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**‘Government Brahmin’:
Caste, the educated
unemployed, and the
reproduction of inequalities**

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Abstract

This essay is based on a longitudinal study and draws on observations, interviews, translations from a diary, and discussions with B. Mallesha; age 32 years, male, master’s degree holder, scheduled caste, and living in a working class area in a small town in Karnataka, India. Although access to subsidized education and reservations/protective discrimination in education and jobs enable some persons from low-ranked castes to have a better life as compared to that of their parents, the inequalities are reproduced at a larger level. Highlighting issues that the capability approach overlooks and tracking how institutions of the government and a range of programmes, that are supposedly set up to facilitate ‘equality of opportunity’, fail to address the embedded nature of discrimination, disadvantage, and the structural relations and internalized structures of inequality, this essay captures the subjective dimensions of one person’s search for equality and dignity in a hierarchical society and its associated apparatus.

Key Words: educated unemployed, caste disadvantages, reproduction of inequalities, equality of education opportunity, structural relations of inequality; graded inequality, critical bifocality, hermeneutical injustice.

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“It is now twelve years since I started to take competitive exams. I have cleared some written exams but did not make it through the interviews. In 2010 I cleared the exam and interview for the High School Headmaster’s post. But, I am still waiting to get my allocated post. If I can get this job, then I will be secure and able to fend for myself and my family, including my mother and sister’s family. I don’t know if I can pursue my interests in art but right now a secure job and regular income are important.”

B. Mallesha, 2012

In his travails of getting a government job lie the complex trajectory of a person from a ‘scheduled caste’¹ seeking education, employment, and security. Mallesha’s² case represents the limitations of formal and institutionalized structures of educational opportunity for disadvantaged groups in India. Even as debates and public pressure for and against affirmative action in education and employment continue, the labeling of affirmative action candidates as ‘Government Brahmins’³ highlights the attendant hostility and resentment that such programmes invoke. Seen and labeled as undeserving candidates who have now become the new elite through government largesse, there is often an absence of attention to the multiple disadvantages such candidates experience.

Details of Mallesha’s engagement and experience with dominant institutions, established to create ‘equality of opportunity’ and to facilitate the development and capability of citizens, indicate multiple complexities. The disadvantages of a sub-standard education, heavy family responsibilities, lack of social and cultural capital, and intensification of corruption in the very institutions which should enable equality of opportunity become hurdles in Mallesha’s attempts at improving his life. What he stands to sacrifice are his own interests and skills, which governmental endeavours such as reservation/positive discrimination—forms of creating equality of opportunity—overlook in their emphasis on integrating persons into the mainstream, but substandard, models of development and equality. Perhaps what stands out most in Mallesha’s case—representing the situation and predicament of a large number⁴ (up to six million) of youth who are seeking legitimacy, recognition, and integration into a dominant system—is that of his attempt to access and gain entry into the large government apparatus which is seen as a key source of not only economic and social mobility but also that of recognition. The emphasis and spread of such a hegemonic model contain and reproduce several inequities and disadvantages.

The dominant economic model is built on the negation of plural and diverse practices and forms of livelihoods and life-worlds. In privileging a model in which both development and equality are premised on ideas of fostering the transition of a large mass of people from an agrarian or non-industrial/urban economy into a predominantly urban/industrial economy via opportunities for education, little attention is paid to the creation of alternatives in which multiple skills, abilities, and life-worlds can be created or sustained. At the same, the emphasis on mainstreaming persons into the dominant education and employment model overlooks how long-entrenched structures of ‘graded inequality’⁵ (Ambedkar 1945) work at micro and macro levels to reproduce forms of inequality. Such inequality includes the continued hold of caste-based disadvantages at a formative stage of people’s lives as also the persistence of caste-based discrimination, corruption, and violation of rights even at the levels of formal institutions such as schools, universities, and recruitment agencies.

Both visible and invisible barriers exist that reproduce conditions of exclusion and deprivation. Even as the rhetoric of ‘inclusive growth’ and ‘inclusive policies’ gains currency, it is important to assess how the very agendas of inclusion strengthen pre-existing and entrenched forms of inequalities. India’s post-1991 economy has meant that the marginalized, who are also the majority, are located primarily as a depleted class, while the spectral but enclave economy led by global financial capital has become dominant. For the marginal who are located primarily outside this spectral and speculative economy, it is their disembedded and continuously eroded lives and livelihoods that are the key markers of their personhood and being. Such trends indicate the need to recognize the voice and agency of disadvantaged groups and persons, especially in the context of understanding their experiences of public institutions and the impact of these institutions on them. Weis and Fine’s notion of bifocality which seeks to “make visible the sinewy linkages or circuits through which structural conditions are enacted in policy and reform institutions as well as the ways in which such conditions come to be woven into community relationships and metabolized by individuals” (2012: 174) is useful and enables one to make inter-linkages between the macro policies that claim to promote equality of opportunity and the experiences of those that such policies seek to serve.

Contextualizing Mallesha’s experiences at several levels and making the inter-linkages to macro structures, processes, and institutions is to enable persons such as him to represent themselves through new forms of ethnography⁶ that can encapsulate both subjective experiences and objectives structuring factors. Drawing on details from his diary and supplementing these with discussions with him and with observations on trends related to his experience enables one to assess the realization of official pronouncements and the impact of these policies on the life-worlds of people.

Standard and official narratives disseminated by official bodies concerned with economic development and growth identify a range of factors and conditions that produce and reproduce inequalities. The World Bank as the dominant apparatus

that claims to address forms of inequalities sees inequality as “objectionable on both intrinsic and instrumental grounds. It contributes to economic inefficiency, political conflict, and institutional frailty” (World Bank 2006: 9). Overlooking how inequality erodes the very sense of being of so many marginal and disadvantaged persons, the World Bank sees the creation of ‘equality of opportunities’ as one of the key ways of addressing national-level inequalities. The opportunities are identified as access to education, health, resources, and infrastructure, all of which in the myriad policy documents and discourses are sought to be translated into objective and measurable criteria. Perhaps what has been missed in all these is the persistence and reproduction of ‘existential inequality’ which Göran Therborn⁷ (2009) identifies as inequalities which affect and mark individuals, whereby there is the denial of recognition and respect. It is the form and entrenchment of this inequality that accounts for what is seen as a contradiction; the inability of the mass of people to challenge the very sources, structures, and agencies of debilitating inequalities.

Mallesha’s life is marked by inequalities, the sources of which lie in the life conditions of family and community, schooling and education, and employment structures and strictures. Locating the life narratives of such persons and their attempts to overcome the multiple disadvantages through the dominant system and its prescriptions will highlight the complex issues involved in addressing the challenges associated with addressing inequality through the mechanisms of education, employment, and integration into the dominant apparatus.

Mallesha: M.A (History); B. Ed; artist and sign board painter; resident of Kollegal town; Karnataka, India.

At age 32 years, Mallesha’s life in Kollegal, a small town in Karnataka, India, has been marked by many of the inequities—including the ‘poverty trap’—that prevent him, his family, and also members of his neighbourhood-cum-caste community from moving out of conditions of marginality and the multiple forms of inequality.

Family and Community

I was born into a scheduled caste family and belong to the Madiga (leather workers) sub-caste.⁸ My parents were uneducated. I am the eldest son and I have a younger brother and sister. When I was studying in Standard I, my father passed away. We had only one small shack as our own property. We had no other property or money. My mother and all of us (three) children moved into my paternal grandparents’ house and we lived there for four years along with our paternal uncle. After that, because of the frequent quarrels in the family, we were separated from the larger family and started to live independently. My mother, who had no knowledge at all of the larger world, started making a living by working at construction sites, spinning silk reels at home, cooking food for sale, grinding rice and millets for others, etc. Somehow she managed to bring us up. Observing all these problems, our maternal uncles sent our youngest uncle to look after us. He

worked as a head loader in the Kollegal bus stand and, together with my mother, looked after us.

Research has increasingly highlighted that class background, parental occupations, and living conditions influence both educational performance and aspirations (Booth and Crouter 2001; Lareau 2003). Yet research in India has failed to detail how intra-family locations and caste-community relations vis-à-vis the larger society and politico-economic factors act as deterrents to those aspiring and working towards educational achievements. Although there has recently been recognition of intra-family inequalities which go beyond the macro and structural sources of inequality, adequate attention has not been paid to the multiple burdens that individuals bear within these families and to the demands that families impose on children. For example, the *World Development Report 2006*, with its focus on 'Equity and Development, highlights how "... income and expenditure are often controlled by the male members of the family and that this leads to underinvestment, especially in the health and education of girls" (World Bank 2006: 104). The focus on intra-family issues, then, has been primarily on gender-related differences, with some attention being paid to how patriarchy and male dominance reproduce varied forms of inequality. What is missing in these narratives is the reproduction of family- and community-based inequalities whereby the cultural and social reproduction of the very strategies of survival become barriers to opportunities to overcome inequality, poverty, and a range of disadvantages.

While Mallesha and his siblings were fortunate to have a larger extended family that sustained them in the early years he, like many of the oldest children in the family, internalized the idea of acting as the *de facto* head of the family. The premature death of the earning parent becomes the single biggest burden on children, and is often the key factor in children dropping out of school and joining the pool of child workers. Children of single parents, in most cases those without fathers, often take on adult roles at a young age and act as parents to their younger siblings (NIAS 2002).

I started supporting my family when I was in Standard X (at about fifteen years of age). I worked as an apprentice to a painter and he would pay me some money. That way I contributed to the household. When I was studying for my bachelor's degree, I went to work in the afternoons and evenings since my classes were only in the mornings. I was able to support my brother's studies also. Even though I dropped out of CAVA, Mysore (a Fine Arts college), I insisted that my brother finish the five-year course there and later I also got him enrolled into the Master of Fine Arts course in Bangalore. My sister was not keen on studies and dropped out at high school. Since my sister and her husband (also his maternal uncle) live with us, I continue to look after them. Uncle looked after us when we were young and dependent. So, now I look after his extra expenses. I paid for my sister's delivery charges, including hospitalization, and care for the premature baby. Once I was able to get more regular work, I stopped my mother from working

outside the house and she only looked after the house. My family consults me on all matters and listens to me. I also take care of all their needs.

Neighbourhood and Community

My neighbourhood (a settlement of about 180–200 households, just off the Kollegal-Bangalore highway) has mostly Madiga (leather workers) households. When we were young, most of the men were occupied in leather-related work. My father purchased sheep and goats which were then sold for meat. Nowadays, many of the men work as head loaders, construction workers, drivers and painters, and some go to the cotton and sugarcane mills. Most of the women stay at home and do household work. Only in those families that have no earning male member do the women go out to work in the mills or to the grain centres to clean grains.

There used to be a lot of alcoholism when I was growing up. There were frequent and violent fights in the families. Many children dropped out of school as their fathers were drunkards and either did not support the families or died when they were young. Nowadays, drinking has decreased. Some of those who suffered from this are now conscious and want to give their children a better life.

Most of the youth in the neighbourhood are able to study only up to high school. Only some go on to Pre-University but many drop out from here also. There were about six to eight of us, all boys, who went to college. Nowadays, girls go for D. Ed. (Diploma in Education). There is pressure on girls to get jobs to help with dowry payments. Girls with jobs also find it easier to get husbands.

Education and ‘Capability Development’

With the post-Jomtien Conference’s⁹ emphasis on education as the key driver of capability development, the dominant development discourse claims and promotes basic education to be the foundation on which development can be made possible. Echoing such perspectives is popular sentiment among the scheduled caste groups who see caste-based educational deprivation that denied them the right to formal learning (and literacy), as the single biggest factor that has hindered their rise out of poverty, discrimination, and low status. Education, as formal learning, is sought as a way out of a life of hardship and as a route to a better life. Families repose great faith in the ability of education to enable them to address their multiple disadvantages, and many people even go hungry in order to get their children educated. For Mallesha, school as an opportunity was a mixed experience.

School

I studied in a school run by Catholic priests and we did not pay any fees. I went to this school regularly until Standard IV and they used to teach us very well. I was also a good student. The teachers were very strict and we had ‘bhaya-bhakti’ (fear and devotion) about them. One day, in the fourth standard, a teacher caned me on

my hand. Out of fear of this punishment, I did not go to school for a year. Because I did not attend school, they also beat me at home. My mother would give me a good beating and then cry. Once, they heated an iron rod and burnt me on my back. But still, I was very stubborn and did not go to school. Even when my classmates came to call me, I would not go. One day, some students from Standard VII came to my house and carried me to school. Still, I did not attend school. So, after all these attempts, they sent me to graze goats. After a year, my grandfather took me again to the school and readmitted me. All the teachers spoke to me gently. They advised me to come to school regularly. At this time, I was studying with students who were younger than me but still I did well in class. In the fifth standard, I was selected to go for a drawing competition. I did not know how to draw well. The other students, who had come from different schools, knew how to draw. They all had sketch pens, colour pencils, paints and paint brush, etc. I had not seen any of these. Seeing all this, I had a desire that I too must learn how to draw and get all these things. From that day, I started to practice to draw. With this, I was able to distinguish myself from the others. I continued to learn and practice drawing even during my studies for various degrees. Some of the teachers supported me in this.

The trauma of entering formal educational institutions which are hostile and unchild-friendly is rarely documented. For many children from marginalized families, among whom formal and regimented learning is non-existent, such experiences become the bases for dropping out. Mallesha's case is exceptional in that his grandfather was insistent that he attend school and he was fortunate to have some sensitive teachers who recognized his interests and abilities and encouraged him.

Illness

When I was in the sixth standard, I developed a severe allergy to dust. I would get fits of cough and cold and had to stay away from school. I had to be taken to the hospital frequently. My mother also took several vows to various gods and goddesses. She took me to several temples, mutts,¹⁰ and religious fairs. I had several amulets around my neck, on my arm, and around my waist. Through all this, I would vent my anger on my mother and throw all the amulets away. Mother sold her brass vessels, her earrings, and also borrowed heavily to get me treated. It was only when I started going to pre-university college that the allergies subsided.

Ill health resulting primarily from malnutrition marks the lives of many children from marginalized families. While health services and institutions are difficult to access, popular understanding of illness also emphasizes treatment via appeasement of spirits, demons, and deities. Mallesha's early experiences traumatized him sufficiently to make him skeptical of such health seeking practices. Yet, his early childhood conditions made him vulnerable to frequent bouts of ill health and it was to be a setback later in his life.

Educational Institutions: Social Scarring and Humiliation

The lack of attention to quality education, to the very experiences of educational institutions and to the new regime in which education as a form of mass and public development agenda is deployed, poses the single biggest barrier to the recognition of multiple capabilities and abilities. Yet, the very orientation and functioning of these institutions and their markers do not facilitate a comprehensive endowment or capability of different persons. Recent reviews and reports have consistently indicated the extant poor quality of education in government primary schools (ASER 2014) which are now largely attended by children of the low-ranked caste groups. Similarly, there are also studies that critique the lack of quality or the provisioning of relevant or employment-oriented education at the secondary and higher education levels. But there are very few studies that detail the negative atmosphere and the severe limitations of the new mass educational institutions, and policy discourse that focuses on promoting increased access to higher education completely overlooks this.

The development discourse also lays much faith in the ability of institutions to endow and entitle individuals and disadvantaged groups with a range of new capabilities. Institutions of education especially are seen and represented as acting as carriers of development and as enabling the addressing of inequalities. Where there is recognition of the very problematic nature of institutions, it is qualified and identified as emanating primarily from either political or economic institutions. For example, although the World Bank report recognizes how "... complex historical processes, combined with inequalities in influence and power, may lead to bad political and economic institutions which severely impair the development of poor countries" (2006: 8), there is little recognition of the social scarring of marginalized individuals and groups in and by these institutions.

Although Mallesha and his friends, as members of the socially low-ranked and officially scheduled caste groups, are admitted to the university and its hostels on the bases of 'affirmative action' or educational 'reservations', their experience of the educational institution and its endowment does not further their capability development or their knowledge and skills to compete in the employment market. The lack of attention to providing quality education and the general limitations¹¹ of India's affirmative education policy (Weisskopf 2004), are also manifest in Mallesha's experience of university life. More specifically, the expansion and even the emphasis on equity through affirmative education policies have not addressed the 'institutional handicaps and handicaps in life-history' (Bögenhold 2001: 833) which continue to mark the lives of even educated persons from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹²

Since I was interested in art and many of the teachers recognized this, I thought I should join CAVA (a fine arts training centre) in Mysore. I had saved about Rs 6,000 and gained entry to CAVA after passing the tests. I had also spoken with my paternal uncles and they promised to help pay the fees for the two-year

course. However, I was able to be there for only three months. The materials (paints, brushes, sketch books, etc.) were very expensive. As a Scheduled Caste student, I received a stipend of only Rs 150 per month. This was not adequate. When I approached my uncles for financial help, they dithered. So, I dropped out of CAVA.

I later joined the Bachelor of Arts course in Kollegal itself. The classes were only in the morning and I worked in the evenings. Since I stayed at home, there were no extra expenses for hostel or food. But, even after completing my B.A. course here, I was not able to get a job. I then decided to enroll for a Master's course in History. I enrolled in Mysore University. The teachers were indifferent. They rarely took classes. We had a few textbooks and only some of us went to the library. There were no discussions or good interactions between the teachers and the students. We, as students from small towns and villages, were always hesitant. They (the teachers) talked down to us.

Every month, there were at least two strikes and classes were cancelled. On the non-strike days, classes were conducted only until the afternoon and after that most students whiled away time in the hostels. The facilities were also not good in the hostel. I used to try and be preoccupied with drawing or writing banners but I did not get such work continuously. The students had groups, and caste associations were strong. Friendships and alliances were made on the bases of their links with their villages and/or their caste groups. I did not join any of them.

Our hostel life in Mysore was very difficult. I stayed at the 'Backward Classes Hostel' run by the Department of Social Welfare. Every student who had gained entry legally had to support at least two or three friends who had entered through the 'back door'. They ate at the mess (dining facilities) and also lived in the rooms. The running of the mess was auctioned to outsiders and they always sought to make money and gave us food that was inadequate and of poor quality. There were often fights over this. The authorities accused students of misusing the mess and bringing in friends. The students accused the authorities of being corrupt and of 'swallowing' the money allocated by the government for them. The hostel also did not have any library facilities. Since classes were held only until the afternoon, we whiled away the time after that. We could not afford to buy our own books. No one cared for us and the students in turn became indifferent to rules and to their own lives. I think we wasted our time there. There was little learning and many students picked up bad habits (of drinking, gambling, and whiling away time).

Exams were held only once a year. But, our performance in these was not always even. Only a few among us did well. Many would fail or get low marks. There were always fights over this, just as it was about the food and the hostel. General caste students often referred to us as 'Government Brahmins' (Government Brahmanaru). We know that even some teachers did so. They considered us unworthy of the reservations and believed we were there only because the government was supporting us. There was always tension about this.

'Government Brahmins'

The overall tensions in the campus are compounded by the general limitations of inadequate and poor quality of educational programmes. These include failure to engage the students adequately or to provide updated syllabi and content and the submission to populist demands in which the overall content and quality are further eroded.

But the reservation policy and the programme designed to address inherited disadvantages fails to develop abilities and skills for these aspiring youth. Hostilities and rivalries between caste groups lead to the labeling of scheduled caste students, and those who receive reservations in institutions, as 'government Brahmins'—as members privileged by the largesse of the government. Intense competition over limited educational seats, deep-rooted prejudice among upper-caste students and faculty, and the institutional failure to facilitate inter-caste integration have led to some of these hostilities. Popular constructions of the access of low-ranked caste groups to education as undeserving and wasteful fail to assess the deep problems in the provisioning of such education which is largely inadequate, poor in quality, and which also fails to enable many to break out of their conditions of disadvantage.

Such tensions in the politics of redistribution and recognitions are noted by Nancy Fraser: "'Affirmative Redistribution' ... aims to redress economic injustice, (but) it leaves intact the deep structures that generate class disadvantage. Thus, it must make surface relocations again and again. The result is to mark the most disadvantaged class as inherently deficient and insatiable, as always needing more and more. In time, such a class even more comes to appear privileged, the recipient of special treatment and undeserved largesse. Thus, an approach aimed at redressing injustices of distribution can end up creating injustices of recognition" (1997: 25). This is precisely what has become the norm in most educational campuses in India, with a rhetoric that 'undeserving', 'non-merit', and 'poorly qualified' students from low-ranked caste groups have now gained entry and are largely responsible for the decline in the standard of education. These are compounded by hostilities between student groups which are drawn largely on caste lines. In what is a cruel misnomer, reserved category students begin to be referred to as 'Government Brahmins', hinting at their new undeserved privilege and mocking them. High dropout rates among the reserved category students and growing hostilities and tensions in various institutions over academic performance and the treatment of such students have become rampant across the nation.

Dreams of English

Submitting to regional language politics, which by the 1980s had gained momentum in the state, many universities diluted their standards of teaching in English as the medium of instruction in higher education. The first casualty of this

was the large mass of first-generation college students, primarily from rural and low-ranked caste groups, who were permitted to receive education in the state language, Kannada. While the numbers of graduates increased, their worth in the job market decreased dramatically. Ruing the lack of English language teaching and the fact that he, and his friends and classmates are unable to even converse in English, Mallesha expresses deep regret and discomfort.

In school, we were taught English from Standard V onwards. The teachers themselves did not know English. They memorized a few words and sentences and pretended to read. They let us write the words in Kannada over the English words so that we could read them. We mostly memorized the passages and could barely understand anything. We could not speak it, even though nowadays some of us can read ... the newspapers. It was the same at college. They allowed us to read, write, and take the exams in Kannada. We found this easy and did not have to struggle. But, we know that knowing English helps get jobs. Many of those who have failed in the tenth standard did so because they failed in English. In college also we were not encouraged to know English. Now, we try. But, we can only dream about English.

Un-employability

Policy documents and reports which focus on criteria such as number of graduates, etc. are singled out as key to the assessment of development, but lack of attention to the quality of education and to the sacrifice of quality over assertions of quantity mean that the disadvantaged become doubly disadvantaged. Lack of knowledge of English prevents them from being employed in the urban and new service sectors. In the contradictory and complex turn of an increasingly globalizing economy, Mallesha and his friends read about new job opportunities in the nation's metropolises; where a booming IT and IT services economy in the regional capital, Bangalore, has taken off and where jobs are a plenty for all those who can speak English. But, many of these unemployed youth, mostly those with poor quality education and lack of skills for the new economy are described as 'unemployable'; often assigning individual blame for such limitations. Even mainstream discourse overlooks the institutional and structural limitations due to which these disadvantaged youth are rendered 'unemployable'. These youth desperately forge multiple strategies to gain entry into mainstream or government jobs. Distanced from any possibility of gaining entry into the new global economy, unwilling to do agricultural work and/or engage in manual labour or in their caste-based work as it is considered demeaning and insulting for educated persons, many youth wander between educational institutions, courses, and short-term assignments that provide them little or no skills for long-term employment. Caste-based skills such as smithy, carpentry, tanning and leather work, stone-work, weaving, etc., are neglected or forgotten as none of these skills are recognized even in the vocational training courses offered by the Institutes of Technical Instruction (ITI). The expansion of the higher education system, primarily through a network of colleges and regional/state universities, has been at the cost of providing quality and relevant education. Outdated in content, orientation, and training, most institutions cater to producing

graduates who remain unemployed, underemployed, or unemployable in the new economy. The lack of competence in English is only one of the key handicaps faced by those who receive this mass higher education. For many, formal education does not provide them the capability to compete in the job market or be skilled enough to become independent entrepreneurs or workers.

The Spectre and Treadmill of Competitive Exams

Over the years, Mallesha acquired several degrees. Apart from completing the two-year pre-degree course in Arts (History, Kannada, and Geography), he worked to get a Bachelor's degree (B.A. in History), a Master's degree in History, and a B. Ed. (Bachelor's degree in Education). Like many of his compatriots in his neighbourhood, he appeared for several competitive exams in order to get a government job. Each attempt, a prolonged process often taking several years (between applying for the post and receiving the final decision), marks every aspirant as having either 'passed' or failed'.

For most of us in the neighbourhood, a job in the government is seen as the best opportunity. Government jobs (government kelasa) are considered to provide security (badrathe), are permanent (khayam) and also have prestige (gaurava). Even a low-level government employee has high status and is regarded with respect. Most of the boys start to take exams for government jobs as soon as they pass Standard X. Many take the exams for first division and second division clerks. Others also take the many exams for teachers' posts, for the forest department, and the revenue and police departments.

Over the past ten years, I have taken several exams. I have appeared for the High School Teachers' exams thrice, once each for the posts of pre-university college lecturer, revenue inspector, hostel warden, and first division clerk. I have taken the Karnataka Education Service Exam once and the Karnataka Administrative Service exam twice.¹³

A Funnel System: Entry Barriers and Corruption

Mallesha provides details of the dates for the exam on which he pinned his hopes.

The details of and process for competing for the high school head masters' post as follows:

1. Submission of application: December 2007
2. Preliminary exam (objective type): February 2008
3. Results of Preliminary: June 2008
4. Main (descriptive) exam: December 2008
5. Results of main exam: July 2009; call for interview

6. Interview: September 2009
7. Final list of selected candidates: February 2010
8. Appointment letter: Sent in June 2012

The process, stretching over four years, involves the assessment of a large number of applicants. For the final 629 posts which were available, at least 60 to 80 thousand applicants took the exams. Of these, only about a thousand were able to clear the exams and qualified for the interview. Even as the whole process is delayed and no details or dates are shared with the candidates, the issue of the number of posts available remains contested.

Over the years, the increasing demand for such government jobs and the gradual shrinkage of these posts has meant that the very institutions that process such examinations and job allocations have also become very corrupt. Even as formal and mechanized processes (objective type questions assessed by computers) of examinations are introduced, the final selection (interviews) becomes the key stage in which influence and money power work to get candidates the job. Applicants seek support from caste-based politicians or organizations to either support their candidacy or negotiate the system in terms of bribing selection officers. In Karnataka, the state's Public Service Commission became the object of much public ridicule and speculation.¹⁴ Standing out as an institution with the responsibility of recruiting and allocating of government jobs, the state's Public Service Commission has become an antithesis of its very mandate. Far from being open and public or service oriented, it has become an institution run by successive governments as an agency for realizing party- or caste-affiliated ambitions and expanding the pool of government employees who will owe allegiance and support to them. Malpractice and irregularities in recruitment led the former chairman, responsible for recruitment over a period of years, to be investigated and served a notice and imprisoned.¹⁵ Between 2010 and 2011, the selection of external headmasters, the post for which Mallesha applied, became contested. Even as 629 posts were declared, older teachers who were also eligible for the posts of head masters as part of their career advancement, filed a petition in court challenging the Education Department's recruitment of outsiders. As the court case dragged on, some of the aspirants who had cleared the exams went on a hunger strike. A compromise was sought to be hammered out between the Teachers Association that opposed the new recruitment and the new recruits who were still awaiting appointment.¹⁶ Such delays, confusion, and lack of transparency make the whole process of state-based recruitment for employment even more fraught with tension.

'Competitive exams' have become a spectre in the lives of marginal youth. Even as they witness the booming urban economy, their own opportunities have not only shrunk but are marked by processes which deny them their individuality, creativity, and interest. In the increasingly competitive and corrupt context of gaining government jobs, the youth experience multiple forms of humiliation and degradation. Much of the discussion and preparation for the exams are to anticipate, guess, and discern what the contents of the exam will be and who will be

on the interview board. Preparations for written exams focus on purchasing 'guidebooks', especially those which focus on preparing candidates for a range of exams. Gathering in friends' homes or in public places, groups of friends try out 'model exam papers' and discuss ways in which the exam can be 'cracked'. In all of this, in-depth knowledge of issues and subject matter are completely bypassed. For those taking multiple exams, the focus becomes on gaining competence in the different types of exams (objective type, or written essays) and in seeking extra help in order to succeed in the exams.

Mallesha himself becomes one such 'government job seeker'—an appellation that has gained currency and even legitimacy among the youth as they await jobs. A lower age bar for scheduled caste candidates means that he is eligible to take these exams until the age of 35 years. This extended age entitlement is also the basis on which Mallesha and his friends pin their hopes of gaining entry into the government sector. It also means they neglect to seek other avenues and fail to seek opportunities elsewhere. For the disadvantaged youth whose singular objective in adult life has become to gain a 'government job', the delays, the lack of transparency, and the entry of questionable and inadequately trained persons into the system compel them to see the whole edifice and process of recruitment for government jobs as a corrupt enterprise. Scams that break out indicate not only nepotism but also the purchase of jobs through bribes paid to members of the selection committees. Among the disenfranchised youth, the exams become the new loadstone, a holy grail in which the bar for each year seems higher and more difficult to navigate and overcome. If passing the written test and interview and the declaration of his eligibility for the post of school headmaster acted as a boost to his self-confidence, the long delay in getting the appointment letter leads to tensions. Upset over the uncertainties and his state of unemployment, Mallesha falls ill. His old childhood illness of wheezing and sinus problem returns. He spends nearly six weeks recuperating from this and has to borrow money for his medical treatment.

After several months of waiting—for information from the State Public Service Commission (nearly 25 months since he applied for the post)—and then despondent, Mallesha returns to work as an independent sign-board painter and a freelance artist. He gets work only intermittently. His family relationships deteriorate. His mother expects him to get a full-time job and to cater to her and the daughter's family and their needs. He would like to join a non-profit organization where his interest in art and education can be pursued but his wife refuses to work in a rural area. He now has a young son to look after as well and his limited income is inadequate to cater to the growing family. He longs to be able to do creative work, to integrate art in education, to read, and to write. But much of his daily life goes in preparing for exams, discussing strategies with friends, and working on hoardings and occasional painting jobs. Mallesha's condition is representative of the experience of many educated unemployed youth, which Craig Jeffrey identifies as 'futureless waiting' which is "a condition that marks the lives of millions of educated youth, who wait for jobs and appointments. Neither despondent nor wholly optimistic ... their openness to possibility can be glossed as a form of

waiting that is neither straightforwardly purposeful nor purposeless but shares elements of both forms” (2010: 91).

In seeking to make a transition from the world of non-literate, informal economy to that of being recognized as an ‘educated’ and employable person aspiring to be a ‘government employee’, Mallesha experiences multiple forms of humiliation and degradation. It is not so much his failure or inability to have the ‘capacity to aspire’ (World Bank 2006) as much as it is the distortions created by the dominant model as to what capabilities and skills will enable him to be employed and therefore become ‘developed’. In the creation of an education-employment funnel that is narrow and limited, Mallesha remains marked as a ‘failure’, a man unable to gain the respect of his family and community. These represent what Craig Jeffrey notes as experiences by the educated unemployed to be “... a triple temporal hardship. First, they are unable to conform to dominant visions of how people should comport themselves with respect to linear, clock time—they ‘miss years’ or have ‘gaps’ on their resumes.... Second, they are unable to obtain the social goods, such as a secure white-collar job, which connote development.... Third, they are incapable of moving into gendered, age-based categories, especially male adulthood, such that they come to be labeled or label themselves as ‘dropouts’, ‘failures’ or people on the shelf” (2010:13).

Even as dominant discourse and theories recognize the multiple complexities and nuances of inequities, ‘durable inequalities’ (Tilly 1998), inequalities of opportunities, and the persistence of the ‘poverty trap’, there is a lack of recognition of the hegemony of the dominant model and its imprint on the life-worlds of those it seeks to integrate into its system. The failure to gain entry into this dominant model and its system becomes a marker of failure and the reproduction of the multiple forms of inequities especially for the disadvantaged. As a hegemonic model that privileges only one trajectory for life and recognition, it becomes the basis for the erosion of their plural life-worlds. In experiencing this loss of the plurality of life-worlds and in the subsequent marking of those who have ‘failed’ (through competitive exams, or through the inability to have those criteria), lie the reproduction of a generation of people who stand as eroded and as ‘wasted’ (Bauman 2004). The significance of the presence of the educated unemployed on families, communities, and on the larger society have not been adequately understood or represented. Only a few scholars have pointed to the implications of such prolonged unemployment for inter-generational and gendered relationships which, in many cases, lead to the possibility of enhancing membership in caste and religious associations and to tensions in marriages (Chowdhry 2010).

Mallesha—talented, sensitive, intelligent, and sincere— stands as a test case for the millions who are only known in official language as the ‘educated unemployed’; a category of persons who must either be retrained or refitted to suit a new economy and its new orientations. What Mallesha experiences as loss—of not being able to pursue his own interest and skills in fine arts, of being subjected to a process that demeans his worth and abilities, of gaining certain ‘capabilities’ despite the very arduous process, and which in reality do not serve his own needs and

desires—are issues that do not translate into objective, measurable criteria. Mainstream discourses in policy-planning, and the deployment of agendas and programmes mostly recognize only those inequalities that can be addressed through a provisioning of education, health, access to resources, and more recently to a range of rights.¹⁷ What of the hidden forms of exclusion which in the apparent rhetoric of rights dissemination, capability development, and collective welfare orientation miss the very foundation of the erosion of individuals? It would not be right or easy to say that Mallesha's life-world could have been drawn on the world of his ancestors and that a life of being 'the shepherds-cum-leather workers' would have been his legitimate or better world lending itself to a plurality of non-modern life-worlds. The limitations and depredations of such a world have only been too well elucidated for any consideration of seeking to return to caste-based occupations. But, what marks Mallesha's life is not only the inability to realize himself but also the stigma of being a failure despite having the certification that should have assured him success. He, like so many others in his cohort group, is the bearer of the loaded promise of development which in its unilinear and universalistic directives is increasingly a crucible in which the life, opportunities, and being of so many are being tested.

In being removed from a life-world of knowledge and skills that were drawn from his family and caste background, and further being denied the ability to realize his own interests, and in being measured against the dominant paradigm of being 'developed', Mallesha experiences multiple dislocations and humiliations. Such subjection and disorientation by the larger system also denude Mallesha and his compatriots of a sense of agency and creates another circle of 'inequalities of agency' (Rao and Walton 2004). Subscribing to the dominant narrative and directives of being 'developed' and seeking legitimacy through it, Mallesha and his friends do not seek to critique, challenge, or disregard the system of education, examination, and job allocation. Instead, the long periods of waiting, preparation, and strategies to gain government employment make them passive participants in the system and they also seek to play it in its own game.¹⁸ This alone accounts for their silence despite the long years of stress, open violation of codes of conduct, and the questionable methods in which the much sought after jobs are allocated.

Mallesha's background of multiple class/caste and cultural disadvantage compounded with the social scarring by modern institutions and his own inability to fully comprehend it or challenge it represents a form of 'hermeneutical injustice' which Miranda Fricker describes as "... the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to persistent and wide-ranging hermeneutical marginalization" (2011: 42). His life and its tribulations represent the tensions of being caught between the disadvantages of a family, a community, and a regime of rights and development programmes which fail to address the very fundamental bases of inequality. Located within the very contradictions of a system that seeks to alter him and his life conditions and yet retains him within its complex of disadvantages, Mallesha internalizes the very norms of the larger apparatus and seeks to negotiate it through its own terms. The

impact of this on Mallesha is personal and significant. He becomes subjected to the processes of submission, co-option, and compromise. The limitations of the macro structures and their apparatus of institutions, processes, and rules mark the life-world of an individual who is also labeled as an 'educated unemployed'. Much of the outer promises of the agenda and programmes of mass and inclusive education then become forms of new sources of inequalities. For every outer promise made by the larger system, there is increasingly an inner denial.

In 2014, close to ten years since I first met him and started discussing his education and employment issues, I visited Mallesha at his home. He had finally been appointed as a high school headmaster (four years, ten months after his application) in a remote village (to which he commuted daily). He expressed that he did not find satisfaction in his job. Being a headmaster entailed primarily bureaucratic work and he rarely got to teach. Yet, I noted a sort of newfound assurance about himself. And, as he noted, he was now recognized by his family and his fellow caste persons.

I am now an official and part of the government. People recognize me for that. One cannot have what one would have liked ... a job doing what one likes. For people like us, being accepted (sweekara) and recognized (guruthu) by what society expects rather than being ourselves become our life's path. Mine has also been one.

NOTES:

¹ The term ‘scheduled caste’ is drawn from the official schedule which identifies persons from former ‘untouchable castes’ and also from other low-ranked caste groups who are entitled to a range of protective measures. The term has now gained social currency and many of these groups use it to identify themselves.

² ‘Mallesha’ is a pseudonym but all other details are factual. In 2004, Mallesha joined a research-cum-advocacy project that I was co-coordinating. In 2005, I noted his interest in applying for government jobs and we discussed his skills and interests, family life and pressures, etc., and I requested him to keep a diary. The research project closed in 2007 but we retained contact and he visited me often in Bangalore. I was privy to his struggles to focus on his art and education work and yet gain entry into a government job. Between 2009 when he quit his job, and 2011, I provided him with occasional financial support and he lent support to work in a research project but was unable to commit to being a full-time or long-term member. In 2010, we reviewed his diary and notes and I reframed several questions. We followed details of the case of the recruitment of headmasters, both through his personal experiences and through discussions and reports in the press. In writing this essay, I have translated selections from his diary (written in Kannada) and shared the draft versions of the essay with him. He approved the essay in its entirety but requested the use of a pseudonym for his name.

³ An autobiography (first published in Kannada and then translated into English) by Arvind Malagatti (1994) called *Government Brahmana* refers to such labeling. But, the label is widely and covertly used by upper-caste students and faculty to refer to reserved category students and employees (including faculty).

⁴ Estimates for the number of youth in India vary depending on the definition of youth. Currently, based on a definition of youth as ranging from 15 to 24 years, there are approximately 240 million youth (Government of India 2014) who constitute the world’s largest bodies of youth. Of these, only about 20 per cent make it to high school and only about 11 per cent up to the college or university level. Numbers for educated unemployed also vary but reliable assessments indicate it to be around 6.5 million (see Dev and Venkatanarayana 2011).

⁵ B.R. Ambedkar referred to ‘graded inequality’ as a specific form of caste-based inequality in which hierarchical caste ranking and ordering meant that each caste was relatively unequal to those above it.

⁶ Although this may be seen as representing a form of ‘para-ethnography (see Marcus and Holmes 2005), I do not draw from this genre of social anthropology. Instead, I draw on the use of diaries and frequent discussions with the interlocutor along with observations of structuring issues and public debates as a form of engaged fieldwork in which anthropological questions of not only culture but also that of structures (and their political economies), and the agency, voice, and representation of the subject are sought to be addressed.

⁷ Göran Therborn (2009) identifies three types of inequalities: ‘vital inequalities’ that pertain to inequalities of health and death; ‘existential inequalities’ which mark individuals and marginal groups; and ‘resource and material inequalities’.

⁸ Madigas (also spelt as Maadigas or Maadhigas) were originally associated with leather (or handling dead cows) and are akin to the north Indian group of Chamars, the Madiga of Andhra Pradesh, and the Chakliyers of Tamil Nadu. In Karnataka, they account for the second highest proportion of Scheduled Castes and are considered to be ‘untouchables’ by many caste groups. As a group that has taken to various

non-caste occupations, the Madigas of Karnataka are relatively well-organised in terms of political mobilisation. Dalit identity and assertions mark many of the Madiga youth associations.

⁹ The Jomtien Conference was first held in 1990, and India was a signatory to this conference and much of the recent directives for elementary education have been set by terms of the Jomtien Conference.

¹⁰ Mutts are Hindu religious orders established and run by various sects and orders. Many have spiritual leaders who are seen as both religious and temporal leaders.

¹¹ See Weisskopf (2004) for a comprehensive overview of the limitations of the affirmative action programme in the US and India. See also Deshpande (2011) for an argument that contextualizes the tension between the new trends in the growing privatization of education and the continued demand and need for affirmative action programmes in education.

¹² Bögenhold elaborates on Blossfeld and Shavit's work which showed in their evaluation of educational opportunities in 13 different countries that rapid educational expansion did not reduce inequalities of educational opportunities. They concluded: "As a consequence of educational expansion, societies can produce a higher average level of educational attainment from one birth cohort to the next, without changing the educational opportunities of children from different social strata.... Thus, the modernization theorists' hypothesis of educational opportunities must be turned on its head: expansion actually facilitates to a large extent the persistence of inequalities in educational opportunity." [1993:22] 2001: 838)

¹³ These are periodic exams conducted by state governments to recruit persons into government posts. Large numbers (up to a quarter of a million persons sometimes) of aspiring candidates undertake these exams and wait for long periods for the final selection to be conducted.

¹⁴ The State Public Services Commission is responsible for the recruitment of all government employees. While the process is supposedly open and exam-based, the biases and corruption enter at the time of interviews for which a substantial proportion of marks are allocated. In addition, in recent years, allegations of corruption in the very constitution of the board of members of the Public Services Commission have made the legitimacy of the Commission dubious.

¹⁵ H. N. Krishna, Chairman of the Karnataka State Public Services Commission, along with three others, was indicted by the Criminal Investigation Department for irregularities and illegalities in the recruitment of public servants in the years 1998, 1999, and 2004. After filing charges, he was arrested in October 2011 and imprisoned before being granted bail.

¹⁶ See newspaper reports in *The Hindu*, *Deccan Herald*, and the Kannada newspapers *Udaya Vani* and others between the period of 12–22 October 2011.

¹⁷ India has, over the past few years, been implementing a range of rights. While the Right to Information (RTI) and the Right to (Elementary) Education (RTE) bills have been passed more recently (August 2009), a range of bills pertaining to rights to food and housing are on the anvil. This is in addition to the establishment of a number of commissions to safeguard and promote human rights. As critics have pointed out, the promulgation of these rights, which have gained currency in discourses of governmentality, are ironically matched by a decline in the functioning of public institutions which are meant to safeguard or ensure these rights.

¹⁸ Common friends alleged that Mallesha had, along with some of his neighbourhood friends, bribed one of the interviewers so as to guarantee him the job. When I discussed this with him, he denied this and so I am unable to ascertain whether this took place or not.

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