Evening the Score:

CREST's Destabilization of Caste-Structured Distribution of Capital in

Contemporary Kerala

Introduction

I felt as though a small crowd was forming around me. Young men looked on expectantly

as I fumbled gracelessly with the fat, wet grains of rice piled high on my aluminum plate. I had

accepted an invitation to dinner at the male student's shared accommodation on the third day of

my internship at the Centre for Research in Education and Social Transformation (CREST).

Their three-bedroom home was within 10 minutes walking distance of CREST's campus and

housed up to 15 male students each semester. Rent for the "boys' hostel," as it was commonly

referred, costs 1,200 INR/month per occupant to be deducted from the monthly stipend provided

to each student of CREST's Post Graduate Certificate Course for Professional Development

(PGCCPD).[1] The men who stood encircling me belonged to CREST's 25th batch (class) and

ranged in age from 22 to 28. Almost every student had travelled from a hamlet, town or city from

somewhere else in Kerala (as well as one student from the neighbouring state Tamil Nadu) to

study at CREST in Kozhikode.

The dinner was to be my first encounter with my interlocutors outside of CREST's

campus limits and, thus, the purview of its teachers and administration. I steeled myself for what

I hoped would prove to be my first foray into the realm of 'genuine' ethnographic fieldwork.

Before I managed to utter a single stilted question, though, the students had launched into a

dialogue with one another about their experiences both in and outside of CREST. For nearly an

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[1] This stipend is provided by Kerala's government. The monthly amount awarded to each student
corresponds with their attendance record for that month, the maximum being 5,000 INR,
approximately $100 CAD. (CREST's Code of Student Conduct 2015)

hour, a conversation ranging in topic from upcoming presentations and exams to students'

hometowns, families and their ambitions for the future raged on. Apart from brief and infrequent

asides in Malayalam, this conversation took place entirely in English (whether this was for my

benefit, an effort to practice or perhaps to demonstrate their proficiency, I am not sure). The

conversation was animated by the voices of 5 or so of the most outgoing men but invariably

revolved around the articulate contributions of Sreejith,[2] a charismatic 23 year-old holding a

B.Tech in chemical engineering. Prior to leaving for India, I had been warned about the

inevitability of an initial period of shyness or hesitance on the part of the students to open up to

me. Consequently, I was astonished at the students' eagerness to share; doubly so when the

conversation turned to caste, a topic I had been cautioned to avoid discussing directly at all, let

alone within the first week of my fieldwork.

"I don't think *you* would understand, Sam… A long time ago there were kings and then

their slaves. The people who are descended them (sic) make those who are rich and who are

poor. This is what it means by caste. Those are who we call socially upward and socially

backward." This was Sreejith's response to a question I had asked about the term 'backward,'

which I had heard CREST's students and faculty using to refer to those living in tribal

communities. Admittedly, this question had been engineered to betray my ignorance of caste and

the role that it played in contemporary Kerala. I had hoped this approach would encourage my

interlocutors to 'fill in the blanks,' that is, to explain to me how they perceived and related to

caste while under the impression that I had no prior understanding of the subject and, thus, no

preconceived opinion on it. Hyper-aware of the sensitivity of the subject, I followed up

apprehensively: "What is it like here [in Kozhikode, Kerala] for those you refer to as

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[2]All interlocutors' names referenced within are pseudonyms.

'backward'? Do they have different opportunities? Are they treated differently from others?" Sreejith responded patiently: "No, Sam, no it is no longer important. Today, in Kerala nobody cares about caste." He spoke with calm assurance among his peers; some nodded their heads in earnest agreement.

It is important to note that by virtue of his enrolment at CREST, "a national institute… addressing the needs of the Dalits, Adivasis and other marginalized communities of India" (CREST n.d.) and, specifically, in the PGCCPD course in which admission eligibility is determined, partly, on the basis of caste membership,[3] it can be concluded that Sreejith belongs to one of these so-called marginalized populations. Both his statement that "caste does not matter in Kerala" and his rhetorical distancing of himself from those that he refers to as 'backward,' may seem irreconcilable with this fact. At the very least, it is puzzling that a student enrolled in a program that specifically targets these populations and whose focus is "Employability Enhancement, Personality Development, Communication Skills, IT, Quantitative & Analytical Skills General Awareness and Entrepreneurship Development" (CREST n.d.) would assert that caste-disparity is non-existent. Sreejith's claim, though, is in many ways emblematic of the broader tension between Kerala and the myth of Kerala constructed through state and expert narratives.

Long heralded as an oasis of 'development,' democracy, literacy, gender-equality, caste-consciousness and political mobilization against the formalized caste system (Devika 2010; Steur 2009), in truth, structural inequality arranged across caste-lines persists in Kerala (Mosse 2010; Nampoothiri 2009; Isac 2011). Dr. Susamma Isac, a project officer at CREST, asserts that in

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[3] "Out of the forty seats available for the [PGCCPD] course, 28 are reserved for SC [Scheduled Castes], 8 for ST [Scheduled Tribes] and 4 for OEC/OBC [Other Eligible Communities/Other Backward Classes]" (CREST n.d.)

Kerala "the gap in literacy and education between non-tribal and tribal people… is striking."

(2011:7) D.D. Nampoothiri, CREST's executive director, argues that in the context of economic

liberalization, neoliberal trends including the privatization of education have "tended to

reproduce the weak access of Dalit/Adivasi candidates to higher education opportunities…

reflected in their relegation to largely uneconomic occupations such as agriculture/allied labour

and unskilled work ." (2009:258-9) So, why would a student at CREST deny the existence of

caste-disparity?

Sreejiths's seemingly contradictory claim was a point of departure in my research at

CREST and one that I will return to at the conclusion of this essay. This moment remained a

defining one in my investigation of the tensions and inconsistencies that exist in and between

contemporary Kerala's neoliberal institutional logic, CREST's PGCCPD program and the

experiences of its students. Each of my interlocutors' unique life histories, it seemed, informed

distinctly personal beliefs about the (lack of a) role that caste played in their and others' lives. I

situate these students' narratives in Bourdieu's (1986) *Forms of Capital*'s theoretical framework,

reflecting on their intersections with CREST's objectives, programs and curricula.

Forms of Capital: Theory and Praxis

In brief, Bourdieu's (1986) seminal work discusses the existence of non-economic forms

of capital (i.e. cultural and social) that - much like their economic counterpart - are borne out of

and reproduce the stratification of a given society. Bourdieu posits that capital (economic or

otherwise) is accumulated labour made manifest and that its unequal distribution at a given time

constitutes the "immanent structure of the social world" (1986:83), that is, the established,

deterministic arrangement of opportunity or capacity for success of a given individual within

their society. I provide a cursory definition of both cultural and social capital here to demonstrate

their relevance as theoretical concepts with respect to my fieldwork at CREST and to contemporary caste-relations in Kerala more broadly.

Cultural capital, as described by Bourdieu (1986), exists in three states: embodied, objectified and institutionalized. Cultural capital in its embodied state refers to those "long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu 1986:84) (some of which may be cultivated in - or adopted by - individuals) that index social, intellectual and economic status (e.g. language proficiency, conversational style, confidence, appearance, style of dress, etc.). Cultural capital in its objectified state[4] refers to those conspicuous material possessions that when owned purportedly convey the degree of cultural capital their ownership enables and/or requires in order to consume (e.g. a bookshelf filled with classic literature, a Basquiat painting, a chemistry set, etc.). Finally, cultural capital in its institutionalized state refers to that cultural capital which is ostensibly guaranteed by academic certifications. Social capital, on the other hand, refers to those resources which are conferred upon an individual on the basis of their membership in a given social network (e.g. family, political party, fraternity/sorority, caste, etc.). Social networks provide "members with the backing of… [a] collectivity-owned capital" (Bourdieu 1986:88). The amount of social capital awarded an individual, then, depends both on the size of the social network in which they are embedded and on the sum of the capital (both economic and cultural) that is possessed by the remaining individuals that constitute it. (Bourdieu 1986:88)

Unsurprisingly, the volume of cultural and social capital an individual has access to plays a significant role in determining their capacity for socio-economic mobility. It is this understanding that informs CREST's PGCCPD program's targeting of students from

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[4] Objectified cultural capital as a concept bore little weight on my research and is, as such, not discussed any further in my analysis.

communities that have disproportionately lower access to social, cultural as well as economic capital. CREST provides these students with the tools necessary to succeed in a job-market that has and continues to grow more competitive in the wake of India's ongoing economic liberalization. Effectively, the PGCCPD program endeavours to promote the social and economic mobility of its graduates and the enrichment of their social networks through programming that cultivates and facilitates their acquisition of cultural and social capital. Thereby, CREST engages in the destabilization of systemic, unequal caste-structured capital distribution.

Ajay

To begin, I recount the experience of one of my interlocutors, Ajay, as he navigated through academic institutions, the job market, family obligations and his home community. In the next section, I place Ajay's narrative in dialogue with the concepts of cultural and social capital, drawing attention to twin processes of geographic and social isolation, which intersect with limited economic means. I then introduce two more interlocutors, Rasheed and Kala and expand my discussion to include the concept of symbolic capital, also drawn from Bourdieu. In the final section, my analysis centers on CREST's approach to caste inequality, which focuses on facilitating its students' development, acquisition and transmission of cultural and social capital to strengthen their position in a competitive job market but does not equip them to tackle caste head-on. CREST's approach helps to account for Sreejith's denial of the relevance of caste and the seemingly paradoxical lack of caste-awareness (or perhaps, unwillingness to disclose caste-awareness) among a significant portion of CREST's students.

Ajay is a 25-year-old with a B.Tech in mechanical engineering who has recently graduated from CREST's PGCPD program. Ajay was born in to a family of agricultural

labourers in a remote village in Kerala's Idukki district. He was 8 when his father abandoned his family. Unable to provide for her three children alone, Ajay's mother was forced to place Ajay and his two siblings in separate residential institutions throughout Kerala that would provide them food, board and education. In the wake of this family crisis Ajay fostered the ambition to become a doctor, a career he believed would allow him to support his family while helping others: "I am passionate about the social works… we must all see a doctor if we get some physical problem or health problem… because after my father left us we have trouble, lots of trouble in my family. So I thought, maybe that profession help us." Ajay studied at residential institutions in Ernakulum and Kannur before graduating from 10th standard with distinction. Bolstered by his exceptional academic performance, Ajay resolved to realize his ambition of becoming a doctor.

While studying his Plus-Two in Palakkad, Ajay specialized in engineering and lived at a hostel reserved for ST, SC and OEC/OBC students subsidized by Kerala's government. He excelled in his first year of the program. However, the following year Ajay and his roommates faced constant humiliation at the hands of a prejudiced teacher leading him to lose interest in his studies and perform significantly less well than he had in the past: "that teacher used to embarrass us always hostel students (sic) 'They are not, they should not be there they are useless boys'… in the class she always asked us to stand up 'Are you studied, are you not studied?'… I know the answer but after that I decided that even though the teacher asked me a question I will not answer it.'" Despite being an excellent student, as a result of his background, Ajay, as well as his ST, SC and OEC/OBC peers, were targeted and subjected to heightened scrutiny.

The assistance provided ST, SC and OEC/OBC students by Kerala's government, while ostensibly an effort to counterbalance the significant impediments they face, contributes to a

system of recognition whose consequences are inconsistent with its purported objectives. Government assistance rendered Ajay and his roommates highly visible to their academic institution, its faculty and their peers. Here, discrimination on the basis of caste is manifested in the contestation of the legitimacy of students whose accommodations are subsidized by the government and who, regardless of their academic merit, are enrolled under the reserved admission category[5]. By alienating Ajay and his roommates this professor contributed to the reinforcement of myths alleging the intellectual or academic deficiency of ST, SC and OEC/OBC citizens; reifying caste divisions and disparity in the context of the higher-secondary academic institution. That said, Ajay had become an increasingly social person and developed strong friendships with a number of students at this institution that would prove crucial in facilitating the progression of his academic career.

Ajay's poor academic performance in his final year notwithstanding, he graduated from Plus-Two. Determined to pursue his dream of becoming a medical doctor, Ajay resolved to continue his education, enrolling in the mechanical engineering program at a government university in Thrissur. At this point, Ajay's network of friends assisted him by securing funds and other necessities in support of his academic progress: "People like friends loved [me], so, they formed monies and some other things for me. Even though I am not asking for them they always help me. For some years my friends arranged all the things what I need at that college. Friends, teachers they borrowed me things free (sic)." Ajay graduated "first class" with a B.Tech in mechanical engineering. However, in order to gain admission to a college providing the

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[5] Reservation is a form of quota-based affirmative action. The University Grants Commission provides financial assistance to universities for the establishment of Special Cells for SC/STs. The cells help universities implement the reservation policy in student admission" (Tata Institute of Social Sciences 2010)

MBBS program (Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery) Ajay would have to write an exam: "From the category I could get admission to I had no money to study for that, you had to spend 50,000 bucks or something to study for that… to join a private college is almost 50 lakh rupees it's a huge expense." Without the funds necessary to study for the admissions test (or to pay tuition should he be accepted), Ajay responded to pressure from his mother to seek work to support his family financially in the present and immediate future: "my mom said 'you don't have to waste years, you have to stand in a place first. You can do things with your engineering degree.'" Ajay ceded to his mother's petitions, applying to a number of posts in the mechanical engineering field. However, he failed to secure employment in the industry as a result of insufficient practical experience and, as he was told: a lack of "character, like initiative". Discouraged by his rejection, Ajay returned to his home in Idukki to help his mother with cultivation on their farm. Poverty and the responsibility to provide for his family proved to be the ultimate arbiter of Ajay's capacity to pursue and realize his ambition.

Tracing Cultural, Social and Economic Capital in Action

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital proves to be a useful concept in analyzing Ajay's experiences of discrimination and (lack of) social, economic and academic mobility. Like many of CREST's students, Ajay has been affected by the erosion of the B.Tech degree's scarcity value as a result of the saturation of degreed candidates in Kerala's job market. In other words, Ajay's possession of a B.Tech failed to secure him employment "because the material and symbolic profits which the academic qualification guarantees also depend on its scarcity" (Bourdieu 1986:88). Academic accreditation is an example of cultural capital in its institutionalized state (Bourdieu 1986:. It is "cultural capital academically sanctioned by legally guaranteed qualifications… a certificate of cultural competence confer[ing] on its holder a

conventional… legally guaranteed value with respect to culture" (Bourdieu 1986:88). As the scarcity value of the B.Tech and other post-secondary degrees depreciate, employers increasingly judge the eligibility of candidates on their performance of cultural capital (i.e. the embodied state) in addition to their possession of degrees that purportedly guarantee it. This phenomenon has resulted in the popularization of group interviews for positions in both Kerala's private and public sectors. Therein, applicants are required, and judged on their capacity, to engage in English conversations in a group; exhibiting intelligence, confidence, comprehension and 'personality.' CREST dedicates a significant portion of its curriculum to developing the skills relevant to these interviews, holding a number of group interview workshops throughout the semester and a 'mock group interview' examination during finals. A number of CREST's students have either experienced or fear prospective employers citing their lack of communication skills, English proficiency and even style of dress as factors inhibiting their employability. In the midst of Kerala's economic liberalization, a premium has been placed on candidates' performance of a cosmopolitan selfhood possible only with the cultivation of embodied cultural capital.

ST, SC and OEC/OBC are systematically disadvantaged in both the pursuit of acquiring cultural capital and its subsequent transmission for a number of reasons, not least of which: their social and/or geographic alienation. Both when growing up in a remote village in Idukki as when living in residential academic institutions Ajay felt as though he was sequestered from the 'outside' world that he desired to engage with and learn from: "where I lived it was like four walls, it's surrounded by hills. When I was there I couldn't see anything *outside*"; "at the orphanage we are in four walls we cannot move *outside*"; "[in Kannur,] those days I am used to stay in the hostel. So I did not spend much more time *outside*, with friends or my family."

(emphasis mine) Ajay insightfully remarks that individuals growing up in cities have the advantages of greater opportunities to socialize and exposure to media: "they get to meet and know others … they have help from the internet social media or something… I am a first class student in my home, in the big city I feel like I am the big zero of my class. I can feel that *distance* from people in the city and people in the village" (emphasis mine). Ajay relies on spatial metaphors to express his feelings of alienation and exclusion, corresponding with the dichotomies of rural/urban, tribal/non-tribal, 'upward'/ 'backward' etc. The personal socio-spatial seclusion experienced by Ajay at the residential institutions is mirrored by the more general social, political and economic exclusion of ST, SC and OEC/OBC populations in Kerala. This exclusion begets a lack of access to the material and social resources necessary to acquire and transmit cultural capital in all of its forms.

The dearth of economic capital, that is, the inordinate impoverishment of ST, SC and OEC/OBC in Kerala is perhaps the most significant factor inhibiting their acquisition and transmission of cultural capital. Prior to land reforms enacted in the early 1970s, ST and SC "remained tied to extremely exploitative and poverty-ridden structures, particularly in areas of paddy cultivation dominated by the landed upper castes of Kerala" (Nampoothiri 2009:258). This poverty, which continues to be politically structured across caste lines, has had lasting impacts on ST and SC populations where poverty remains concentrated and unremitting (Mosse 2010:1171. Ironically, as Isac (2011) notes, ST populations often suffer disproportionately from poverty regardless of their abundant agricultural resources: "despite the large forest cover and a thriving plantation economy in Wayanad poverty among [its] tribal communities is very high, estimated at 60.4 per cent"(5).

As Bourdieu explains, the acquisition of cultural capital necessitates the possession and

expenditure of economic capital (1986:86). The process by which economic capital is converted into cultural capital is as follows: an individual or individual's family network amasses sufficient economic capital to afford that individual time free from the necessity of labour to be allocated instead to the pursuit and acquisition of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986:86). This principle of conversion is substantiated by Ajay's struggle to acquire cultural capital. As a result of the lack of free time Ajay's family could afford to yield, he was unable to pursue his dream of becoming a doctor and denied the ability to amass cultural capital in its embodied and institutionalized forms through further education (i.e. developing intellect, MBBS degree). Ajay's mother could not continue to delay Ajay's "entry into the labor market through prolonged schooling" (Bourdieu 1986:92). However, despite his family unit's lack of economic capital, Ajay was given another chance to accumulate cultural capital.

While working at his family's farm in Idukki, Ajay was contacted by a friend who recommended he apply to CREST's PGCCPD program: "he introduced me to this CREST. He thought I am a good student and I am a leader in my classes, so he liked me and he told me that 'there is a place called CREST prepare like for the PO exams, a lot of job opportunities, that it will help you (sic).' That's why I joined it." The increase of ST, SC and OEC/OBC students' cultural capital is what CREST's programs seem particularly interested in and well suited to undertake. Among other things, the PGCCPD program emphasizes the development of 'soft skills' such as communication, confidence, English proficiency (the curriculum includes traditional language instruction, vocal exercises, drama workshops), style of dress (uniform responsibilities include organizing and managing the acquisition of workplace-appropriate uniforms in a timely fashion and within a budget as well as mandatory 'contemporary' dress one day of the week), education on current affairs and exposure to foreigners (e.g. international

interns). This aspect of the PGCCPD course, referred to as P.D. (personality development) on course materials but more often as "self-enrichment" by CREST's faculty and administration, is an effort to facilitate students' accumulation of cultural capital. For the 40 students that gain admission each semester, the material cost needed to support the acquisition of cultural capital is shouldered by the state. That is, CREST students' capacity to acquire cultural capital is not over-determined (or, at least, determined to a lesser extent) by the lack of surplus time awarded them as a result of their socio-economic status.

Since graduating from the PGCCPD program, Ajay feels more confident, extroverted and comfortable speaking in English: "I could see myself changing. Before I am not that much talkative… CREST made such a huge change in my mind… my friends are saying you are extremely changing a lot. So I have some shyness but now I think I am somewhat changed… before that we never talked in English." Ajay's remarks are a testament to the PGCCPD program's success in facilitating its students' accumulation of embodied cultural capital. Nevertheless, at the time of our second interview Ajay was living back at home, helping his mother with the cultivation of their crops, no longer pursuing his ambition to become a doctor: "I have that passion in my mind but I couldn't." He plans to continue assisting with his family's agricultural labour for "a few months" before seeking a position related to his mechanical engineering degree, now a more competitive candidate than before his studies at CREST.

While (lack of) cultural capital continues to have considerable influence on students' capacity to succeed, an individual's social capital is equally crucial to their achievement of social, economic, academic and professional mobility. Unfortunately, social capital may prove more difficult to accumulate, establish or secure than its cultural counterpart. Ajay has experienced both the facilitation and impediment of his mobility as a result of "social obligations

('connections')… convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital" (Bourdieu 1986:84). On one hand, the absence of his father precipitated the economic strain that first separated him from his family and community network as a child. Now, he is faced with a social obligation to support his mother and siblings alone: "I have to get a job and after 2 years my sister is there so I have to take care of her." On the other hand, Ajay benefited from financial support that he secured from his network of friends and teachers during his post-secondary education. Moreover, without this network Ajay would have had no knowledge of CREST's program nor would he have had the opportunity to apply. Clearly, particular factors unique to Ajay determine the quantity of social capital available to him to a certain extent. However, the amount of social capital at a given individual's disposal, especially those belonging populations settled in remote or isolated areas, is overwhelmingly determined by the family, community and population they are born into.

The value of social capital derived from membership in a community corresponds, in part, to the strength of that community's sense of the institutionalized processes or pathways to achievement and success (Appadurai 2004) (e.g. the knowledge that to secure employment in the engineering industry one requires at minimum a B.Tech in a field of engineering). ST, SC and OEC/OBC have historically been and continue to be underserved in their access to quality education (Isac 2011; Nampoothiri 2009). While Kerala boasts universal literacy and near-universal enrollment in primary and secondary education (Nampoothiri 2009) "inequality in education has deepened and broadened substantially…. [A] child's caste/community, gender and class now determine which school is to be attended; a new hierarchy of access is in place" (258-60). This hierarchy of access is evidenced by the fact that many of CREST's students are some of, and in some cases *are*, the first individuals from their communities to attain or pursue higher

education. Ajay: "in my place there is no one like that, I am maybe the second or third to study engineering in my village. I know lots of friends, lots of people like that… people study up to 10th level then they move to farm their lands." Rasheed, a 26-year old graduate of CREST's PGCCPD: "I am the first person from my hamlet to pursue schooling past Plus-Two." Lower rates of higher- and post-secondary education in ST, SC and OEC/OBC results in a lack of awareness of the mechanics of the institutional structures that must be navigated to realize individuals' ambitions. The collusion of unequal access to quality education and a paucity of social actors that have attended higher- and post-secondary education constitutes a disproportionate lack of social capital endemic to ST, SC and OEC/OBC populations.

The most obvious way CREST's programming develops social capital in underserved communities is through its targeting of individuals from ST, SC and OEC/OBC. By establishing and strengthening an individual's awareness of the pathways to mobility and success you effectively enrich their social networks. CREST undertakes this task directly, as well, through programming specifically designed to enhance ST, SC and OEC/OBC social capital. PGCCPD students are required to engage in outreach with ST, SC and OEC/OBC youth throughout each semester. This outreach consists of engaging youth by relating their personal histories and experiences with education as well as encouraging them to think concretely about their ambitions and the steps needed to achieve them. Sreejith explains: "we give them a hope that they can go to school too and do something." CREST also operates satellite programs in various districts of Kerala, two of which I was fortunate enough to participate in. In these extra-curricular programs (taking place during students' summer vacation) CREST's program officers supplemented by visiting lecturers (e.g. science, math and English teachers, art therapists, MA and PhD candidates studying in fields related to ST, SC and OEC/OBC issues) engage ST, SC and OEC/OBC

students at residential institutions at the secondary and higher-secondary levels. These satellite programs are essentially a scaled down version of the PCGGD program, focusing on "Employability Enhancement, Personality Development, Communication Skills, IT, Quantitative & Analytical Skills General Awareness and Entrepreneurship Development" (CREST n.d.) of underserved communities as well as providing students the opportunity to travel, to be exposed to and to learn in different districts of their home state.

Rasheed and Kala

In addition to its own programming, CREST has supported students' independent efforts in the development of their communities' social capital. Rasheed, mentioned above, is a fellow at the Kerala Institute for Research Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (KIRTADS) as well as a graduate of CREST's PGCCPD program. Though his community development project is conducted through KIRTADS, (an institution that is independent of but shares its campus with CREST) he received guidance from members of CREST's faculty in support of his work developing education awareness in the population of his home community. Rasheed was born in a Muthuvan (ST) hamlet in Idukki district. He pursued a Bachelor of Horticulture, initially aspiring to a career in the field of agricultural science in Idukki. While studying, though, Rasheed became increasingly conscious of and concerned about the barriers faced by the Muthuvan community in the attainment of higher- and post-secondary education. Upon obtaining his Bachelor of Horticulture, Rasheed enrolled at the Rajagiri College of Social Sciences' School of Social Work where he is currently pursuing a MSW with a specialization in community development. His Master's dissertation asserts the importance of education in bringing about the social and economic development of the Muthuvan and other ST populations. Rasheed argues that, as discussed above, these communities are often unfamiliar

with the mechanics of higher education and lack awareness of the government assistance that may be provided to ST peoples in its pursuit: "the main problem that most of the tribal community do not aware (sic) about the scope of education and government policies."

Rasheed's work with Idukki's Muthuvan population was ongoing throughout his studies at CREST and he was granted considerable flexibility to allow him to continue this work while pursuing his PGCCPD (at one point leaving CREST for 10 days to visit Idukki). CREST's dedication to the enrichment of ST, SC and OEC/OBC social networks and, thus, their social capital through both its own programming and the support of independent projects is a testament to their commitment to and success in developing social capital not only within the limits of its campus or within its students' home communities, but in underserved communities throughout the entire state of Kerala.

With respect to caste-relations in contemporary Kerala Bourdieu's social and cultural capital dovetail with the concept of symbolic capital: "unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence, as authority exerting an effect of (mis)recognition… in all markets in which economic capital is not fully recognized" (Bourdieu 1986:86). Kala is a 23-year-old graduate of the PGCCPD program holding a BA in English. She invited another intern and I to stay with her family in Kannur while we attended her performance at a festival held at a local Shiva temple. Following her performance, Kala gave us a tour of the temple. I inquired about the logistics of setting up the subsidiary shrines' candles: "if no one is allowed in the shrine how do they light the candles surrounding the statues[6]?" "Only the Brahmin are allowed!" My naïve question prompted Kala to embark on a surprisingly frank monologue about her experiences of

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[6] In the Hindu religion, Murti are sacred images of deities "*murti* may be considered to be God or the specific deity it represents. Some Hindu groups consider the *murti* a form of *avatar*." (The Heart of Hinduism n.d.)

discrimination on the basis of caste in the religious, public and professional domains of her life.

Kala discussed what she sees as a shift in the nature but not necessarily the conspicuousness of caste discrimination in Kerala during the last half century. Fifty years ago, she explains, her family and others belonging to what is now commonly referred to as SC (formerly Dalit) and ST (formerly Adivasi) were barred from the temple grounds to worship: "They would have to stand all the way outside those walls to pray, even the dogs they allowed in here but not lower caste." Kala maintains, though, that caste membership continues to be of considerable importance in contemporary Kerala: "today, in Kerala, caste is the main issue. You go look for apartment they ask your caste 'Oh, sorry no' they want higher caste. You go to government jobs they say you get reservations, but no." As explained by Kala, discrimination on the basis of caste stems from the religious domain yet persists in the social and professional spheres. In Kala's understanding, the (lack of) symbolic capital afforded her through caste membership determines her capacity for social and professional mobility.

Caste at CREST

Caste and community membership provides, or fails to provide "material profits, such as… services accruing from useful relationships and symbolic profits, such as those derived from association with a rare prestigious group." (Bourdieu 1986:89) In the context of India's caste-system, social networks emerging from and mirroring the divisions between castes impart benefits unequally depending on group membership (e.g. a Muthuvan individual growing up in a hamlet in Idukki is likely to have a less substantial and socially, economically and politically 'upward' network of relations to draw on than a Nair individual growing up in Cochin). In the case of contemporary Kerala and with relevance to caste-disparity in India more broadly, inequality is maintained through social categorization and, accordingly, asymmetrical access to

the social, cultural and economic forms of capital. Members of the dominant or 'upper' castes are awarded disproportionate access to that which society values and the tools needed to achieve and access it (i.e. economic, social and cultural capital). This context of systemic unequal access is precisely what an institution like CREST is poised to respond to.

Unsurprisingly, then, many of CREST's students, Ajay, Rasheed and Kala included, are aware of the role that caste plays in shaping their and others' capacity for upward mobility. This consciousness of caste's considerable influence is not shared by all of CREST's students, however, as evidenced by Sreejith's contention that caste no longer has any bearing in contemporary Kerala. Sreejith is by no means alone in maintaining this position. This became clear to me while I had the opportunity to lead a seminar with a small group of CREST's 26th batch of PGCCPD students. I began by asking each student to discuss their ambition and what barriers they had to face in realizing it. Of the 7 students present, none mentioned their economic status, the area their family lived or raised them in, their community, let alone their caste when discussing barriers they felt might hinder them. Instead, students listed what they saw as individual failings or personality flaws that had or would have potential to hold them back from achieving their goals. I pressed the issue: "Some barriers are beyond our control; they might be something we are born with or something that we cannot change. Even though this *thing* isn't our fault it makes it harder for us to achieve what might be easier for someone else. Does anyone feel like they have experienced this kind of barrier?" Finally, Bibin, a 23-year-old with a B.Tech in Mechanical Engineering spoke up: "Laziness?"

Dumbfounded, I considered how it could be that 7 intelligent students at a school expressly targeting ST, SC and OBC/OEC would fail to articulate the importance of caste. Perhaps it is too political or sensitive a topic to expect students to broach with an outsider. It may

also be true that my belief that caste must have an observable impact on the lives of these students is an example of hubris. It is possible, too, that these students have been neglected by an education system that failed to encourage a critical perspective on contemporary caste-relations. During my months at CREST I witnessed a number of speeches given by faculty and administration exalting hard work and admonishing laziness. I saw a guest lecturer, M.N. Karaserry, a prominent Malayalam writer, political activist and outspoken opponent of the caste system invited to discuss the history of Malayalam but not to reflect on social issues relevant to the PGCCPD students. I saw, and participated in, innumerable activities requiring students to list their individual strengths and weaknesses: the things they could rely on or had to work on if they wanted to achieve their goals. Over and over, I listened as students were told that if they worked 'hard enough' they could succeed.

In the midst of economic liberalization and in response to the demands of contemporary Kerala's job market, CREST has adopted a meritocratic lexicon compatible with the dominant neoliberal paradigm. To my knowledge, not a single discussion of caste discrimination or disparity in *contemporary* Kerala took place in a formal class setting throughout the duration of my internship.[7] This approach, while clearly effective in galvanizing of CREST's students to strive their hardest to succeed, has the unintended effect of mystifying caste-disparity in contemporary Kerala. Students of CREST's PGCCPD program are being taught how to succeed in a neoliberal Kerala and India. They are taught about the importance of developing their social

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[7] I acknowledge that I was not present in enough classes to claim this conclusively. During a theatre workshop that took place off-campus following the completion of final exams a group of PGCCPD students wrote and presented a play discussing caste and marriage. The final play, written by an art therapist leading the workshop and in which each student participated discussed caste discrimination metaphorically.

networks. They are taught how to acquire and perform the cultural capital necessary to adapt to the changing standards of a competitive, globalizing job market. They are taught that they alone, through hard work and dedication, decide whether or not they will succeed. They are not taught, at CREST at least, to critically engage with the reality of caste-disparity and socially structured inequality that disproportionately disadvantages them in the pursuit of their ambitions.

There is no doubt that CREST's PGCCPD program makes possible some tangible successes. Examples I encountered directly included the offer of a competitive position at Cisco Systems, inc. (a prestigious multinational technology corporation) to a graduate of the PGCCPD's 25th batch and the astonishing transformation of a shy and self-conscious student into an extroverted and self-possessed adult. As a result of its incredibly devoted faculty and administration, as well as its curricula and programming informed by practical and innovative approaches to education, CREST will undoubtedly continue to play an indispensable role in contributing to its students' successes. These victories are evidence of CREST's ability to prepare its students to adapt to the demands and values of the society in which they live.

Nonetheless, in the context of a contemporary Kerala wherein the legacy of caste-disparity persists, I argue that a student's assertion that "in Kerala nobody cares about caste" indicates that CREST's "you can do it" approach comes with a price. It seems unlikely that the achievements of CREST graduates, as they realize their social, economic, professional or academic ambitions despite having faced considerable obstacles, will culminate in the subversion of the system that produces those obstacles, especially if they themselves are unaware of or apathetic towards that system. By not working to develop a critical consciousness of the systemic disenfranchisement of ST, SC and OEC/OBC in Kerala, CREST's program leaves the socially repressive structures that continue to subjugate ST, SC and OEC/OBC intact. More specifically,

if people belonging to marginalized populations experience success as a result of their ability to perform a certain 'valued' personhood, yet do not critically reflect on or problematize the dominant structure of meaning through which 'un-valued' personhood is defined, the dominant structure could be further cemented.

Conclusion

In its current incarnation, CREST's PGCCPD and ancillary programs are engaged in the extremely sophisticated and effective management of the symptoms of caste-based structural inequality. CREST facilitates the cultivation, adoption and transmission of cultural and social capital among individuals, communities and populations that are deficient in them. The importance of this accomplishment cannot be overemphasized. Through the experiences of Sreejith, Ajay, Rasheed and Kala, I have demonstrated the significant contributions that CREST has made for young people struggling to improve their social and economic situation against formidable odds.

Still, a question lingers for me. Could CREST not - at the same time - encourage the mobilization of socio-politically informed resistance among its trainees? Are the two types of pedagogy incompatible, or could they be combined? If CREST devoted time in its curriculum to the development of analytical perspectives on caste-disparity in Kerala, it would provide its students with the tools necessary to discuss, critique and challenge the dominant ideologies and structures that inform caste-relations. In so doing, CREST might move from simply managing the symptoms of caste-disparity to cultivating generations of informed graduates that have the aptitude and tools necessary to effect meaningful structural change in their home state.

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