

The Cultural Politics of Education Policy in India Today: Sean Sturm interviews Shivali Tukdeo on her book *India Goes to School: Education Policy and Cultural Politics*

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Sean: The straightforward question is, why this topic? What was it that engaged you with it and got you thinking about it in what is quite a distinctive way?

Shivali: The primary motivation was an absence of research on education policy in India that goes beyond applied policy research: the implementation, the macro-, micro- and meso-structures, and how and what happens to a policy. We don't have much research that is historically attentive and looks at how policy ideas are constructed, how they travel, and how they get re-contextualised, or domesticated, in a particular situation. The story of Indian education and education policy is really fascinating because, in the formal institutional sense, it is connected to colonialism. From the early 20th century onwards, there are, in many ways, anti-colonial or nationalist visions of education. The development of educational goals and policies also served Indian education for a while. Then, another shift, post-1990s economic liberalisation and the deepening imprint of neoliberalism, brought another set of changes. I thought it was important to chronicle these shifts and find out what happens to educational goals, policies and institutions when these larger shifts happen. That's how I started this work.

Sean: There are clear parallels here with the educational history of New Zealand, although New Zealand is a settler state rather than a former colony. So there's a different context, but I can see some similar shifts. However, in your study, the influence of caste is quite distinctive. It will be, I think, of real interest to people looking at the situation from the outside because they will be accustomed to thinking in terms of categories like race or ethnicity or class in a taken-for-granted sense. But caste may be challenging for them to understand. To put it simply, what is the greatest influence of caste on the history of Indian education as you've charted it?

Shivali: That's a great but also a very complex question. The history of formal education in India goes in parallel with colonialism: the British introduced formal education in India for logistical reasons that served the needs of empire. There was state knowledge, an official discourse about the colonised, but, at the same time, there was space opened up for public education. Like with pretty much everything, the 'upper' caste and upper-class Indians were the first ones to take advantage of public education, and they both benefitted as they moved into the administrative services under the British. But the 'lowest' caste, or Dalit caste, people who had been historically socially marginalised, also saw this as an opportunity for social transformation or for entering the institutions that were previously forbidden to them. So because they saw public education as a political project, they too embraced formal education, but for completely different reasons. And, in contemporary India, you still see an

enormous desire to get an education. Poor parents from socially marginalised communities want their child to get a good education, which wasn't the case a few decades ago, partly because the structural conditions prevented them accessing education. Our public universities are completely different compared to a few decades ago. Diverse students from marginalised backgrounds are coming to universities; getting a university education is a personal project, and it's also a political project for a lot of communities. Why? Because we still see caste-based discrimination and violence in educational institutions. While, theoretically, there is an opportunity for all, educational practices are extremely caste-driven. As a result, tension and violence is a part of the educational experience, particularly for marginalised people. I have worked with diverse indigenous communities, and it is impossible to have a story of education that does not involve some kind of violence – not just obvious physical acts of violence, but also other forms of violence permeating everyday practices.

Sean: When the book charts chronologically the large shifts in education in India over the last century, it's as if a different caste or set of castes comes into focus with each shift. You mentioned earlier about 'upper' caste or -class access to public education; you then talked about an attempt to improve the access to education of those of 'lower' cast through quotas. At another point in the book, you also talk about the massification of education, which shifted the focus to access for the middle classes; presumably, this is also related to caste? And now things have shifted again with the move to mobility and globalisation in education – higher education, in particular. Can you talk through what you see as the main shifts in the relationship between caste and education and access?

Shivali: The most important factor is the provision of affirmative action, or what is called 'reservation' in India: provisions for the historically marginalised castes to enter higher education and public sector employment. This has been instrumental in allowing 'lower' caste students and communities to access public education and the public sector employment. And it has been important with regard to the constitution, as the most significant feature of independent India's movement in policy towards some sort of social justice for the communities that have been historically marginalised. Also, massification, or mass education, has indeed enabled access, particularly to higher education, for the lower middle class, the socially disadvantaged communities. This, again, was a very useful provision. But those institutions that enabled access to the marginalised became boxed in. While they became open to the public, they also very quickly became overburdened and underfunded. They became the teaching places. Those institutions that concentrated on research and innovation got a lot of funding, but were, again, controlled by historically elite classes. And massification, which was a good idea, ended up leading to greater privatisation. Affordable private schools or colleges that catered exclusively to the poor further weakened the public system, which further crumbled. But the biggest thing remains the very uneven development of institutions: there are research-based institutions, for instance, Indian institutes of technology, which are research-oriented and globally recognised, and, parallel to them, extremely underfunded state institutions that opened access for marginalised communities. It's a really uneven landscape.

Sean: So you talked initially about state actors directing policy that was designed to allow access to a greater number of students, which fits with the international discourse in the 20th century about national education. And now you're talking about a public-private model in which you've got state-funded and private institutions. What, then, has the more recent 'NGO-isation' of education done to change the landscape when it comes to access?

Shivali: As you rightly pointed out, since the 20th century, there's been a lot of emphasis on the national education system. That was an anti-colonial move, in a sense: one way to respond to the plurality of ethnicities, castes, religions and languages in India would be to have a robust public education system. That is why the national system of education was envisioned. But this meant the state devoting a larger percentage of the overall budget to education and setting up public institutions for everybody. After Independence, the first education commission that gave its report in 1966 talked about a common school system, which was revolutionary in the Indian context, simply because several communities were previously barred from accessing formal education. However, what has resulted is not a common school system. While there was a large network of public schools and higher education institutions set up, the public system began to be weakened. In the '70s and '80s, the NGO sector boomed, and non-state actors emerged. By 2000, it was really prominent. Early in the book, I talk about how government schools became laboratories for experimentation; now any NGO that wants to do some educational experiment can just go into government schools and do so because the state has completely retreated. The experiments of NGOs were about accountability for teachers, how to be an effective teacher. There was a lot of pressure on teachers to deliver learning outcomes and better results, be efficient. [Sean: This sounds familiar.] This story is connected to the economic liberalisation and neo-liberalisation of Indian education. And, recently, in the last decade or so, there has also been a trend towards the neoliberalisation of education welfare. In India, what used to be scholarships, or schemes, for historically marginalised communities is now direct benefit transfer. It's not a scholarship, not access for you to the higher educational system; you become a beneficiary of a direct cash transfer that you choose what you want to do with. It represents a shift in what it means to be a citizen under the neoliberal conditions of the Indian state.

Sean: This seems like neocolonialism: the openness of the Indian education system to global actors, both NGOs and corporate, or neoliberal, interests, yes? How does that impact the ways in which people are educated on the ground that these three big actors, the state, NGOs and foreign neoliberal interests are operating? How does this operate in practice?

Shivali: The global discourses are all about creating policy universals. For instance, a huge scheme, Education for All, is very much target-driven. It calls for the developing world to have clear, measurable outcomes, and it calls for reforms in education administration through decentralisation – or what it calls 'community participation.' It also calls for greater accountability and new ways of understanding learning. But these schemes are imposed without understanding the context, the specific nuances of the particular country. As a result, there is a misalignment. On the ground, in India, there has been a lot of talk about

decentralisation since the 1990s. The vision has been to remove the shadow of the state and to ensure that local authorities, the local agencies, become more active, more responsible. But that vision has been imposed by the government and through global policy discourses. The grasp of the Indian state and its state mission gets even tighter, and, because you have the accountability initiatives from the global discourse, you cannot say no to either. In practice, very interestingly, it really is completely opposite of what is intended.

Sean: A centralised mission to decentralise: it's really an obstacle.

Shivali: Exactly. We have a long tradition of democratic decentralisation and community participation in India. But the globally imposed ideal of community participation has been translated as communities providing services, volunteering for education. That means communities working as para-teachers, or teaching support staff, on much lower remuneration.

Sean: Let's shift direction a little. Most of the discourse that we hear about India currently is about the strength of Modi and Hindu nationalism. Are you seeing any influence of that on the way that education policy is being made, or is it a cover for other things: is it a cover for neocolonialism, effectively?

Shivali: The rise of Modi, and the rise of right-wing influence in Indian politics, is a most unfortunate and yet phenomenon. It's a form of nationalism that is fascist and unscientific in its tendencies. And I think it's to blame for the pandemic situation in India: there is just too much bravado, too much chest-beating about how great India is, how great India was as a civilisation. Most of those claims are false and just serve the purpose of riling up people into a sort of false faith about their culture, about their civilisation, which is wrapped up in a kind of jingoistic, anti-Islamic – anti-minority, actually – rhetoric. Education has taken a beating from this attitude. For example, the Prime Minister has, on multiple occasions, talked about how ancient Indian science was far ahead of Western science. This sort of binary – ancient India versus modern Western science – in a context like India can ignite a lot of passion due to the history of colonialism. But that is just empty rhetoric. And, like the last time they were in power, they have changed the textbooks to rewrite Indian history as Hindu history, Indian history as much more communal and much more patriarchal. But all this is just a cover for a consistent reduction in budgets. The last budget, for example, imposed an as much as 30% reduction in education funding, including for early childhood education. Within a decade or so, we'll see the effects of what the Modi regime has done.

Sean: And has the rise of Modi led to any changes in the interactions with both the global actors: transnational and NGO education? Has it led to any shifts in those spheres of education?

Shivali: The government has clamped down on particularly the NGOs that were progressive or political by calling them Pakistani or Asian; anti-India, anti-national forces. It's a very convenient way to understand dissent and silence opposition. But the most dangerous way in

which this right-wing government has dealt with views that don't conform to their view is by unleashing social media campaigns. It can easily result in the reproduction of hatred against minorities, against anybody who doesn't agree with the government. I want to understand what the role is of critical literacy, or education, in such conditions because we're not really able to counter such campaigns otherwise. It is important for us to think about how to counter that sort of illiteracy.

Sean: So far, we've talked a lot about top-down influences and about the overwhelming weight that the state and other actors place upon education, which makes it difficult to innovate, even if there have been, for example, signals from the state that access to education is important and so on. Can you describe for me ways in which people have been resistant to such top-down governance, some of the ways in which people have managed to carve out some space for themselves in this system, which seems very centrally driven and bureaucratic?

Shivali: There are many local initiatives. For example, a lot of students in public universities have organised themselves to creatively campaign against all these things and for an India that they think is worth preserving. That is something truly anticolonial, post-independent; in many senses, this is the India that needs to be cherished. Where organisations are concerned, many social movements have arisen that have included minorities and women, who have resisted the way in which debates get framed by the Government today. Some local, even political, parties have taken different stances than the Government's jingoistic and simplistic policies. Those are the possibilities. But such practices tend to be fairly local and are definitely not financially supported. Like many resistant practices, they operate in a different register to majoritarian practices; they have different ways to sustain themselves. But they don't really feature prominently in the national theatre: the revolution will not be televised.

Sean: How do these resistant practices interact with policy? How do you conceive of that relationship?

Shivali: The central government machinery is a formidable force to counter. When it comes to policy, several groups have consistently pointed out why global policies got translated inadequately in the Indian context. For instance, by privileging equality via equal access, the group called the All India Forum for Right to Education has been pointing out the flaws in India's translation of the global discourse into local practices. Another organisation, Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS), has been working with the teachers in government schools to strengthen public education.

Sean: Coming back to your work, when you're talking about Policy Studies in general, you argue that one of the principal motives to undertake it is to attempt to improve governance in some way. What do you see as the role of your work in this? Where do you situate yourself, on the side of the critics or on the side of those who want to improve governance from within?

Shivali: I definitely started with the desire that things, the system, can be improved. And I do think it is possible; for instance, a lot of teachers are making a big difference in extremely impoverished schools. But a critical orientation is required to understand what they do in structural terms. Many teachers in India work on temporary contracts: their contract gets renewed every couple of years; job security has increasingly become a distant dream. Yet people teach because they're passionate about teaching and school. And many students, for example, first-generation learners, have a tremendous desire to do well. So you can't just be a critic and say that's all I have. And efforts are being made within the system to improve it. But I think that, to understand our daily practice and desire to do well, it helps if we have a historically and instructionally informed understanding of our practices and where education is at today.

Sean: Of course! What struck me as quite distinctive about your book, in the context of policy studies, was that you introduce people's stories into the book. They are powerful. Why did you do this, and what does that say about your work?

Shivali: Methodologically, I didn't want to write a policy book with a top-down understanding of policy that focusses on structures and schemes. I also wanted to contextualise it. What happens when, say, government or global supranational agencies steer a policy idea in a certain direction? For instance, early on in the book, I reproduce the story of a 'lower' caste student. He is going to school for the first time and is made to sit outside of the classroom. Then it starts to rain, and the teacher sees the boy sitting outside in the rain and is moved to tears. That's a very important moment for understanding exclusion and the ways in which our institutions reproduce social hierarchies. These stories can tell us a lot about how our policy ideas are floated and what they actually do.