

Jesus, markets, state, and the silenced dialogue

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“How then is perfection to be sought? Wherein lies our hope. In education and nothing else”. Immanuel Kant

Born into a poor landless peasant family, Jesus never attended a formal school, but had full academic authority. Jesus lived in a highly oppressive, and class-conscious Jewish society. In his struggle to build a just and egalitarian world, Jesus lived what he taught with an emphasis on hope for a ‘new day and justice’ and discover

the identity of man as being created in the image of God. Jesus’ pedagogy was heavily relied on parables, with an emancipatory force that proved a fatal attraction among the large downtrodden, and oppressed poor Jewish masses who instantly connected with him. Centuries later, the impact of Jesus’ teachings on grassroots Christians was felt across the globe including the famous Brazilian catholic educationist, Paulo Frère, who mastered the art of Jesus’ concept of praxis—a form of education by practically involving people in developing critical consciousness of their oppressed situation and learning how to leverage change in society by improving their conditions.

In India, education with Christian values began in Kolkata as early as 1830 when the first missionary of the church of Scotland to India, Alexander Duff began opening schools to impart English education. Duff’s educational activities greatly influenced missionaries working in the area for education, more or so because of proselytization. It’s clear that the Christian missionaries used English education primarily as a vehicle for communicating Biblical teachings with the natives, while educational needs were also served as the ability to read Bible was seen a necessary precursor to worshipping God, in which the tasks of establishing schools and churches were further facilitated when the colonial state permitted them official duties for administration. During the post-British era, unlike in other parts of India, many missionary schools flourished in Northeast India, especially English medium schools, which played an important role in improving the educational

status of the tribal population of Northeast India. Interestingly, over time, missionary schools began to act as ideal models with a strong impact on producing more private schools charging high fees where children from urban and better off families traditionally attend. Manipur too witnessed the mushrooming growth of private schools, (mostly catholic model) especially during the late 80s while witnessing spiral downfall of state-run schools.

The educational development characterized by weak state vision and strong market; promoting what is private is necessarily good; and what is public is necessarily bad; originated in the 1980s in developed countries beginning from the period of the Thatcher government in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the USA. Efficiency and cost benefit became the thriving force of market oriented neo-liberal policies, with its core idea is to pass the cost of educational services to clients through user fees, inviting more and more market driven private players to take up the educational role that was traditionally performed by the welfare-state system. The emerging trend is an onslaught on the Education for All agenda. While it’s a matter of serious public concern that differential access to school facilities accentuates inequities in economic and social opportunities among social groups, there are also marginalized social groups who have no access to schooling opportunity of whatever—public/private. The absence of the trinity—God, markets and state for these social groups is startling.

Herein, I wish to revisit the incidence of state violation of fundamental human rights by denying educational aspirations of Chadong village children. The infamous Maphithel dam construction in and around Chadong village destroyed the Government Junior High School and shunted out of over 1000 students from schooling opportunity. The state with its alleged failure of providing an alternative learning opportunity directly violated the educational right of these children under the Right to Education Act (RtE) 2009—a Constitutional commitment to promote equity and quality education for all children on a progressive scale. What’s more, according to the local community, the former government siphoned off a huge amount of Rastriya Madhyamic Shiksha Abhiyan funds meant for improving the school that gradually shrank under the Maphithel dam water. As the school building was completely damaged and inaccessible, older students got shifted to nearby

local schools while some children discontinued. My recent visit to Chadong village noticed that the temporary learning facility for small children is currently provided at a makeshift without teaching-learning material aids. The tribal chief makes every effort to ensure children in the age group of pre-primary and primary level are provided some form of learning as they cannot be re-located. Not only that these children are small, but their parents cannot send them to boarding schools owing to financial constraints. My interaction with the community leaders also reveals that there is strong aspiration to educating children in their own local social milieu for obvious reasons. The specific community needs, and aspirations are the reference points by which educational plans of the state must direct its action.

Taking the community along requires building dialogue of hope, trust, possibilities, and constant reaffirming. Without this dialogue, community aspirations for long term goals cannot be addressed. The dilly-dally state response to educational demands of Chadong villagers reinforces social injustice—the common corollaries of which include inequality, marginalization, and alienation that may result in unwanted consequences. Because educational deprivation to the young generation, especially from marginalized communities is more dangerous than the deprivation of other basic social securities as meeting these challenges in sustainable ways cannot be irreversible, if not accompanied by the inputs of quality education.

The prolonged state failure in providing a functional school for the community indicates non-committal in translating educational rights of children provided by the Constitution. RtE Act is a fundamental right by inserting Article 21-A as derived from Article 21. Hence, denying educational aspiration amounts to state violation of children’s fundamental right to life. The fundamental idea is, everyone ought to receive education as a matter of right, and free of cost, not merely by chance or charity. Educational services cannot be abandoned to the arbitrariness of God, and markets or private individuals. The democratic state alone, has the sole responsibility to fulfil its Constitutional duty in ensuring all children enjoy educational right by translating its Constitutional commitments and legislation into action.

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