A comprehensive critique of the Indian formal education system is long overdue not the least because of its rank failure to respond in any meaningful way to the needs and aspirations of the masses. The persistence of tremendous inequalities in educational access, retention, performance and outcome between oppressed sections such as Dalits and Adivasis and the rest of society, has laid bare the huge gap between the promise and reality of state sponsored education. Despite this, however, the mythology of education as the great equaliser persists in public and academic discourse and continues to shape policy, research and action. Even those who perceive education’s failings and critique it, continue to repose faith in it and seek solutions to educational problems through policy change and reforms within the existing sociopolitical framework.

The social scientific study of education in India, too, has not escaped this naive faith. Educational research has been policy driven, and in obvious alignment with the state educational institutions. Sociologists of education, guided explicitly or implicitly by the structural functional paradigm in their modes of problem formulation have remained engaged in the task of investigating the functions and dysfunctions of education for society, their implications for economic, social and political development, and for the achievement of western modernity. Even though the problem of inequality in education has been a central research theme, investigations have not ventured beyond questions of access and achievement, and explanations have been sought more in terms of the social origins and cultural background of the learners, and not in the way of the education system itself.

The general perspective adopted in this paper is that the role of education in society can only be grasped by viewing it historically, contextually and relationally. To understand the operation of the educational system in an unequal and hierarchical society, it must be located in the larger context of the structures and ideologies of power and domination and of the political economy. It is the contention of this paper that dominant ideologies and interests—which, in contemporary India, are predominantly rooted in caste, class and patriarchy, now increasingly in conjunction with those of the global capitalist economy—have got articulated through the state and largely determined the course of educational development, change and expansion in India. They have impinged upon the structure, content and process of education in socially significant ways, making it a complex political and ideological mediator.

This paper focusses on caste and class ideologies and structural processes, and explores their relationship with the educational structure of schooling in post-independent India. Its concern is with the plight of those historically excluded from and deprived of education, viz., the Dalits. More
specifically, the paper examines the caste-class stratified structure of education and attempts to unravel the unstated values and assumptions that underlie it. The paper argues that the dominant cultural, social and economic values, both Brahmanical and capitalist, of the ruling classes are deeply embedded in the hierarchical design of the institution, making it a most significant source of inequality. It draws attention to the various ramifications of this dominance and the mechanisms through which educational stratification serves these dominant and influential caste, class and political interests and subverts the interests of the oppressed. Both external and internal structural features and internal hegemonic processes act as mediators of hierarchy and inequality. Apart from sustaining consolidating and perpetuating the historical condition of educational advantage and disadvantage, educational policy and practice has led to new divisions and hierarchies that breed new difficulties. Thus far, we have had fragmented critiques of individual aspects of the education system, but not systematic critiques examining society-school links and external and internal links within the system. A total structural analysis reveals how the system functions as a formidable force militating against the oppressed. Dominant ideology has also created a highly gendered institutional structure, which will not be explored in this paper. However, the analysis carried out here is fully applicable to girls belonging to Dalit communities.

Against a brief historical background of the ideological development and definition of the educational structure, the paper explores this relationship between caste-class structure and educational structure by: (a) systematically examining the caste-class linked character of the educational structure, (b) focussing on the political economy of educational provisions, (c) exploring trends in the current restructuring of the educational system in a globalising society and rapid changes in the meaning of education, and finally, (d) outlining implications and social consequences of the hierarchical system for the downtrodden castes of Indian society. In developing the framework of analysis and tentative propositions and arguments, I have drawn upon the indigenous anti-caste critiques, theoretical perspectives rooted in the critical and conflict traditions of the sociology of education and insights derived out of my own field based and historical research on education and Dalits in Maharashtra. The limited secondary sources that throw light on educational inequality have also been utilised. There is an overall paucity, though, of meaningful historical and sociological research in education. Hopefully, the exercise conducted here will suggest a new direction for critical research in this field.

IDEОLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE MODERN EDUCATION STRUCTURE

The sociohistoric roots of the modern educational structure lie in the colonial period. As is well critiqued and known, the colonial system reflected the power and educational needs of the colonisers. It was the sole powerful model on the educational scenario, having effectively destroyed the indigenous system (Kelly and Altbach, 1978; Carnoy, 1974.) In following a pernicious policy of religious neutrality, the British evolved a new educational system that seemed to rest on the traditional social order. The issue of which sociopolitical forces with what ideology have shaped the post-independence system has, however, not received much attention. In the post-independence period context of a political discourse that was dominated by national development, nation-building and nationalism, education came to be identified as a master instrument of change and development. The development agenda cast in western liberal ideology was that of Nehruvian modernity and Nehru called for the ‘revolutionisation’ of education to fulfil it. The dominant characteristics of the national paradigm were: massive industrialisation, the growth of science and technology in the service of an industrial
civilisation, the creation of a scientific and rational temper, and instilling the values of secularism, liberty, equal opportunity and justice. Its chief proponents were the new social elites—the metropolitan, western educated upper and middle classes, the intelligentsia, predominantly all upper caste, who had benefitted from the colonial system. They were the architects of the 'new' national educational system, along with the right wing element of the ruling Congress’ political and economic elite.

The ‘revolutionisation’ of education envisaged by Nehru, however, did happen. As the goals of national development were converted into those of capitalist development in agriculture and industry and any pretence of egalitarianism was crushed by the powerful presence of the old hierarchical structures, rooted in Brahmanical religio-culture, one saw the expansion of the colonial model of education which was earlier criticised by the very same nationalist elite. Due to the overwhelming Brahmanical domination in almost all categories of the ruling elite, Brahman ideology held sway in the shaping of the education system. As in older times, the Brahmans maintained close links with the economically and politically powerful, the latter, in turn, depending on them for intellectual and religious leadership. Having made the smooth transition from being a ruling class in the traditional feudal order, to being part of the ruling class in the colonial system, primarily on the basis of their knowledge power and literati tradition, the Brahmans had a particular stake in the maintenance and persistence of dominant colonial and Brahmanical categories. Education had been their traditional vehicle of domination and this was critical in the modern age, too, for self-preservation.

Thus, as the predominant policy and decision makers, they advocated continuation of the stratified, lopsided educational structure that was tailor-made for the maintenance of sociocultural domination and for hegemonic use in the perpetuation of the dominant ideology. Not surprisingly, the opposing Phule-Ambedkarian ideology of education for enlightenment, mental awakening and social transformation towards a new humanist society found no place at all.

Though this area needs systematic historical study, the broad historical contours of educational policy making and action in the early decades after independence indicate how the foundation for educational stratification and inequality, (the rhetoric of mass education and action of mass expansion notwithstanding) was firmly laid during the time. For years, the Constitution of India was the only guiding light for extending mass education. A full-fledged education policy for the nation came into existence as late as 1968. In keeping with the elitist intents, higher education was given first priority in the efforts at reforming education towards fulfilling national goals (Kamat, 1989). 3

The Brahmanical core of the decision-making element was most palpably evident in the staunch opposition to dismantling the hierarchical organisation of education in favour of a common school system based on the concept of a neighbourhood school. This was advocated by the Kothari Commission of 1964-66, but was bitterly opposed and rejected (Naik, 1977). The apparent contradiction between retaining a system (manufactured in the first place for exploitative use), and professing nationalist goals, can only be explained by the fact that these goals were only set for the ruling minority, to build and enhance their material and knowledge power.

The form and structure of the educational system was thus directly and almost autocratically determined by the interests and values of the dominant, who used it to attain hegemonic domination over the deeply divided, antagonistic Indian society. Curriculum and content as ideological apparatus have also been central to cultural domination-subordination through the educational system, but this is a separate and complex area, which will not be dealt with here. Suffice it to note here that modifications of content which aimed at indigenisation only meant Brahmanisation of the curriculum. In keeping with the strategy of agricultural and industrial modernisation, western
science and technology assumed the level of ‘high status knowledge’.

The only competing indigenous model of basic education was half-heartedly implemented. It, therefore, decayed and died a quick death. Now we look closely at the powerful structural features of the chosen system.

THE HIERARCHICAL STRATIFICATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURE

The external and internal hierarchical structuring of the system is of extreme importance in understanding how it actually functions in society—it serves as an instrument of internal domination/colonialism in the hands of the dominant classes, and serves to extend the caste/class handicaps and oppressions suffered by the subordinated in the home/community/village settings, right into the school.

All existing schools can be broadly classified into a four-tiered pyramidal hierarchy, which almost parallels the Varna of gradation. This hierarchical school system ranges from the exclusive, elitist public school that caters to the top of the social hierarchy, to the impoverished rural schools run by the local bodies that cater almost exclusively to the bottom, viz., the overwhelmingly poor SC/ST sections. It corresponds roughly, but definitively, to the hierarchical caste-class division of society into the high caste economic, social and political elites, the high caste, middle caste upper and middle classes, the lower caste classes and the lowest class predominantly constituted by the lower Shudra, and Dalit castes and the Adivasis. It is important to note that the lower end of the hierarchy may signify not just the most inferior quality schooling, but no schooling at all. Thus, the gradation in education terms of quality and social composition appears to rest on the traditional hierarchical system. The hierarchy may vary regionally in form and shape, depending on the general development of state or region, but there is a hierarchy nonetheless. In the context of

the changing stratificatory order based on new criteria and principles, each new emergent stratum is fitted into an educational sub-system, which also gets increasingly differentiated to accommodate them.

THE INTERNAL STRUCTURE

The internal structure and culture of the colonial model of schooling has also remained unchanged. The defining features of the system are full-time attendance of specific age groups in teacher supervised classrooms for the study of graded curricula.

Whole day schools, uncondusive time-spans of vacations and compulsory attendance have served as deterrent factors in households dependent on children for domestic work or other productive work to supplement household earnings. The fundamentally different economic situations, life aims and social circumstances of different strata households have not been given due cognisance in the selection of structure. In all, it has been particularly ill suited to develop the vast reservoir of the rural sector. Culturally, the educational norms of attendance, discipline, home work, tests and exams, the cognitively ethnocentric demands of concentration, comprehension, relating to and mastering what is being taught, are all problematic. The crucial factor of the content of education, the curriculum itself as a tool of cultural dominance and hegemony, has an alienating and intimidating impact.

Each stage of school education—primary, middle, secondary—leads to the next and is not terminal in itself. The design of the non-terminal internal structure is one that has negative consequences for the low-caste child or she is not suitably trained for upward advance due to the hierarchy. The few years of primary education are useful to gain the label ‘educated’, which is not adequate, however, as meaningful learning or preparation for gainful employment. For the child who succeeds beyond the primary level, absence of a middle or higher school in the vicinity puts limits to her motivation and
aspirations. Public educational facilities at this level remain highly restricted till today. Thus, the overall though not terminal for the privileged, forces termination on aspirants among the underprivileged. Vocational training, which could be of some use to them, has remained a grossly neglected area. Overall, there is a drastic reduction in secondary school level opportunities, which appear to be meant solely for the middle classes.

At the school level evaluation practice, we have the great contradiction between the hierarchical structure and an equalitarian evaluation system in the form of the common school leaving exam. Children who school in sharply variant educational environments, especially Dalit children who also lack the 'cultural capital' of the caste Hindu children, are placed at an obvious disadvantage. The outcome is predictable—a vast gulf between types of schools in numbers attempting and qualifying the exam. There is vast difference in the educational levels attained and achievement levels of schools, which reflects difference by caste and class (Velaskar, 1992).

The Hegemony of Educational Values

The gross incongruence between operating such a hierarchical structure and the ideological values and assumptions claimed to be underlying the system per se has never been squarely confronted. The dominant liberal ideology that propagates education's prominent role in the creation of a just meritocracy has served well to camouflage the inherent injustice and unfairness of the system. As a result of the political rhetoric and social propaganda accompanying mass expansion, education's image as a neutral institution remains untainted in the public eye. The mythology of merit and achievement, productivity and efficiency, supposedly promoted by education holds, despite its stark ascription based foundations and practices, which reserve the best education for those with cultural and/or economic capital. The notion of merit becomes a convenient stick with which to beat protective discrimination policies, and their beneficiaries. What is needed is to problematise concepts of merit and intelligence and consider their social base. The characteristics that go into definitions of merit and IQ are not drawn from core values and knowledge of every strata, but from dominant strata. Dominant ideology plays a role in defining merit and the construction of merit itself is what upper classes can achieve easily ('pure' languages, maths and elite history), given the role of social origin and cultural property (increasingly economic property) in the attainment of merit.

New liberal values, thus, have been used to strengthen old patterns of cultural domination and legitimise them, rather than generate, create and nurture merit from the vast pools of talent that remain suppressed. In fact, the hierarchical designing of the educational system reflects unstated assumptions about the low social worth of the Dalits or Adivasis, their inferior natural intelligence and educational potential. Thus, there are limits set on the definition of their educational needs and the educational levels they can reach based on cultural assumptions regarding their preordained destiny as labourers and servants.

The Teacher as an Element in the Hierarchy

Following educationists, sociologists of education have treated teachers purely as an occupational category in research and theory. But teachers as social beings in an unequal society, must be sociologically seen as located in and representatives of, the caste/social class (and also gender/ethnic based) social order. In the Indian context, where the profession of teacher has been traditionally associated with the Brahman caste, and they along with other upper literati castes such as the Kayastha have dominated school and college teaching, this has been a major theoretical oversight. Unless we view teachers as products and bearers of caste/class cultures, we cannot make sense of the persistent set of negative findings regarding their overall poor functioning in mass schools. In particular, it should be useful to
view the classroom in a poor, Dalit dominated backwater school as a dynamic site of caste antagonism, caste struggle and resistance. Otherwise, we are at a loss to explain the multiple findings regarding lack of teachers absenteeism, teacher apathy to teaching, low teacher motivation, teacher incompetency, teacher inability to cope, teacher attitudes, etc. Research studies are replete with such findings. There is need to go beyond such arbitrary collections of mundane facts, place teachers in their sociocultural contexts, examine the theories they hold on education and educating, and their social motives for entering the field. Most importantly, we need to investigate their stated or unstated assumptions about low-caste children, their deprived and deficient cultural backgrounds, their intellectual deficiencies, capacities and limits to learning, their discriminatory pedagogic practices of labelling, classifying and teaching styles, their ‘realistic’ perceptions of low-caste children’s educational and life chances, in sum their attitudes and behaviours towards the downtrodden castes. What are teachers’ levels of hostility and indifference to Dalit/tribal cultural traits, value systems and how does discriminatory behaviour manifest itself? While these issues have not been directly studied, empirical evidence that is available seems to suggest that teacher preconceptions and attitudes are the medium through which caste/class background dominates the educational process and contributes directly to low learning levels, dropouts and the creation of failure.\(^5\)

**The Political Economy of Expansion and Provision**

The articulation of dominant politico-economic interests in the state has been amply evident in the pattern of educational expansion and financial provision, which provides sustenance to the hierarchical system. Politicians, policy-makers and bureaucrats as agents of the state, and private educational managements constitute the influential body of educational decision-makers and implementors. Their inter-relationships and actions determine the course of educational expansion (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1972; Rosenthal, 1972). We have little systematic study of the power relations that operate in policy framing and implementation, but it has been clear that there has been a grudging expansion of educational facilities of the mass variety and a particularly poor implementation of special policies made in the favour of the oppressed. Social reformist education’s efforts launched during times of the nationalist struggles, withered away perhaps with the expectation that the state would take care of its constitutional commitments.

Along with the woefully inadequate educational infrastructure and the abysmal conditions of the schooling system meant for the lowly, we have a long history of apathetic implementation of all the schemes meant for the SC/ST/BC categories—freeships, scholarships, \textit{ashram shalas}, hostels, etc.\(^6\) Implementation is directly related to political action and where Dalit political and social consciousness and movements are strong, there has been pressure to put the schemes in operation and systems have been activated. Much energy has been spent on this translation of educational schemes into practice, thus even getting these meagre provisions implemented has been an uphill task for the oppressed.

In contrast, traditional powerful elements and burgeoning sections of the urban and rural elite and middle classes in the post-independence period have advanced the systems of secondary and higher education under politico-ethnic leadership and patronage (Kamat, 1989). The new elite from the lower castes have also entered the fray and attempted to spread more education among their people, but this is happening to a very limited extent. Decentralisation has also served the purpose of expansion to hitherto deprived regions and sections, but quality has always remained questionable because of the extra-educational interests of those involved.

Educational investments and allocations have been commensurate with this deliberately created uneven and
unequal pattern of growth. The difficult economic situation created by the overall severe under-investment in education has been aggravated by the lopsided financial priorities and allocations within education. The state, as the primary funder of primary, secondary and higher education, has clearly played favourites. The education of the entrenched elite and middle class segments of society receives a disproportionate share of valuable resources. The education of these segments at the secondary and higher education levels is subsidised, while mass education for the poor suffers. The priority given to primary education in the First Plan declined in subsequent years, till it had to be renewed in the Eighth Plan due to the glaring failures noted at this most basic level. Furthermore, the meagre resources allotted to primary education are largely spent on salaries, with a pittance allotted to capital expenditure on educational infrastructure (Tilak, 1997). Only 2 percent of the total capital expenditure on elementary education is for building, equipment, etc., and the backlogs are alarming as per NCERT reports. 

Furthermore, contrary to belief, state sponsored primary education has been free. Poor households spend large sums of money, including amounts on fees, books, uniforms (Tilak, 1996). In the context of the persistent existence of intense poverty, the costs of education have a definite deterrent impact on enrolment and retention.

Implications of Social Hierarchy and Political Economy of Education

The key implications for education of the oppressed that clearly emerge from the foregoing analysis are:

(a) The hierarchical system of education is a system of closure to the most socially valued, and most economically rewarded education. It organises for economic selection to take place on the basis of social ascription, while the façade is that of universalising access, democratising and opening up.

(b) The system either excludes the oppressed (through non-provision) or includes, but by employing the mechanism of tracking from the outset. Exclusion and tracking produce educational disadvantage.

(c) The system is thus caste discriminatory, which compounds the overall difficult socioeconomic conditions, making education a process full of struggle for the disadvantaged. Limits are set on how much education they will acquire and how far it will take them and where.

(d) The system involves closure to high-status knowledge and culture, yet it is an aggressively culturally homogenising and hegemonising system, which underscores and reinforces both the superiority of high castes and their culture and the cultural, educational inferiority of the oppressed. It socialises the opposing strata into roles of the exploiting and exploited (with an appropriate common or national civic consciousness), and legitimises this socialisation.

(e) Thus, the system is structured to guarantee unequal access and produce the unequal results in achievements and outcomes that it eventually does. Social hierarchy is converted into academic hierarchy.

Globalisation and the Restructuring of Education and Ideology

In the context of the powerful forces of the world global-capitalist economy, liberalisation and the quicker march towards the free market ethos, national development goals have undergone a sea change. The role of education has changed visibly and the earlier goals visualised for education have been transformed. The instrumental, economic goal has assumed pre-education, primarily as a means of individual, not collective, economic advancement. Citizen formation has given way to skill formation, national building to national economic competitiveness (Green, 1997). In India, in the context of the
new consensus on the inevitability of the new economic policies, the new educational goals are obviously defined by the political and economic elite, who stand to gain the most by them. They are supported by the massive middle class, which is dependent on them for material betterment. Thus, new educational policies are masterminded by a new class of professional experts and assistants. The new instrumentalist ideology of education provides the legitimacy and impetus for (a) privatisation-expansion of private educational institutions, (b) narrow skill/knowledge based education geared to meeting the demands of the new economy, and (c) the concept of banking education to become dominant, in view of educational competition for individual success.

Privatisation refers to the increase in employment of non-public resources for providing education (tuition fees, donations, contributions). In the post-1980 regime, when liberalisation began, privatisation originated in higher education in the establishment of private engineering and medical colleges. The development signalled and reflected the change and a definitive move towards the privatisation of the public sphere.

Privatisation can be seen as a mechanism used by the powerful and the upward looking middle classes to be able to control/secure the conditions of their achievement and advance. It reflects a competition for credentials, which can be seen as a matter of power and exclusion in service of the reproduction of the middle class from one generation to the next in the new, lucrative economy. The present trends in the economy, provide a golden opportunity to further consolidate the hereditary advantage, now in neo-colonial collusion with the international agents of foreign investment and capital.

Privatisation as a dominant feature in higher education today is not delinked from caste interest. In Maharashtra, the Maratha political lobby is establishing Maratha hegemony through the use of educational institutions. The historical link between politics and education is old. Education has always constituted a micro-arena of politics. What is new is the unbridled expansion in response to the demand of upwardly mobile elements in specific castes and the predominance of the pure commercial motive (exemplified in the capitation fee). The consequence is the commercialisation and commodification of education. With the entry of the businessman-educationist, there is transformation of education itself into a big business. There is now open entry and access for commercial players in the field. Money power is central in the acquisition and expansion of education.

Hitherto, secondary education has largely been government aided private effort and primary education has been largely government run. Now in the continued search for upward mobility, there is great demand for private education at all levels. There has been a general proliferation of primary and secondary, recognised and unrecognised private schools. We do not have an idea of the exact size, but it is grossly underestimated (Kingdon, 1996). There is also a widespread proliferation of the parallel institution of the coaching class.

Along with the middle classes, the lower classes, too, demand private education in the struggle for mobility. Only a minority, however, can access it. In keeping with their lowly status, the quality impacted to them is poor. Private education for the poor is available at exorbitant rates and the sacrifices made eventually do not prove worth it, as they remain at the bottom of the hierarchy.

THE GROWING DEPENDENCE ON FOREIGN RESOURCES

With liberalisation began the foreign funding of primary education, made dependent through foreign loan aid. The historical Jomtien Conference on 'Education for All' in 1990 was the beginning of a structurally adjusted political economy of education. In actuality, Jomtien was the venue of a public ceremony at which the poor were introduced to the "nasty new world of post cold-war capitalism". After this, Jomtien, rather
than the Indian Constitution, has become the origin of the concept of universal schooling. (Kumar, 1995). Moreover, education is now a component of the Social Safety, Net Adjustment Credit financed by IDA. Social Safety, as is well apparent to the perceptive, is the new façade of the welfare state. The actual goals remain social control and containment of growing discontent and frustration in the lower classes.

In the new primary education programme, NGOs will replace the state primary delivery mechanisms link between the bureaucratic and industrial elite. In a scenario which has seen the depoliticisation of NGOs through funding, the goals of the new programme are vague and elusive, such as capacity building. Monitoring through psychometric techniques of learning achievement seems to have a hidden agenda (Kumar, 1995).

The renewed rhetoric that emphasises the ideology of universalisation of primary education, camouflage the contradictory reality of receding expenditure on education of the poor and intensification of the inherent tendency of elitism in education. Mass education is being advocated as a tool to project the human face of adjustment. Similarly, in the new context of the human rights discourse, social justice and equal opportunity have become unattractive, outmoded concepts.

This is the new political economy of primary education. The desperate situation of the education of the poor notwithstanding, in the context of the new political economy of privatisation, fees hitherto of marginal importance are being viewed as the most potent source of educational financing even with respect to primary education. This financial cutback will have a direct impact on opportunity at the most basic level.

**Conclusions: Educational Stratification and the Reproduction of Disadvantage**

Focussing on educational stratification by caste and class, this paper has argued that the hierarchical structuring of education itself fundamentally restricts hopes of equal opportunity that the socially oppressed people may have. We have attempted to problematise the manner in which the issue of educational disadvantage of these sections has so far been posed and laid the blame squarely at the door of the educational system itself for determining the very pattern of opportunity. Further, we have attempted, through an analysis of the ideology, structural features and mechanisms of differentiation of this structure and the political economy of education, to expose the full manifestations and implications of this hierarchy.

In this concluding section, we may briefly outline the impact of these structural processes in order to grasp the full import of how children from these groups are made victims of this highly unjust, inegalitarian, alienating and dehumanising system. The impact of educational stratification, summed up in the following points below, indicates how it has reproduced and produced the educational disadvantage suffered by those historically excluded from education.

(a) The adoption of the mass education system has represented a shift from mass exclusion to mass inclusion which is however an incredibly weak and highly discriminatory inclusion. Dominant ideology and caste and class interests have kept alive the Brahmanical principle of closure, cooling out most of the oppressed at the primary level itself.

(b) Educational deprivation, failure and low achievement for the oppressed sections are thus inbuilt in the system. As a result, there is a continued effective exclusion or the achievement of low levels of education, which do not necessarily reflect learning. This achievement level is an overall poor qualification in the labour market. With levels of learning officially declared to be at a minimum level for the disadvantaged, there is a further dilution in their learning. In contrast, the privileged are scaling newer heights of elitism in education. The situation of disadvantage thus will not only persist, there will be an increase...
in the relative gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged in both the quantity and quality of education.

(c) The inevitable, therefore, has happened. Low education levels have not been of much consequence in raising the status of the oppressed. And with growing job ceilings, the pool of educated unemployed is expanding rapidly. But this large pool, which should be considered truly meritorious for having braved it through a hostile educational process, is not considered capable enough to be admitted in the open category.

(d) Thus, the painful process of education eventually may not result in social recognition or reward.

(e) The psychological, intellectual and cultural consequences are damaging. At the psychological level, unequal schooling and the failure mark it puts on these children, creates a range of negative impacts: low self-concepts, low motivation, low aspirations, which in turn serve to instill a fear and dislike for schooling. The school, more than the home, actively contributes to produce this condition of educational disadvantage, demotivating and alienating the students from the learning process and channeling them to varied other arenas not necessarily beneficial to them.

(f) In all, to view it from the perspective of the oppressed, they go through much anguish for such little education. They are damned if they get education and damned if they don’t.

(g) From any angle one looks at it, educational backwardness is the dominant reality, but contrary to the general assumption and belief, it is a backwardness kept alive by the system itself. It would be futile to expect otherwise—that a hierarchical system would function as a harbinger of equal opportunity.

(h) On the positive side, education for those who have been able to secure it, has fetched dignity and self-respect. The achievement has been of immense symbolic value in itself, but its substantive social value in terms of fetching equal social status is, as we have seen, questionable.

(i) Thus, to make the crucial point clearly and emphatically, the true character of the educational system is that of a powerful bastion of caste and class inequality—an arena of institutionalised casteism, where hierarchical ideology prevails in several collective acts of omission and commission in educational provisions which make for a stratified educational system. Educational stratification is thus the fundamental basis of unequal opportunity on which the hierarchies of educational content and classroom process are maintained. Together, structure, content and process act to produce and reproduce educational disadvantage, which, in itself, given the poor economic capital or political power base of the oppressed masses, is conditioned enough to produce and reproduce social disadvantages.

Education thus helps maintain the hierarchical social system and also serves as its chief legitimiser. By corollary, it itself serves as a central obstacle in the democratisation of education and in the propelling of emancipatory impulses towards educational and societal change. In the contemporary environment where educational needs and demands are increasingly dictated by international market forces and imperialist designs, national goals and the Constitution itself are under threat by reactionary forces, and there is growing state repression of any countervoice, the problems of the oppressed, both educational and others, seem destined to intensify.

Notes
1. See for example the approaches of the Surveys of Research in Education published periodically by the NCERT.
3. Early educational policy-making has suffered from inadequate attention. The priorities have been lopsided from the outset and the most crucial recommendations of important Commissions have been ignored and rejected. Educational expansion, thus seemingly ad hoc, has proceeded along the lines desired by the powerful (Naik, 1972).

4. For an overview of descriptive studies documenting inequality and hierarchy in schooling, see Velaskar, 1992.

5. See studies by Kumar, 1989; Banerji, 1997; Bhatt, 1998.

6. See the Commission of SC/ST reports, in particular the one authored by B.D. Sharma, published in 1987.


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11

CONFRONTING CASTE INEQUALITY

WHAT SOCIOLOGISTS MUST DO TO
REORIENT SOCIAL POLICY

SATUSH DESHPANDE

For sociologists interested in the history of their discipline, there is a puzzle that still awaits a satisfactory explanation. As in the famous Sherlock Holmes story where the crucial clue is that a dog does not bark, this puzzle too involves accounting for an event that ought to have taken place, but did not. The basic problem is the following: Given that (a) state programmes and initiatives towards equity enjoyed enormous political legitimacy in the Nehruvian era; (b) that involvement in such programmes brought prestige, power and resources to academic disciplines; and (c) that the institution of caste was the source of deep and widespread inequalities, why didn’t Indian sociology try to leverage its intellectual ownership of (c) to lay claim to (b) by getting involved in (a)?

The answer to this question is long and complicated, and it involves at least the following elements: orientalist and anthropological constructions of the caste system as the antithesis of modern (western) values; consequently, the defensiveness about caste among Indian intellectuals since the early 20th century; the stance towards caste taken by influential anthropologists