmins, while the remaining 31 percent is open to anyone, including the meritorious "others." This largely causes the Brahmins to regard education in terms of occupational outcomes. It must be noted here that this social group is actually known for its philosophical mindset on education, wanting to acquire education "simply for the sake of gaining knowledge." The change in the Brahmins' view that we have seen also needs to be viewed in light of a new reality: although education itself is a capability, the broader notions of "functioning formation" and employment choices are only available to those with higher levels of education today. Hence, the system of higher education has become an important factor in capability formation in present-day India, with the nature of capability mostly being determined by the "opportunity sets" that are available. This insight has not been explicitly discussed in mainstream educational research, however, it has mostly been analysed in terms of human capital; capability-specific analyses are still rare in this country.

Conclusion

A capability analysis thus has to be conceptualized in a social context. Although independent decision-making is a virtue, a patriarchal society like India with its collectivist social order does not allow it because of its norms and values. Decisions of this nature are mainly seen as a sign of "claiming rights without any responsibility" to the family. In light of this, it must be said that social backgrounds are still central in determining functionings and capabilities in India. Unfortunately, although the development literature suggests that "both capabilities and functionings are, to a large extent, determined culturally" (Jackson 2005: 117), this is an under-researched subject in India. The "functioning failures" – at least in terms of educational outcomes – have to be contrasted with common sense as southern India is often celebrated as being a particularly "well-developed" part of the country. In view of capability approach, the failures experienced in the evaluative spaces that exist cause the author to question this celebration. It is pertinent to remember the insights of Dreze and Sen here:

> One way of seeing development is in terms of the expansion of the real freedoms that the citizens enjoy to pursue the objectives they have reason to value, and in this sense

the expansion of human capability can be, broadly, seen as the central feature of the process of development. (Sen and Dreze 1999: 10)

In this sense, growth and development have yet to move beyond political rhetoric in India.

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