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## **L. N. Venkataraman: The Social Construction of Capabilities in a Tamil Village (with a Foreword by William R. Jackson)**

Himayatnagar, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2021. XIX + 190 pp.

### **Review by Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam**

In 1953, then Tamilnadu Chief Minister Rajagopalachariar suggested a controversial education reform: instead of following the academic syllabus, children should for part of the school day be instructed in their parents' caste occupation, because that might sooner secure them an income in the face of a glut of educated youth. The proposal was furiously mocked and spurned by the Dravidian parties as *kula kalvi tittam* (caste vocation plan), to be subsequently buried quietly and never put forward again. It was seen as preventing children from the lower castes to climb out of poverty, aspire to an academic career and to social mobility and as cementing the dominant position of Brahmins in the academic professions and the crucial civil service. Education in the sense of schooling, book learning and attaining an academic degree is now generally taken as a panacea for all ills, economic and social. That this is not the case has long been argued about in the literature. While education can provide a path out of poverty and towards social mobility, it also always has a clear filter function.

The author of the study under review shares this ambivalent view of education. With the example of a village in Tamilnadu, he specifically highlights the fact that mere education does not help the poor and low-caste to achieve social mobility, whereas for the Brahmins and the dominant castes it does so only to a limited extent. In other words: education does neither flatten social hierarchies nor by itself reduce poverty.

In the introduction, the author takes issue with Amartya Sen's famous theory of capabilities which regards education as a crucial factor to provide the individual with life chances and freedom of choice to utilise these. He does not dismiss this approach but argues that the theory does not sufficiently take into account the social setting and environment of individuals and the intersectional constraints and disabilities they are exposed to. Caste and class, he says, often intersect to exacerbate social and professional disadvantages and thus obstruct or prevent the development of capabilities and functionings. Capabilities are, as he says in the title of the study, as much socially constructed as the functionings that are assumed to arise therefrom.

The argument is developed in nine chapters. The village he researched is the same one that André Beteille investigated for his path-breaking study "Caste, class and power" of 1965. The author wants to find out how the village and the people have changed since then and finds some remarkable differences. He states that the study should now rather be termed "Caste, class and education". He points out that quite

decisive social changes have taken place in the village since Bétéilles work, not least due to policies that favour the “Backward Classes” (BCs) and make it punishable to denigrate them. But he emphasises that politics has not been able to eradicate social hierarchies and intersectional discrimination. Merely changing the name by which a caste is addressed and make a derogatory name punishable takes away some overt discrimination and oppression, but not the covert and insidious workings of it.

While outlining the changes that have taken place, he shows that education, though all inhabitants in the village agree on its crucial relevance, in many cases has not had the desired effects. Considerable educated un- and underemployment can be observed. Whereas the Brahmins have dealt with that by mostly moving to the big cities, among them Chennai, the “Other Backward Classes” (OBCs) have stayed in the village, sometimes commuting into the next big town for work, and moved into the houses and erstwhile positions of the Brahmins. The BCs have remained stuck to a large extent and aspire at most to landed property in order to secure a modicum of livelihood. Further, the author describes a two-tier system of education: that in the government village school where the quality is dismal, and that in private establishments where mostly skills for a very restricted job market are taught. Thus, the author concludes, education fails young people in the village in both respects: it neither creates capabilities in the sense of life choices for the individual nor provides functionings for the job market. This is due both to the formal organisation of education and its content. Education is considered a business providing skills on the way to employability.

The narrowness of education, both government and private, shows in the degrees the young people collect: mostly B.com., BBA and such which at most provide formal skills geared to a quite limited range of jobs. While the Brahmins have at least networks that can help them access opportunities, the BCs have to fend for themselves and subsequently cannot utilise their functionings and capabilities. Many of the latter have acquired an incredible number of skills and degrees, but still have to accept low-paid and low-prestige jobs to survive. The gender aspect is of particular interest here: women of all castes are even more restricted in their life choices despite a high degree of education.

What remains largely implicit in the argument is the question of the function and meaning of education in general. What is it supposed to achieve, what type of functionings and capabilities should it provide? And which of these does it actually provide?

The study is well grounded theoretically and the author has been able to operationalise his approach adequately. His being a native speaker is a major advantage that provided him direct access the villagers without the help of an interpreter. In an annex to the study, he provides a summary and a critique of approaches in development sociology. While he again affirms Sen’s capability approach, he argues that it does not go far enough because it looks primarily at the

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individual and leaves out the limitations of this approach that consist in intersectional discrimination and social hierarchies.

The language employed in the study is, however, often opaque and overcomplex, occasionally making it difficult to get the author's point and sometimes obstructing an understanding of the considerable merits of the work. Also, while it is certainly interesting to re-investigate a research field after a gap of a few decades, the insight that education is not the highway to success and mobility it is often made out to be cannot remove social disadvantages by itself, is, although important, as remarked earlier, not altogether new. The case study on the whole confirms findings that have long been known and researched in the abstract and on the ground. In this context one might ponder whether after all *kula kalvi* properly implemented for all groups of pupils and not forced upon any one group, or a thorough change of educational content with less emphasis on book learning might not be a better avenue to create capabilities and life chances.

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