

Educational Spaces of Contention: The navigation of capital and aspiration by female students in Kerala

Since the 1970s, Kerala, a state in Southern India, has been experiencing rapid social development. Social scientists and economists have referred to this process as the Kerala Model of Development: Kerala's rapid social improvements such as gender equality, education and literacy, and high material conditions of living have been studied as an anomaly [1] [2]. As a result, Kerala has a literacy rate around 95%, as well a highly educated generation of youth [3]. However, this social development has led to an increasing amount of qualified, yet unemployed youth, as job creation has been relatively low [1] [4]. Due to the simultaneous economic liberalization of India, government jobs have become increasingly less profitable, both financially and in terms of cultural capital. Jobs in the growing private sector have become more sought-after and reputable, but they are scarce, and many citizens are forced to relocate due to a lack of jobs [4] [5]. This challenging environment has been particularly difficult for youth from lower castes, as they must not only tackle the competitive job market, but must also navigate stigma and discrimination, as well as lack of opportunity [5]. I will specifically refer to the lower caste communities of Dalit (former untouchables, referred to as Scheduled Castes or SC), and Adivasi (tribal communities, referred to as Scheduled Tribes or ST). Although the government has implemented a caste reservation system, where government jobs are reserved for workers from lower castes, these jobs have become increasingly stigmatized and less reputable [5].

In response to social changes and emerging challenges facing SC and ST youth, the Government of Kerala developed the Centre for Research and Education for Social Transformation (CREST) in 2008 as an autonomous organization. CREST is situated in the city of Calicut, which is the third largest city in Kerala with a population of around two million (in 2011) [6]. Just a short bus ride from the Malabar Coast, CREST is situated on Kirtads Campus (Kerala Institute for Research Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) [6]. Kirtads is a government organization that conducts research to promote the development of SC and ST communities. While sharing facilities with Kirtads, such as classrooms and computer labs, CREST hosts a variety of programs geared towards SC and ST youth, including an orientation program for BTech students, management development programs, research projects, and the Post Graduate Certificate Course for Professional Development (PGCCPD) [7]. It was at CREST's PGCCPD program where I conducted the fieldwork that will frame this paper.

The PGCCPD targets youth from ST and SC communities who lack the cultural capital (education, physical appearance, language, fluency) and social capital (social mobility, network, peer group) to overcome systemic barriers: discrimination and stereotypes based on their caste. The program's curriculum includes language and communication skills, interview skills, reading and writing, networking opportunities, and a theatre workshop. Students are instructed to speak in English as much as possible, and to adopt Western mannerisms inside and outside of the classroom. In this context, I will look at the ways that students navigate CREST through Bourdieu's analysis of capital. Bourdieu suggests that we cannot simply look at economic capital, as it is

limited; we must also look at the interactions between social and cultural capital [8 pp 83]. Indian society is highly regulated and structured by capital; caste is an institutionalized form of social capital, in that caste determines one's social mobility and network. It is a lack of cultural and social capital within this context that restricts students from lower castes when applying for jobs. The stories in this paper explore issues of capital, and how CREST's pedagogy as an institution is informed by its students' past experiences of discrimination and urgent need for cultural capital. My research is focused particularly on the experiences of female students, as their plans and expectations often exist in tension with those of the institution. The negotiation of these conflicting goals has resulted in their ability to use cultural capital in unique and strategic ways, which not only reaffirm the mission of CREST, but also simultaneously resist the structures that inform the institution.

methodologies

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at CREST from April 18th to June 13th 2015 towards the end of the PGCCPD program that ran for five months. The students ranged from 21 to 25 years old, and had all obtained an undergraduate degree; many students had even completed a Master's degree or had previous work experience. The majority of students had a background in engineering, math, or science. Typically, the fully funded, bi-annual program is comprised of around 30-40 students; there were 20 female students and 15 male students when I arrived at CREST. My data was obtained through participant observation. I would spend the day at CREST, participating in activities alongside the students, as well as teaching some spontaneous activities in English, and would spend the evenings with the female students, as we were residing in the same hostel. I also conducted seven formal interviews with female students, three with male students, and three with staff and faculty. I have changed the names of participants to protect their privacy. Formal interviews lasted around 30 minutes to an hour, while informal interviews occurred frequently (several times per day) and spontaneously, lasting 5 minutes to 2 hours. In this paper, I chose to rely heavily on the young women's stories to highlight their subjectivities and to convey some of the complexity of their individual situations.

educational pedagogy

I will first explore my personal relationship to the curriculum of the institution itself, looking at the interplay between traditional academic curriculum and anti-oppression pedagogy. My background in equity studies and social justice education informed my expectations of CREST's approach to tackling caste discrimination. Most of my background in anti-oppressive education was based around Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. A component of Freire's pedagogy suggests that the oppressed can only be freed from their position of oppression through a change in individual consciousness, which is accomplished through problem-posing education and critical thinking about social issues [9 pp 79]. Since CREST works with students facing discrimination and systemic oppression, I assumed that a similar approach to education would be implemented. Based on my reading of Freire, I expected teacher-student

distinctions to be minimal, and student questioning to be the norm [9 pp 80]. I was shocked when I did not hear a single discussion about caste during the formal curriculum at CREST, as students were simply learning literacy and technical skills. My perspective insisted that teaching students skills and monitoring their use of English was reproducing harmful colonial and casteist methods of education, and simply further repressed students who had already been oppressed by discriminatory educational and social systems [10 pp18]. I viewed CREST's model as a complete contrast to my idealized vision of anti-oppressive pedagogy, where alternative modes of learning, fluency, and creativity were encouraged. However, my understanding was not culturally relevant. Although consciousness-raising does have a place in education (as I will further explore through CREST's drama workshop), concrete and tangible skills are necessary, if not crucial, for most ST and SC students' survival. It is hence CREST's role to provide a curriculum that responds to the needs of its students.

As an institution, CREST must implement a curriculum that best addresses the urgent needs of participating students. CREST hence occupies a space of contention: As an institution designed to assist ST and SC communities in achieving excellence, do they choose to resist pre-existing oppressive systems and institutions, such as education or caste? Or do they seek to work within them, and teach students the skills to navigate and succeed within these systems? Although CREST does not directly challenge the barriers of caste discrimination, as Freire's pedagogy would encourage, the staff and faculty have actively decided that the most effective and strategic approach is to teach students skills to overcome these barriers. D.D. Nampoothiri, the Executive Director of CREST, sheds light on the public education system in Kerala: "Hardly any worthwhile knowledge transfer takes place in the schools where these children [Dalit] study. More shockingly, even basic literacy and numeracy that they are supposed to imbibe at the primary level remain alien to students who had reached the middle school level" [5 pp 259]. This leaves SC and ST students at a disadvantage when applying for university or jobs, regardless of existing caste discrimination. Nampoothiri also mentions that a disconnect exists between educators and students, as only 0.28% of teachers in Kerala come from the Dalit community [5 pp 259]. A lack of representation in the education system contributes to the persistence of caste discrimination. Also, students at CREST would speak often about poor treatment that they received from educators, particularly in university. Whenever a male student would pick up his government stipend from the university, he would be ridiculed and humiliated by his principal. Another student told me that their teacher in grade school would constantly belittle his intelligence in front of his class, and claim that he was "unteachable" [5]. Since ST and SC students at CREST have experienced such poor treatment within the education system, CREST works within this system to provide participants with the necessary tools and skills that they may be lacking from previous education. Further, CREST provides students with the cultural capital to overcome caste discrimination that may restrict them in the future when applying for positions in higher education or work in the private sector.

CREST provides students with necessary skills to gain cultural capital through its formal curriculum. Rather than framing the students' inability to achieve success as a

systemic issue, CREST engages in a neoliberal approach to overcoming caste discrimination [11]. This framework is perhaps to prepare students for the neoliberal and corporate workforce that they hope to enter. A staff member told me that the program teaches students to be resilient and strong; they must recognize the barriers facing them but must also look at the resources they have around them, including their peers and the faculty at CREST. As such, students are taught through the guise of “personality development,” where they must work to improve themselves in order to overcome systemic barriers. I was initially uncertain about this approach and its potential effects on the students’ self-esteem and confidence, as it appeared that they were being blamed for their failings. However, the students explained that the program gave them a tremendous sense of pride. An overwhelming amount of students were content with their success, as it was a direct result of their own capabilities and hard work. This was empowering for many students: “Before CREST, I was not confident to speak. If I had to speak in front of a big group, my legs would shake. I am more comfortable with English now” (personal communication, April 24, 2015). Another student echoed his sentiments: “I never wanted to travel. I never wanted to leave until I came to CREST. I just felt nervous. I was afraid to talk in English to foreigners” (personal communication, April 22, 2015). CREST not only provides students with cultural capital from engaging in personality development courses, but it provides students with a newfound sense of self-esteem and confidence that they did not develop through their previous educational experiences.

female students & cultural capital

The female students at CREST had similar reactions when discussing the empowering results of CREST. However, many expressed needs and future aspirations, often around marriage, that were different than the male students, and that did not match those that the institution has been designed to meet. Initially, I thought that the female students’ expectations in regards to marriage conflicted with the curriculum and mission of CREST. However, as I will discuss, the negotiation of these conflicting goals has resulted in their ability to strategically use the skills they develop and the cultural capital they gain while at CREST. In a formal interview with Kana, a female student at CREST, she discussed her future aspirations and how they have changed from when she was younger. Kana completed her undergraduate degree in an arts-based program, going against her parents’ wishes, so much that her mother stopped speaking with her for a few months. According to Kana, having an 80% in school means that you should pursue higher education in engineering. Kana was the first student to introduce me to what she termed the “marriage market,” which depicts the transaction that takes place when looking for a husband or wife. According to the students, a husband and his family often look for certain qualities and characteristics in a future wife, which result in her worth within the marriage market. A woman’s worth is often highly determined by her education, career, family, and caste. When reenacting a marriage arrangement in the program’s theatre workshop, it was common knowledge to all students that within the context of a potential marital transaction, a woman was supposed to act quiet and shy. When my male colleague challenged the male students on this assumption, they simply

disagreed and continued with their reenactment. Kana furthers this understanding by describing the importance of a woman's career within the marriage market: "a career as a journalist means that the girl is outspoken, arrogant, and unpredictable; these are all undesirable qualities in a future wife. A girl is worth far more if she is a doctor or works in business" (personal communication, May 1, 2015). As such, Kana has shifted career paths and aspires to attend school for her Masters of Business Administration since it is more "profitable." This reveals the gendered expectations within the marriage market that female students must negotiate while at CREST.

I would like to complicate this revelation by suggesting that although the marriage market can be a restrictive gendered transaction, the female students are able to use the skills and cultural capital that they have obtained at CREST to challenge caste relations and restrictions around marriage. Although CREST may not appear to be constructed to address women's expected roles within the marriage market, as it is geared towards getting the students jobs in the private sector, some of them are able to translate these skills to meet the needs of their situation. Attending CREST will have assisted Kana in several ways within the marriage market. Kana says that her family is well off, and that accessing education was not a financial challenge or burden. As such, she has economic capital. However, her caste and the associated stigma and discrimination put her in a lower position, as she is lacking cultural capital. While at CREST, she has gained the technical skills to enter into an MBA program, which she would not have been able to accomplish with solely an arts degree. Here, Kana follows the pathway to success that CREST lays out, although her intentions in regards to her use of this success are conflicting. Once Kana has chosen to engage in the exchange of marriage, her husband becomes a symbol of her status. Bourdieu suggests, "exchange transforms the things exchanged into signs of recognition" [8 pp 89]. Kana uses the cultural capital that she has gained at CREST by performing outside of her caste when engaging in a marriage transaction (her mannerisms, language, and new career path). As such, her cultural capital will be transformed into social capital through this transaction, improving her own status through her new husband and redefining the limits of the group (caste) through her membership [8 pp 83]. Kana's transaction and transfer of capital subtly challenge the caste system and the narrative that she is stuck within her social position. However, although she has discovered the tools to challenge her caste through this gendered transaction, she is still unable to achieve her ideal career as a journalist. This is due to the gendered restrictions that structure aspiration and achievement, which maintain her feelings of contention while at CREST, and within larger systems that structure identity-based ideologies.

consciousness-raising & gendered space

The educationalist Lisa Delpit states: "Students need technical skills to open doors, but they need to be able to think critically and creatively in order to participate in meaningful and potentially liberating work inside those doors" [10 pp19]. The instructors at CREST provide students with information and skills to engage with larger economic systems that structure the private workforce in Southern India, as I mentioned above. However, the students also require different types of learning in order to meaningfully

and critically engage with those systems, as Kana's story showed us. This engagement emerged through the students' increasing emotional intimacy, leading to the creation of a safe and supportive learning environment. I first gained insight into the root of this intimacy and friendship between students at the girls' hostel in the evenings. The female students at CREST go to school together, eat together, and live together, most of them sleeping in bunk beds in rooms of 10 to 12 girls. The time that they are able to spend together within a space of their own allows them to further develop their peer group, sense of solidarity, and camaraderie. It is within this space that unfiltered conversations about caste inequality exist. At night in the hostel, I spoke with several girls who revealed their experiences of caste discrimination. The girls spoke often, and critically, about relationships, marriage, and marriage arrangements, leading a bold student, Aruna, to call it a "stupid system" (personal communication, April 26, 2015). When speaking, they often compared the "stupid system" to their assumptions about Western culture, and their relative lack of independence. Aruna's friend mentioned that in the past, Dalit women in Kerala would have to bear their chests in public; they were not allowed to cover their chests when they were in front of upper castes [12]. By discussing the sexual harassment that Dalit women faced in the past, the girls began to think critically about the intersections of caste and gender in their own lives. Most conversations ended with mutual feelings of empowerment, where the girls reaffirmed that their caste and gender do not define who they are, and that they have the ability to overcome the discrimination that they encounter. However, most girls still conform to family and community expectations. The private space of the hostel enabled the atmosphere of support that fostered these conversations, most often those related to the intersections of caste and gender discrimination.

The emotional intimacy amongst female students led them to feel more confident engaging with each other, and with their male peers, in the formal spaces of CREST. While participating in the programming at CREST, female and male students also became physically closer, a direct contrast to gender-based relations I saw in the public sphere. Students would hold hands and hug often. Both emotional and physical intimacies are what established a strong peer group. Pallavi Chander, an art therapist and social activist who facilitated the theatre workshop at CREST shares her own experiences as proof: Having a strong support system was what allowed Pallavi to pursue a career in art therapy. She received consistent backlash from her family for her nonconformist aspiration, as most of her peers went to school for science or math. She believes that she would not have been able to go against her parents' and community's wishes had she not had a group of like-minded friends. This peer group can be particularly useful to female students, who must still negotiate the expectations from their family and communities. Kana is a female student at CREST, residing from a very small town and holding a Bachelor of Arts in English. Unlike Kana, Anya has chosen not to get married after CREST, in order to stay home and take care of her parents, since she wishes to give back to them for all that they have provided for her. This is where CREST's unintentional results are effective: Anya is supported by her peers and feels a sense of community and connection to her friends who deeply understand her experiences. Although Anya did not directly benefit from the cultural capital she gained

at CREST, she developed social capital: a peer group that offers her a sense of solidarity and support via online media and new technology, transcending physical boundaries of sociality and exemplifying the sustainability of CREST's program.

This peer group was important at CREST as well: It was through this support system that a safe and supportive environment emerged during the theatre workshop. It was also not until the theatre workshop that caste discrimination was actually mentioned by either gender within the formal programming of the institution. During the theatre workshop, students developed a capacity for critical thinking and creativity. Towards the end of the weeklong workshop, Pallavi asked the students to discuss an instance where they felt hurt or were treated unfairly because of an aspect of their identity. Aruna, once again, brought up her experiences with inequality based on her caste. Her group ended up presenting a skit out of her story: Aruna was renting a room while at university and was treated extremely poorly by her landlady, very blatantly because of her caste. An example is when she was forced to use the washroom outside, while her friends of upper castes were able to use the washroom in the house. Another example is when her landlady did not accept food from their lower caste neighbor as she claimed it was "dirty." It is interesting that Aruna's discussion shifted significantly to exclude the gendered influences that have contributed to her experiences of caste discrimination. The construction and maintenance of a safe space at CREST is important and contentious. Pallavi states that that "creating a safe space is essential - it's the space where voices emerge" (email communication, July 15, 2015). Although a sense of safety and support enabled by the peer group allowed the students to feel comfortable discussing caste within the institutional, it is important to note that gender was not discussed within this formal context at CREST. CREST is successful in responding to Delpit's analysis, that students need creative spaces to learn skills and raise consciousness in order to critically engage with the structures they enter, in this case, dialogue around caste discrimination [10 pp19]. However, CREST is unsuccessful in directly addressing the unique challenges that female students must negotiate while at the institution, and in the future.

Although the students had established the drama workshop as a safe space that enabled conversations addressing caste discrimination, topics such as gender inequality were never addressed. As I previously mentioned, the structure of CREST relies less upon the acknowledgement of systemic oppression, but rather the qualities that the individual must gain in order to overcome that oppression, or to "act" outside of it. Even in the private space of the hostel, the female students thought within a similar framework: They looked less at the root cause of their oppression and instead, how they could individually overcome and negotiate these barriers to achieve their goals. However, even when conversations did emerge around caste, such as in the theatre workshop, neither male nor female students discussed gender relations or restrictions. This can help shed light on to the question: Why did the female students *choose* not to talk about gender? Bourdieu states that each member in a group is seen as a custodian of the limits of that group [8 pp 90], referring to one's social network in relation to social capital. However, I believe that this concept can be applied to gender in Calicut as well. Perhaps, women also monitor the limits of gender groups. The private space of the

hostel allowed them to question the strictures of both gender and caste: Moments of consciousness-raising allow them to navigate these systems (informed by economics, neoliberalism, education), including those perpetuated by the structure of CREST, while simultaneously leaving them in tact. As such, the girls conform to these systems. They do so to meet expectations that are monitored externally by their families, communities, and dominant public discourse, as well as by each other, in their mixed-gender peer group. They simultaneously resist these systems by navigating them creatively and strategically with the tools that they have obtained from CREST, whether intentionally or not.

conclusion

The success of CREST's program is two-fold. The formal curriculum successfully provides students with the institutionalized capital of an educational institution; students have gained the skills to become competitive members of the workforce. Second, the personality development component of the curriculum provides students with the tools to excel in interviews and relationship building; they are able to overcome caste-based stigma by changing their mannerisms, language, and behavior. However, CREST also provides students with unexpected capital. It allows them to extend the limits of their social network by developing a strong peer group, as well as develop the skills to think critically and thoughtfully about caste discrimination, enabling them to challenge the systems (higher education, economic workforce) that they will be entering. Although most students follow the path set out by CREST, several female students must negotiate external expectations and commitments within the context of their education at CREST. This includes marriage requirements and family obligations. Unfortunately, gender inequality continues to persist in Kerala, and remains unspoken and unaddressed at CREST, complicating the Kerala Model of Development and ideas of complete equality and progress in the state. Although female students are left at a disadvantage, compared with their male peers, the female students at CREST use the cultural capital and social networks that they develop to their advantage, in order to challenge and resist caste discrimination and limitations, and manipulate the strictures in which they are situated. This does something important in validating CREST's role as an important institution within a space of contention. It also reveals the importance of recognizing both the formal and informal curriculum of an institution, as the latter is the space where consciousness-raising, solidarity building, and reflection exist. It is thus crucial that safe spaces are developed and maintained for students, particularly women, to creatively develop opinions and beliefs on their own terms, in order to strategically challenge, rather than simply overcome, caste and gender discrimination.

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