

**THE RTE ACT IN BENGALURU: A STUDY IN THE CONTRADICTIONS OF  
NEOLIBERAL WELFARE**

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

by

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August 2019

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I locate welfare policies within the broader dynamics of the state's relationship to capital, the hegemony of the neoliberal rationality, and class and caste politics. I ground my theoretical questions in the aftermath of the implementation of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, based on my fieldwork in Bengaluru in early 2019. One clause of the Act, which required all privately owned schools to reserve 25 percent of their seats for students from socially and economically disadvantaged groups, was the subject of a fair amount of debate and generated the ire of private school associations and much of the middle and elite classes. Placing the Act within the broader context of the welfare architecture of the last few decades that falls into the framework of "inclusive growth," I question the credibility of a welfare paradigm that sits comfortably alongside free-market capitalism. The case of the RTE in particular is demonstrative of the retreat of the state and its legitimizing of the expansion of the private sector. Engaging scholarship on the poverty, neoliberalism, and the relationship of the developmental state with the economy, I argue that the class antagonisms that came to the surface in Bengaluru in response to the RTE Act demonstrate the inherent limitations of a politics of welfare that simultaneously legitimizes the neoliberal project and ignores the structural nature of poverty and inequality as rooted in capitalist development. In this case, what transpired was middle-class and elite anxiety about the possible erasure of existing class markers, and consequent attempts to re-draw lines of exclusivity and power.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Lavanya Nott is a Master's degree candidate in the Department of Asian Studies at Cornell University, with a regional focus on South Asia. At Cornell, she has been a Foreign Language and Area Studies fellow for two consecutive years. Originally from Bengaluru, India, Lavanya completed her undergraduate degree at Bryn Mawr College (2014), where she majored in English Literature and minored in Mathematics.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My two years of study at Cornell would not have been possible without the support of Foreign Language and Area Studies fellowships. For generous institutional support and consistent encouragement, I thank the South Asia Program at Cornell and its staff. I also received support from the Graduate School to conduct research in Bangalore; I am grateful for the University's enthusiasm to support its students' ventures.

At Cornell I received feedback and support from numerous members of the faculty, across the disciplines. I particularly wish to thank the members of my committee, Durba Ghosh and Viranjini Munashinghe, for helping me see this project to completion, reading drafts of various iterations of this paper, and engaging with me at different points in my thought process. I'm also particularly grateful to Philip McMichael and Fouad Makki for the time and encouragement they have given me, and the exciting ideas they have introduced me to. And, of course, to Sreematidi for the endless warmth, encouragement, and the bi-weekly slices of home.

The long Ithaca winters wouldn't have been nearly as bearable without the companionship of friends and comrades at Cornell. For their friendship, commiseration, and support, I particularly want to thank Xavier Robillard-Martel, Andi Kao, Akhil Kang, Palashi Vaghela, Sampreety Gurung, Daniel Ferman-Leon, Trishna Senapaty, and Xinyu Guan. I couldn't have done any of this without them.

I owe so many people in Bangalore for their time and insight. The great paradox of academic research is an unfortunate one; there are few ways I can match the insight and time my interlocutors gave me, but I thank them nevertheless for asking for whatever help I might be able to provide. My conversations with Mr. Suresh Kumar,

Mr. Narasimhan, and Dr. Niranjanaradhya took my thesis in exciting directions I had not anticipated. I admire them all, and have great respect for their work. I also thank Dr. Shashidhar Jagadeeshan for his time, connections, and enthusiasm for my research.

Of course none of this would have been possible without friendships around the world that keep me learning and grounded. Thank you to Meghna Singh, Alex Barrett, Zein Nakhoda, Anishaa Tavag, Erika Nuñez, and Prithvi Acharya.

And finally, to my parents, who have watched me oscillate from one aspiration to the next with reasonable amounts of patience and endless valuable advice. Thank you for everything.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

BEO: Block Education Officer

CCL: Center for Child and the Law

CFL: Center for Learning

ERT: Education Rights Trust

IT: Information Technology

RTE: Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education

SAP: Structural Adjustment Program

SDMC: School Development and Monitoring Committee

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2016, a Bengaluru family who run a chain of highly sought-after private schools in the city and across the southern Indian states was under the media spotlight for a case of alleged forgery. The brief background to the story is as follows: in 2009, the Right of Children to a Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) (hereafter referred to as the "RTE" Act) was implemented; amongst stipulations for the state at all levels to participate in ensure universal education, it set in motion a law that required all privately operated schools to reserve 25 percent of their seats for children from economically and socially marginalized communities. In 2012, the Supreme Court announced that schools registered as minority institutions are exempt from this ruling. A few years following, a complaint was registered against the management of this particular family of schools, claiming that certificates submitted in order to prove minority status on linguistic grounds had been forged. This was not an isolated case, but received relatively extensive media scrutiny due to the prestige of the schools, a result of a long legacy of its graduates gaining acceptance to the coveted Indian Institutes of Technology. During my research on the fallout of the RTE Act, I had the opportunity to speak with one of the members of the management of these schools. One thing that she said has stuck with me since: that her family's schools strive for two things: academic excellence and character building. The latter is pursued through extra-curricular activities that include community outreach and social awareness. The holistic nature of this education, she said, will ideally mould students into "social entrepreneurs."

For the context it was spoken in, this was a fairly trivial and typical statement. Other elite private school administrators I spoke with said similar things about curricula including social outreach. I only emphasise it here, alongside the anecdote,

because together they are demonstrative of the pulse of a society whose conception of social responsibility and justice is shaped within the parameters of the neoliberal rationality.

Empirically grounded in civil society<sup>1</sup> responses and class antagonisms in Bengaluru following the implementation of the RTE Act, this paper considers the credibility of welfare measures in the context of an economy embedded in free-market capitalism, and the retreat of the state from welfare. I ground my field-based research within the context of scholarship on welfare and capitalism, the relationship of the state with the economy, and explorations of the dynamics of class relations in an urban context. Specifically, I examine the class antagonisms that emerged in Bengaluru in the wake of the RTE Act and related legislations, to demonstrate the very limited possibility that welfare measures can promise, in a context where the hegemony (both economic and ideological) of private capital is as pervasive as it is in 21st century urban India.

For now, a brief explanation of the Act and the responses that it evoked amongst the different urban socio-economic classes in Bengaluru: in 2002, the 86th Amendment to the Indian Constitution made the right to education a fundamental right. Following this, introduced in 2009 and implemented in 2010, the RTE Act provided the legal framework for the provision of free and compulsory education to all children aged between six and fourteen. Much of the Act detailed the responsibilities of central, state, and local governments to ensure that every child is in school and therefore to ensure that there are an adequate number of accessible public

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “civil society” in this instance as a matter of convenience, to denote non-state actors as a whole, distinct from and relational with the state. Later sections of this paper engage the debate on the structural opposition between civil and political societies; my use of the term here is not meant to have any import to that discussion.

schools. Despite the Act mapping a new terrain for state involvement in education, public response to one clause of the Act, Section 12(1)(c), and subsequent political mobilisation has eclipsed any substantial understanding of how the state's role in education might have changed.

Article 12(1)(c) required all private, unaided schools across the country to reserve 25 percent of their seats in incoming classes (typically class 1; sometimes pre-school) for children from economically weak and disadvantaged groups. To the private school industry this was akin to the sounding of a funeral bell; they claimed it an encroachment on their right to free enterprise. Some sought to fraudulently assert minority status in order to be exempt; meanwhile, poor people turned up in droves at their gates, demanding their right to a free education. I spoke with poor people who had turned to activism in the wake of the implementation of the Act, forming associations and grassroots networks to help others navigate bureaucratic red tape, understand their rights, and exert collective pressure on school and state authorities. I also spoke with a number of elite private school administrators, as indicated in the anecdote I began with. What emerged was a fertile story on the permeation of the neoliberal rationality and its unique manifestations in private educational enterprises as a variant of what we know as "corporate social responsibility" i.e., an understanding of social responsibility that is more akin to welfare colonialism than systemic change. And indeed, this question of the hegemony of the neoliberal rationality is central to my study, as all of the articulations of politics in this case happened *within* the framework of privatization and the withdrawal of the state.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first is a brief economic history of Bengaluru, meant to provide historical context for its contemporary political economy. The second provides the backdrop for the RTE Act, emerging as it did as

part of the welfare architecture of the United Progressive Alliance's ten-year stint in power, between 2004 and 2014. This section also comprises the large part of my empirical research. Some of the most generative interviews and conversation are narrated here, and I provide an account of responses to RTE in Bengaluru, ranging from public discourse to collective mobilisation. In the third section, I provide an overview of the scholarly debates on welfare within the framework of the capitalist development in India and the relationship of the state with the economy. I outline the contours of these debates in order to bring to light the ideas that have framed my thinking, in addition to their having great impact on policy trajectories. Additionally, providing this contextual backdrop allows me to situate my own analysis more clearly within the framework of these debates, as I draw from, challenge, and build on their various strands.

What emerges from an engagement with the scholarship on welfarism and free-market capitalist development is a terrain of ideological and political divergence regarding the ability of the state to provide relief in an economy that thrives on inequality. At the heart of this debate is the question of the relative autonomy of the state from capital. In the fourth section, I delve into the question of poverty more directly, interweaving the takeaways from my own ethnographic research with scholarship in anthropology and political science concerned with questions of poverty, and its entanglements with state and economy. This section begins with a discussion of Akhil Gupta's monograph *Red Tape*, which explores the everyday relationship of the rural poor in Uttar Pradesh with the local bureaucracy. These explorations lead him to a theory of the state, whose disaggregated and highly decentralized structure allows for slippages and, crucially, the systematic production of arbitrariness in its provision of care. His study is of bureaucratic processes rather

than outcomes, and aims to shed light on the systems within the bureaucratic structure that cause its results to be inconsistent. The violence of poverty, he writes, is structural in nature due to its being built into this bureaucratic system. What is important is that he steers clear of analysis of the *economy* as structural, let alone productive of systemic inequalities. In order to make more sense of the relationship between state and economy and their production, together, of systemic inequalities, I then move on to scholarship that centers the questions of neoliberalism, work, and informality. It is this line of thinking, I argue, that brings us closer to a definitive understanding of inequality, class, and welfare in present day India.

Finally, as a means to interrogate more deeply the class conflicts that emerged in the wake of the RTE ruling, I turn to Partha Chatterjee's (2008) formulation of the difference between civil and political society, in terms of their respective relationships with the state and the market. His framework is generative to an extent, as I will demonstrate, and led to some lively debates in the following years. Following these debates, I too suggest that in order to understand the iteration of class politics that emerged in Bengaluru in the last decade and, more broadly, to center the reality of the hegemony of private capital and neoliberalism, some of Chatterjee's structural oppositions require undoing (and possibly inverting). But the framework of oppositions that he provides, as well as the idea of the transition narrative in capitalist development (which, to him, is no longer tenable) is generative for me even in my divergences from it. In this section, I put Chatterjee in conversation with Satish Deshpande's foundational text on castelessness, which provides an important analysis of elite caste and class power in the context of the hegemony of a secular market society. My argument in this section, following Deshpande, is that privileged classes are able to make their interests and welfare congruent with supposedly universal goals

like economic development, which are in fact disempowering for the majority of the population. This contextualizes the phenomenon of elite revolt in the face of threats to their class and caste boundaries and markers, demonstrated in the case of RTE by the measures they took to re-draw class lines and preserve spatial and intellectual exclusivity. Private schools, in this case, can be considered a form of collective private property. I argue, like others, that the transition narrative exists in various modern iterations, and in fact helps explain parts of urban class conflict in a neoliberal landscape such as Bengaluru.

### **BENGALURU: A BRIEF ECONOMIC HISTORY**

It is useful to begin with a brief sketch of Bengaluru's economic history, which will also illustrate the ways in which caste and class have shaped the city's terrain of politics, work, and mobility. In the colonial period, the British settled in Bangalore in a military settlement that was segregated from the existing city. The Cantonment, as the settlement was called, consisted of the British military and migrants from Madras. In 1949, Bengaluru City and the Cantonment were unified under one municipal administration. The city, however, continued to be segregated by way of caste and class. Janaki Nair writes of the spatial organization in the city in the early 20th century as being shaped by caste:

"the laws of town planning...reproduced caste hierarchies in a new form, so that the purely residential areas that were zoned into existence now reasserted caste privilege and segregation. In this sense, town planning conceived of space as not merely reflecting social difference but also instituting it" (Nair 2007, 53).

A recent study on urbanization and space making in Bengaluru illustrates how the edifice of contemporary class hierarchies has been built on the framework of caste

inequalities. The authors demonstrate that early urbanization privileged upper caste groups, and that the patterns of segregation that appeared in the early decades of the city's urbanization have produced and reproduced class and caste-based hierarchies, which are neatly, if not perfectly, mapped onto each other. (Bharati, Malghan, and Rahman 2018)

Prestigious positions in the colonial-era bureaucratic order were monopolized by Brahmins, and later by other upper-caste groups such as the Lingayats and Vokkaligas. Others have written about the ease with which these communities were able to transition to the postcolonial economy, which in Bengaluru was dominated by a large public sector economy consisting of manufacturing units and state-owned scientific research institutions (Nair 2007). This large public sector industry and the robust small scale industrial sector had been the mainstay of organized manufacturing employment in the city, providing work to unskilled and semi skilled urban labour. The shrinking of these sectors stands on the firm footing of liberal arguments for economic efficiency and growth.

The economic reforms of the 90s facilitated the shrinking of the public sector as the city globalized and embraced a new economy driven by Information Technology (IT) and financial services. These sectors have played an important role in expanding the city's economic growth. Urban lower classes have mostly crowded into the expanding construction sector and the export-oriented ready-made garments industry. However, the workforce is largely migrant, non-unionized, and lacks the collective bargaining rights necessary to improve their incomes and living standards over time. They also remain disadvantaged in terms of access to education and skills that could lead to occupational and social mobility inter-generationally. Additionally, the emerging knowledge and skill-based growth channels of the city are

domains that are inaccessible to the urban unskilled workforce. There is, therefore, no easy bridge connecting the city's slums, comprising of poor, lower-caste groups and religious minorities, with the gateways of its new economy. The urban poor “mostly share a common economic characteristic, that is, that they work in the informal sector of the urban economy” (RoyChowdhury 2012, 75).

This broad overview indicates certain patterns of exclusion inherent to the structure of the city's economy as it has evolved in the past three decades. Bangalore in that sense provides an appropriate location for examining the paradoxes of growth, as a city that has provided space for remarkable economic and technological dynamism, and at the same time retains large ghettos of households that are unable to access the opportunities introduced by the city's rapid growth.

## **RTE IN BENGALURU**

In 2002, the 86th amendment to the Indian Constitution added a fundamental right to the Constitution for the first time since the latter's implementation in 1950: the right to education, previously only a directive principle of state policy. Constitutional guarantee required complementary legislation; therefore, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act was introduced in 2009 and implemented in 2010. This Act, known colloquially as RTE, required the State and Central governments to work together to provide free education to all children aged between six and fourteen, to make it compulsory for all children between these ages to attend school by ensuring that all children are admitted, and to undertake the establishment of neighbourhood schools. Under this Act responsibility lies in particular with the local governments to ensure universal enrolment, undertake teacher training, and make provisions that prevent discrimination against students from disadvantaged and

weaker sections. There was, therefore, a significant deployment of responsibility to the state to ensure universal education. However, the one particular Article in this Act has by far drawn the most attention and debate: Article 12(1)(c) of the RTE, which reads as follows:

"a school...shall admit in class I, to the extent of at least twenty-five percent of the strength of that class, children belonging to weaker section and disadvantaged group in the neighbourhood and provide free and compulsory elementary education till its completion" (6).

In other words, following the institution of this Act, all schools—importantly, private schools included—would be required to reserve 25 percent of their seats for students from weaker sections and disadvantaged groups. Loosely defined in the Act itself and left to local governments to determine based on regional specificities, students from "weaker sections" are those whose parents have an annual income below the regional poverty line, and students from "disadvantaged groups" are those who fall under the category of Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe, and any other community that faces cultural, linguistic, religious, or geographical backwardness. State governments are also required to define particular criteria regarding neighbourhood zoning, and account for extraneous expenses such as uniforms and books.

The response to this Article engulfed all other conversation related to the RTE Act, featuring heated debate with strongly polarised opinions. Many criticised what they saw as the state absolving itself of its welfare duties, and considered this to be merely another example of the country's steady journey towards privatisation. Others pointed out that this could be an important attempt to mitigate segregation in elementary education and ensure the accountability of the private sector in playing a

role in public welfare, particularly given that many private schools have access to land free of cost.<sup>2</sup>

The debate on educational reform in India began for earnest in the 1960s, with the Kothari Commission's proposal for a Common School System, featuring public administration of the entirety of the educational system, in which all schools would be required to admit anyone regardless of income, religion, caste, and gender. The Kothari Commission argued that this move would facilitate the de-segregation of education in a society fractured by social hierarchies and systemic power differentials. However, given the sheer size of the private educational sector, and in particular its tremendous growth in the last few decades, featuring a proliferation of low-cost private schools, the Kothari Commission's proposal for the socialisation of education was increasingly untenable and considered undesirable (Sarin et. al. 2015). The debate then transitioned to the idea of reservations in the private sector—leading us to where we are now.

With the implementation of RTE, admissions for children who qualify are based on an online lottery system. The state government is then responsible for reimbursing tuition fees and providing poor families with the funds to obtain books and uniforms. In Karnataka, until 2018, the state government was paying unaided schools between Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 16,000 per child each year. At the end of that year, observing the massive drain this system imposed on the exchequer, the Cabinet of the State government amended the Act, stipulating that all children eligible for admission

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<sup>2</sup> This applies to private schools situated on government land. My interlocutors informed me that this is the case for most Bengaluru schools. I was unable to find any data to verify this, but see this press report on Delhi schools for remarks about a similar policy: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/right-to-education-on-uncharted-private-school-turf/cid/1687996>.

through the RTE Act would be required to enrol in the neighbourhood public school. Only in the event that there isn't a government school within a 1 kilometre radius can the student seek admission in an unaided school through the RTE Act.

This latest amendment likely will not have much of an impact on the already low levels of enrollment in public schools. The mushrooming of low-cost private schools has happened in response to demand from low-income groups, who have demonstrated that they in fact prefer to send their children to private schools regardless of quality or prestige. This is a choice that is made largely on two grounds: the hegemony of the notion of the superiority of the private sector, particularly in regards to it being a pipeline to upward mobility; and general public opinion regarding malfunctioning, poorly managed government schools. Research reports on education have detailed this trend<sup>3</sup>, and my research in Bengaluru confirmed it: by and large, the allure of a private education compensates for the inevitable downsides: there are no institutional measures to assess the quality of education and infrastructure in private schools unlike the monitoring of government schools, and the majority of private schools in the city have the same issues as government schools: poor infrastructure, under-qualified teachers, and unstructured systems of accountability.

The RTE Act, which is conflated in public discourse with the Article concerning the role of private schools, precipitated much backlash from private schools and their associations as well as from middle class and elite groups. Low-cost private schools typically stood to benefit from admitting students through the Act, given that the state government's monetary contribution per child has been greater than the fees these schools charge. Elite schools catering to the more well-to-do citizenry, however, found themselves in positions where they were forced to

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<sup>3</sup> Sarin et. al., in "State of the Nation: RTE Section 12(1)(c) Report" elaborate on this.

participate in what they regarded as charity, encountering financial losses as a result. Backlash from the privileged classes was articulated as opposition to the dilution of resources intended for their children—an unfair redistribution of their wealth for a cause that they perceive should be the responsibility of the state.<sup>4</sup> The implicit discomfort of the privileged classes and castes with the prospect of desegregation cannot be dismissed; class and caste hierarchies have historically reinforced one another through systems of spatial segregation and the monopoly over knowledge and resources; any destabilization of these models of the reproduction of power and privilege will evoke anxiety, both regarding the scarcity of resources as well as the threat to markers of social status.

In my field work, only one school administrator did not convey anxiety—on the part of the school, or parents’ narratives—regarding the social integration that RTE has imposed. The school, the Center for Learning (CFL), has an alternative approach to pedagogy, inspired by philosopher and educator Jiddu Krishnamurti<sup>5</sup>. In the 28 years of its operation in the city’s rural hinterland, it has drawn a primarily middle-class student body, typically from families themselves occupied in non-mainstream professions or in the non-profit world. One of its co-founders, Dr. Shashidhar Jagadeeshan, explained to me that over the years, they have seen some demographic change; there has been a general increase in the affluence of the middle class, and therefore the material world the students come from has changed. But in

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<sup>4</sup> These opinions from parents were related to me by school administrators in the Indus International School and the National Public School. There have been similar reports in the popular press; for example; see <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/tendentious-arguments-against-right-to-education-act/article20430395.ece1>.

<sup>5</sup> Krishnamurti (1895-1986) was a secular philosopher and educator. The Krishnamurti Foundation, his joint venture with Annie Besant, runs a number of schools in India and internationally.

addition, he remarks, the school seems to be attracting more families from the business and IT sectors—parents whose affluence allows for more relaxed aspirations for the children, and less concern with upward mobility. The school’s philosophy, following Krishnamurti, is that there is no such thing as a society that is distinct from the individual—each of us represents and embodies what society is—paraphrased in the concept: “you are the world.” Subsequently, societal change comes from individual change. deep alienation on an individual basis is amplified to the scale of the general public leading to crises.

It is perhaps due to the self-selecting nature of the student body at CFL that has resulted in its openness to the RTE legislation. Their parents come from the privileged classes but constitute a small, self-consciously progressive section of civil society. And perhaps this openness is a demonstration of one direction that the secularization of upper-caste and upper-class groups has gone. I take up the issue of the secularization and castelessness of the privileged in later sections of this paper, but given what we know of the strength of the elite class’ opposition to RTE, it is safe to surmise that middle-class moral panic regarding desegregation is hegemonic, and that the example of the CFL community is an anomaly. The secularization of urban space still, for the most part, obscures an underlying logic of power and difference.

While private schools summoned the strength of their associations<sup>6</sup> and the middle classes protested, the poor also mobilized to ensure they were delivered their new rights. The wake of the ruling saw the sprouting up of grassroots organization, led by and comprised of poor people mobilizing to ensure the delivery of their new rights. The power of the private school lobby and bureaucratic red tape combined

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<sup>6</sup> KAMS Karnataka, the Associated Managements of English Medium Schools in Karnataka, has a membership of over 1500 schools in the state, and has been vocal in matters regarding RTE.

have made the process of applying for and enrolling in private schools a formidable task, particularly to those without the advantage of literacy. My field work emerges from this potent mixture of public discourse and contention; a central point of interrogation concerns the question of how we might conceptualize the political agency of the poor as articulated within the parameters of a legal framework that furthers the agenda of privatization.

Alongside the mobilization of poor people to support one another to acquire private school seats, there has been a simultaneous, albeit quieter, push from parts of the academy and middle-class citizenry for a critique of the RTE on the grounds of the Act signifying the failure and retreat of the state. Dr. Niranjanaradhya of the Centre for Child and the Law (CCL), housed in Bangalore's National Law School, gave me a sense of this counter-movement. RTE activists, he said, have the wrong goals in mind. Their efforts to expand the umbrella of private education are effectively underwriting the state-sponsored privatisation of education. The CCL is trying to revitalize the idea of a common school system, and have mobilized a range of civil society organisations for a more broad-based movement; in particular, they work closely with farmers' movements, *anganwadi* associations, the mid-day meal association, and Dalit groups. The Centre works to strengthen and advocate the need for greater institutional support for School Development and Monitoring Committees (SDMCs), hyper-local associations specific to each government school and comprised of both elected officials as well as parents of children in attendance. Mr. Aradhya describes SDMCs as having potential to bring about a public education system truly based on the common principle, because they work both downward (with the *panchayat/gram panchayat/municipal corporation*) and upwards (with the department

of education and Block Education Officer (BEO)), thereby acting as a mediator, allowing for a participatory and democratic decision-making process.

This work is powerful, even in its relative lack of ideological strength in the face of the hegemony of the stranglehold of private capital over the popular imagination. The power of the mainstream discourse, which legitimizes and prioritizes the privatization of social life, is evident in the sheer number of poor people vying for private school seats, regardless of whether or not they are obtained through RTE. This is the context in which I place my research.

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Mr. Suresh Kumar, an auto rickshaw driver who began doing grassroots work as an RTE activist, helping other poor people navigate bureaucracy and paperwork, sat down with me one evening for a cup of chai at a roadside restaurant in Bengaluru. I asked him for his opinion regarding the appeal of private schools. He was matter of fact: he and his comrades don't have any illusions about the quality of education in private schools; it is the big buildings and the nice uniforms—in other words, signifiers of cultural capital—that they are drawn to. "Bada school, achha painting, achha design, aisa school me bachhe padna... aisa josh aa gaya, parents ko" (Parents are happy when their children study in schools with large, well-designed buildings that are painted well). He admits that poor and illiterate parents are often unable to gauge the quality of education their children are receiving, that they are vulnerable to manipulation by private schools, which, he says, essentially operate as money laundering businesses.

In many ways, Mr. Kumar is the archetype of Bangalore's urban poor: he comes from the low-caste community that falls in the Other Backward Castes (OBC) category, is part of a wave of migrants to the city post-liberalization, and is engaged

in informal work. He moved to Bangalore from Kolar district in Karnataka in 1993, and began work as an auto rickshaw driver. Until he got married in 2006, he lived life "like a dog," he says, just about surviving: working, eating, and sleeping. Auto rickshaw driving continues to be his day job and his source of income, but he is happy now; he has two children, born in 2008 and 2011. His happiness, he says, comes also from the sense of purpose that political work lends: he leads an organization called the Education Rights Trust (ERT), meant to mobilize and provide support to poor people encountering difficulty and red tape—as they inevitably do—in availing of their rights under the RTE Act. Most of his fellow activists are also auto rickshaw drivers, but he says that large numbers of women participate in their mobilizations and their outreach programs, most of whom are daily wage labourers.

A vignette from Mr. Kumar's navigations with bureaucracy and an uncompromising private school lobby is illustrative of the class antagonisms that emerged in the wake of the RTE legislation. His first encounter with the opacity of the RTE school admission process was in 2013, when his daughter was five and ready to begin elementary school. She was admitted into the private school of their choice—St Anthony's—but mistakenly, under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) reservation quota (7.5 percent of the 25 percent). Suresh Kumar's family, while low-caste, don't fall into the SC/ST category, and therefore were not able to provide the required caste-certification documents. Nevertheless, his daughter made it in, and was able to begin school. This was only the beginning of a series of battles for Mr. Kumar and his family, however: at first, they were not aware of the stipulation that books, uniforms, and miscellaneous expenses were all supposed to be covered by the school; they covered these expenses themselves. Upon discovering that information, he and other aggrieved parents complained to the BEO, to no avail. In

2014 and 2015, Mr. Kumar organized other parents--primarily fellow auto-rickshaw drivers--to protest in front of the BEO's office, and then again in front of the State Education Department. The latter protest saw women and children participating as well, demanding free books and uniform. A protest in front of St. Anthony's School saw Mr. Kumar arrested, on charges that he wasn't made aware of until after his release: a private school association accused him of holding on to a teacher's saree during the protest. They hoped, he believes, that the arrest would subdue him, but "bahar hone ke bad sher ban gaya," (*after I was released I became a tiger*) he says.

Mr. Narasimhan, the director of the Child Rights Trust, an organization that leads another advocacy and network program called the RTE Task Force, recounted a similar incident to me: he was accused by a school administration of harrassing female teachers during a protest outside the school gates. Mr. Kumar and Mr. Narasimhan both denied these accusations, and connected them to school authorities' attempts to subdue their work. It feels important to note that the policing of poor people on grounds (often fabricated) of misbehaviour, is a familiar and well worn tactic of middle class and elite politics.

The fallout of the RTE Act produced sites of class tension beyond the terrain of the political and ideological. Many administrators of private schools were frank in their analyses of class dynamics between students after the implementation of the Act. The principal of Indus International School, a leading private school set in a sprawling, leafy campus in a neighbourhood at the fringe of the city, near the IT corridor, explained to me that students who attend his school via RTE come from the neighbouring villages. The fees-paying students, on the other hand, live primarily in several gated communities in the wealthy south Bangalore neighbourhoods close by, and come from families largely in business and software industries. He explained to

me that it has been difficult to facilitate inter-class mingling, given how stark the economic, cultural, and aspirational gap is between fees-paying students and those who are enrolled through RTE. Annual educational trips often involve international travel—usually to Europe—and costs can be as high as a few hundred thousand rupees per student. This amount is obviously out of reach for families who qualify for RTE seats; the principal explained this to me as an example of the everyday reinforcement of class disparities that poor students experience at his school. I recount this conversation to illustrate what can be understood as a very early confrontation with class consciousness.

This same principal also told me that many students enrolled through RTE drop out before the age of fourteen (education is free and compulsory only until this age), due to various reasons ranging from difficulty in keeping up with coursework and lack of extra-institutional academic support, to the need to support their families either by way of housework or paid labour. I heard similar stories from administrators of other schools; few reported success stories. In contrast, I found, tuition-paying students in these elite schools almost uniformly went on to higher education in the technical, business, or medical sciences in Indian universities—this is typical of the modern middle class urban populace—or attended universities in Europe or the U.S., generally returning to India to pursue successful careers in engineering or law, or to take over their families' businesses. Thus far, then, one can conclude that RTE has created very little, if any, change in regards to the relationship of socio-economic class with the potential for upward mobility, in concrete terms as well as in relation to how mobility is pictured in the popular imagination.

At the very end of my conversation with Mr. Kumar, I ask him what keeps him going, what he derives sustenance from: "gadbad hota hai, sab kaam me gadbad

hota hai, finally result is positive. total system se fight kar raha hun, positive rehna hai." *There are ups and downs in all kinds of work, but I need to stay positive; we are fighting the entire system.* The particular framing of this struggle for access to private education—which Mr. Kumar himself has acknowledged is not entirely correlated with the desire for a better education—as waged against a *system* makes it critical to interrogate the point of emergence of private education as a site of struggle.

For historical and contextual clarity, one must therefore interrogate the impact of privatization on welfare and the terrain of political struggle. This story of the the re-shaping of political and personal aspiration, and the re-direction of struggle, will also, I believe, shed light on the changing nature of class politics within larger processes of privatization and neoliberal hegemony.

## **DEBATES ON WELFARE AND CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT**

The many contestations over RTE, described above and manifesting in the class antagonisms that emerged in its wake, can begin to be understood within the context of the theoretical question of the efficacy of welfare within the neoliberal paradigm. The fields of development studies and political theory have for many decades debated this very question, pivoting around the relationship of welfare with capitalist development, particularly in societies that constitute the so-called Global South. More recently these debates have been anchored more specifically in the contexts of neoliberalism and globalization.

Early proponents of state autonomy, seeing the state as a coherent unit with its own rationality, were resistant to questions regarding the state's relationship with capital. This latter question, part of the larger discourse around questions of relative as opposed to absolute autonomy, received considerable attention from scholars of India

in the last decades of the twentieth century. This literature has perceived the state as negotiating between different dominant classes (Bardhan 1984) or as increasingly collaborating with capital (Chatterjee 2008). The global hegemony of free-market capitalist development, and its imposition on third world economies via Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), has been marked by polarized debates regarding the legitimacy of inclusive growth measures, meant to generate social opportunity within the context of capitalist development. Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz, for example, made notable arguments for a developmental state committed to free-market capitalist growth (Sen 1994, Stiglitz 2002).

The question of the compatibility of the market with equality, opportunity, and social justice, then, was embedded in the question of the degree of autonomy of the state from an economy understood to be exploitative. In the next section, I outline the parameters of scholarship concerned with an understanding of poverty within the context of an India that is simultaneously globalizing, urbanizing, and developmentalist.

## **POVERTY AND NEOLIBERALISM**

In the following pages, I look at Akhil Gupta's book *Red Tape*, which is an important ethnographic account of the nature of the state as it is perceived by primarily rural poor people, in their everyday interactions with the local bureaucracy. Its focus is on the interface between the state and the poor, and Gupta studies this relationship by exploring the implementation of poverty-alleviation schemes. I bring Gupta into this paper because his book is located in the same broad terrain of enquiry as this paper, and is a definitive text on the anthropology of the state, executed via grappling with the question of poverty. Importantly, I find that his

analysis keeps the state—in all of its fragmentation and disaggregation—markedly separate from the economy. This means that his analysis of the relationship of the state with the phenomenon of extreme poverty remains bound within the operations of the bureaucracy and sidelines questions of political economy; this has significant bearing on his assessment regarding why so many poverty exists at such a staggering scale in India.

Gupta examines interactions between the hyper-local bureaucracy with the rural poor in Uttar Pradesh, in order to understand how ordinary citizens see and experience the state, as well as to make sense of the continued prevalence of poverty and deprivation, in spite of the state's numerous development schemes and poverty alleviation measures. Why, he asks, does there continue to be death and suffering from poverty on a scale akin to that of a natural disaster? This question is of particular importance to him because it digs into what appears to him as a paradox: “that the poor are killed despite their inclusion in projects of national sovereignty and despite their centrality to democratic politics and state legitimacy” (6). For him, this extreme poverty is akin to “a direct and culpable form of killing,” and he seeks to theorize it as such by elucidating on the ways in which this violence has been naturalized and taken for granted in the practices of the state.

Gupta therefore begins with the premise that the developmental state has, in theory, made all the correct moves towards an eradication of poverty. That its poverty alleviation measures have failed is another matter—it requires inquiry precisely because one would expect a state that has acted on good intention to have seen some concrete results. Taking us through a series of ethnographic vignettes from his research in rural Uttar Pradesh, where he observed the activities of the local bureaucracy and their interactions with the poor, Gupta argues that poverty in India

continues to be endemic and on the scale of a disaster, because “bureaucratic action repeatedly and systematically produces arbitrary outcomes in its provision of care. While indifference does indeed play an important role in this story, the indifference to arbitrary outcomes is central” (6).

Much of Gupta's book deals with this issue of the indeterminacy of the trajectory of state action. The reality of the Indian bureaucracy is that it is highly disaggregated, he writes, and therefore the top-down trajectory of directives, until they reach the lowest level of bureaucracy (the level responsible for implementation, and therefore also, in the everyday of governmentality, what is experienced as the state to the common person), is one in which good intention (welfare measures) can easily be catalyzed into something else. Then there are the many slippages in the implementation itself, caused variously by lack of coordination, short-staffed offices, lack of verifiable data, etc. This filtering of welfare policies and directives as they make their way through the various levels of the state machinery, combined with an inadequately efficient final implementation, makes for what Gupta calls "arbitrariness" in the outcome of welfare measures. This arbitrariness, he argues, can help explain the failure of the Indian state to manage its population's poverty levels. For Gupta, this arbitrariness is the reason why poverty takes on a structural nature in India—because essentially the violence of poverty is embedded in the very functioning of the bureaucracy.

I find there to be a certain dilution of the meaning of the idea of “structural” as Gupta uses it. If we think of widespread and acute poverty as a form of violence, he writes, it is not in state intention that the root of this violence lies. Emphasis on the structural aspect of poverty as tied to the embedded nature of arbitrariness in the functioning of the bureaucracy obscures questions relating to the broader economic

structure which produces the need for said measures. This reading, of good intentions and arbitrary execution due to bureaucratic sloppiness, cannot account for the inherently exploitative and unequal nature of Indian modernity, enabled by a state that has doggedly pursued liberalization and withdrawn from public welfare. A more direct way to think about the structural nature of poverty would be to examine the reality of the neoliberal situation and the political economy of inequality that is inherent to this project.

I would like to suggest two possibilities that problematize the idea of arbitrariness, which for Gupta is where an understanding of poverty emerges. First, I suggest that this arbitrariness is inevitable, and not due to bureaucratic slippage of any kind. A capitalist economy would no longer function if economic hierarchies were adequately addressed, and therefore this so-called arbitrariness keeps the balance of power intact. Second (and this can be read as a corollary to the first), perhaps we then should not attribute to arbitrariness this failure to ameliorate poverty. I suggest that we instead consider the reluctance of the state to implement any radically redistributive policy that would approach a structural reconstruction of Indian political economy. In its place, poverty-alleviation measures can only be thought of as “arbitrary” in their continued deployment regardless of there being substantive data to show that such measures result in any significant change. This kind of arbitrariness is therefore part of a larger apparatus that ensures economic inequality.

Another way to consider the viability of arbitrariness as a rationale for endemic poverty is through the questions: what would the true eradication of poverty look like; and how would it come about? I suspect that addressing the arbitrariness in the execution of poverty-alleviation measures would not be the answer to the latter question. Therefore I find Gupta’s argument to have its limitations in its designation

of bureaucratic unweildiness as “structural,” and in its hesitation to instead examine the larger political economy of neoliberalism—what I suggest we think of as “structural” instead. A centering of the inequality inherent in a neoliberal society would add a necessary critical dimension to Gupta’s valuable observations on the failure of the Indian state to make any significant change in a landscape of acute poverty.

Recently, there has been a cross-disciplinary range of scholarship devoted to the mechanisms that enable the persistence of poverty. This work has been done through the analytics of caste (Teltumbde 2018), agrarian distress (Patnaik 2007), capitalist development and primitive accumulation (Harriss-White 2006), systems of power and categorisation that are reproduced, not erased by capitalist development (Mosse 2010), displacement and precarity (Menon 2018), and work and informality (RoyChowdhury 2018). This list is not nearly exhaustive of the disciplinary and methodological richness of the scholarship, and it is not the scope of this paper to engage them all, but I bring them up because of their common interest in examining the social and economic mechanisms that maintain inequality and exploitation, while also engaging the role of the state. The case of the RTE Act and the politics it generated require a theoretical embedding of analysis of state with economy and society. This seems important, because the class antagonisms (and more insidiously, caste biases) that were brought to the surface in Bengaluru following the implementation of the Act shed consequential light on the relationship between welfare and neoliberalism (is it a relationship of struggle or complicity?).

India’s “great transformation” (Polanyi 1957) formally began with changes to its economy in the late 1980s and the economic reforms that led to liberalization in 1991, inscribing the economy in globalized processes of capitalist accumulation and

exposing its labor force to the vagaries of a global market and supply chain; embedding them, therefore, in the very infrastructure of globalization. The development state's contradictory relationship with poverty predates even the initial liberalizing years, however.

In her study of the circumstances leading to pavement dwellers arrival in the city of Mumbai, Gayatri Menon reflects on 1971 as a critical moment in the reformulation of development policy: one of decoupling economic growth from the welfare of the poor. "What populism did was create the conditions where the welfare of the poor was perceived as being separate from economic growth, but also as siphoning off the wealth created by middle class effort" (89). The separation of economic growth from redistributive welfare measures, then, served to fragment the poor from the middle class, creating "the conditions for fuelling middle-class hostility towards the poor, who were seen as encroaching on the economic growth and prosperity of the middle class" (89). We see, then, that the welfare of the poor has a history of being considered by the middle-class as an appropriation of their wealth and resources.

Importantly, Menon historicizes the influx of squatters by demonstrating the role of the green revolution—which marked a shift from the redistributive and labour-intensive strategies for agricultural growth in the Nehru years to a project targeted at middle- and upper-class farmers—in the displacement of poor and marginalized peasants to the cities. This rural flight, generated out of the state's understanding that "the only way to improve the 'food situation' was to support private profitability by public action" (Kohli 1987, 75; quoted in Menon, 87), created a new class of the urban poor whose mobilization through electoral politics was still seen as crucial. Thus we have here a historicization of welfare measures aimed at the displaced

peasantry, introduced in a situation of economic precarity that was induced by development measures that prioritized wealthy farmers and private enterprise. Those welfare measures, much like the RTE, had the effect of further alienating the middle classes from the poor.

It is clear that the case of the RTE Act pushes for a consideration of welfare policies within the neoliberal project. This is an instance of the state retreating from providing public education, encouraging the existing trend of poor people privileging private schools (regardless of the quality of education) over government schools, and, crucially, capitalizing on the classic neoliberal narrative of corporate social responsibility. So how can we do justice to a situation that sits at the nexus of multiple conflicting and reactive exercises of power and citizenship? In the following few paragraphs I will attempt one way forward, by looking at neoliberal governmentality and “inclusive growth” (Gooptu) on the one hand. On the other, I will consider how subaltern politics can be seen to have an organic spatiality of operation that isn’t necessarily contained by the limitations imposed on it by larger constraints of governmentality and elite power. Like Menon demonstrated in her historicization of green revolution-era welfare measures, poor people’s negotiations with the state—what Partha Chatterjee calls political society—are contested, situational, and work within a more malleable legal framework than that of the middle and elite classes.

I place the RTE ruling mandating reservations for low-income students in private schools within the framework of poverty-alleviation measures that co-opt and reframe political struggles such that the latter legitimate processes of neoliberal urban change. Consider the legislation’s promotion of the privatization of education, and consider subsequently the politics of the poor vis-a-vis the state and private school

authorities to fight for seats. This sort of political mobilization in the wake of the state legislation helps us understand how privatization shapes subaltern politics such that the latter are made to play into the neoliberal agenda and provide consent for it.

Menon's essay is part of a rich body of work on the polarization of urban space as a result of growing precarity and informality. Scholars have written about concurrent elite prejudice against the urban poor, who are seen as encroaching on land and diverting state resources. Those who are displaced by processes of capitalist accumulation and left out of the urban organized economy have faced the brunt of the ill-effects of economic liberalization. As Supriya RoyChowdhury writes, "the welfare paradigm has turned the discourse of state responsibility away from the political economy questions of work, wages, and income" and further, that the development state's focus on welfare at the cost of addressing the root causes of inequality has allowed for "a shield for ignoring the most stubborn dimensions of poverty, rooted in an economic policy regime, which creates and recreates the poor's lack of access to skills, secure work, and regular incomes" (RoyChowdhury 2018). To what extent, then, is it generative to theorize the credibility of welfare programmes in developmental states where the very structure and practices of economic production are prohibitive of empowerment?

That the urban poor are also at the receiving end of middle class and elite suspicion and resentment points to an anxiety about the scarcity of private property, here embodied in the private school and the resources expended on the education it provides. This is evident even in the case of the RTE Act, where the resource in question is not land per se, but where there are echoes of the anxiety regarding the encroachment on the sanctity of private property. Two school administrators mentioned to me that parents of fees-paying students were unhappy with the idea of

poor children attending these same schools free of cost, because it would in effect entail a dilution of their resources. There is an unspoken caste dimension underneath this resistance, although caste did not once come up in any of my interviewees' narratives, and I was hard pressed to find any documented data on the caste breakdown of children in attendance in the private schools I visited.<sup>7</sup> Two of my interviewees, however, mentioned that a leader of a private school associations (these associations were leading the lobby against the private school quota) described the post-RTE diversification of school student bodies as "water from the drain entering the sea."<sup>8</sup>

In order to understand this iteration of class politics, it is necessary to think through the larger context of the political economy whence welfare initiatives such as RTE emerge. The implementation of poverty-alleviation measures alongside the neoliberal project has been critiqued by others. Nandini Gooptu, for example, writes that "inclusive growth" measures such as poverty alleviation schemes only serve to "include poor people in the project of neoliberal urban transformation" (42). This language of inclusivity is poetically literal in the case of reservations for the economically and socially disadvantaged in private schools—those who are otherwise left behind in the liberalized economy, i.e. in a larger political economy that is quite anti-poor. But then again, what is the nature of such inclusivity? The poor's integration into the neoliberal project can at best be a "limited or even exploitative inclusion (that) can paradoxically have a palliative or ameliorative effect, and can

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<sup>7</sup> School administrators were unanimous in their assertion that they information do not discriminate on the basis of caste, and are not in possession of any caste data regarding their student bodies.

<sup>8</sup> Here I cite Mr. Nagasimha of the Child Rights Trust and Mr. Kumar of the Education Rights Trust.

help to elicit the complicity or compliance of the poor to the neoliberal order" (48).

The prospect of resistance in the form of challenges to privatization and demands for a robust state school system is defused. This is an agenda, Gooptu writes, that "makes the bitter pill more swallowable" (48).

Scholars of neoliberalism have documented that neoliberal change has often been accompanied by regenerative policy based on ideas of social development and regulation, premised on the illusion of the usefulness of strategies like corporate social responsibility. In the RTE we can see an extension of a similar principle to another industry in the business sector: that of education. The anecdote from the introduction of this paper—that of a member of the family who unsuccessfully forged documents in order to be exempt from RTE—mentioned “social responsibility” as an ethic their schools hoped to inculcate in their students. The politic here—of a performance of social responsibility but a fear of redistribution—provides a telling example of the class boundaries in a neoliberal order whose obscuring can cause what Gooptu calls revanchism coupled with moral panic. An attempt at the desegregation of education that itself exists within the framework of liberalization encroaches on pre-existing consumption patterns: with RTE, the poor can now avail of the same education as the more well-to-do, thus challenging the existing markers of class, consumption, and economic experience. Thus there is hostility and "elite revolt" (Corbridge and Harriss 2000) to the increasing participation of socially and economically marginalized people in political life, read by the elite as the encroachment of the poor on their space and resources. This idea of individualized economic progress coupled with a moral panic about the sanctity of private property is key.

The RTE Act talks about increasing the number of public schools at the same time as it enact the rights of poor children to free private schooling. But in an environment where there is an unprecedented proliferation of even low-cost private schools that the poor prefer to government schools, a move by the state to support poor children's education in unaided schools can only be understood as an example of the poor being incorporated into the neoliberal project, whose rationality or "common sense" (Gramsci 1971) privileges the private. We can think of this as an example of the manufacturing of consent by the creation of desire and competition: poor people compete with one another in a randomized lottery system that will select a limited number of children for admission to each unaided school every year. Others have written about the normalization of individualism and competition as being part and parcel of neoliberal subjectivity (Harvey 2005). In spite of the RTE Act requiring local governments to set up neighbourhood public schools, the fact that Article 12 (1)(c) regarding the role of private schools by far grabbed the most public attention and sparked a range of social and political claims involving the state, the poor, and the elite classes, is demonstrative of the already-existing hegemony of the rationality of the citizen as consumer, upward mobility as tied to private enterprise, and the normalization of competition and scarcity. So we can see from this story how the terrain of politics of the poor has been shifted from a demand for greater state accountability and welfare measures that could address structural issues, to a claim for a part in the new private normal.

However, it would be remiss to dismiss the reality of the agency of subaltern politics to shape policy to their suitability, regardless of whether such agency is exercised within or outside the framework of privatization. Others have written about this aspect of agency of ordinary people vis-à-vis the state. Matthew Hull's

*Government of Paper*, for example, points to a lack of agency of the Pakistani bureaucracy itself in controlling or managing or foreseeing the effects of the documentation it produces. To an extent, this documentation has a life of its own, and can be appropriated and used by civilians in unexpected ways. Rohit De, too, writes about the Indian legal system (as embodied in the Constitution) as a space of state-formation, where subalterns (and ordinary citizens in general) have the power to shape the state, making claims against it by using its own vocabulary (De 2018, 24).

The idea that a legal system set up by the constitution can take life and assume force in unexpected ways, as a result of the demands and actions of ordinary citizens, who now have power to shape it, adds an important dimension to this analysis of popular politics within neoliberal regimes. This space for negotiation, in the case of poverty-alleviation measures, serves to include poor people in the processes of neoliberal change, but can also be read as part of the “double movement” (Polanyi 1957) in response to state-initiated privatization.

The nature of political mobilization in this case—that of poor people negotiating with bureaucracy to ensure the deliverance of the promise of private education for their children—brings to light the ways in which the project of neoliberalism can shape ordinary citizens’ articulations of their needs vis-à-vis the state. These are needs that only emerge as a result of the economic and political changes wrought by this project. They play into the “common sense” of scarcity and private property and at the end of the day, demonstrate that consent to the neoliberal project can and is being manufactured.

However, even though we are seeing an absorption of the neoliberal rationality, where private enterprise and competition are seen as the conduit for social mobility, the politics of the poor here are also pushing toward a critique of gross

inequality under capitalism, even though they "work mainly within the parameters" (Munck 2002, 19) of the neoliberal project. Regardless of these politics being generated out of the expansion of the neoliberal agenda, there is an articulation of what can be read as a more radical political intent in the kind of activism Mr Kumar is organizing. This is illuminated in the anxiety of school administrators and parents in the wake of the RTE legislation. At the core of this conflict is an anxiety about the dilution of resources: relatively wealthy parents are anxious that the resources (economic and otherwise) that should be enjoyed in full by their children will now be shared by children entering through affirmative action. Even though this struggle takes place within the framework of a push toward privatization, the movement of poor parents represents a struggle for equality while wealthy parents and school administrations try to protect their privileges. This is important, because it reveals also a dissatisfaction of the poor with a slower model of redress, such as the one that would unfold in the long fight towards a solid public education system, or even with the trickle-down effect of reservations restricted to the public sector. Redistributive politics work faster, and their prospects inspire resistance from those who feel the scarcity of their private property, and fear its appropriation by poor people.

Menon's illustration of the class conflict following the populist welfare measures in the 70s, and my example here of the RTE leading to middle and elite class antagonism toward the poor, are illustrative of the hostility that emerges in the wake of welfare measures directed at those who bear the brunt of processes of capitalist accumulation. In both situations, attempts are made to manage poverty, deprivation, and lack of opportunity of the displaced poor, but not to address the structural nature of inequality. This happens after the poor have already been displaced from peasant life, or have migrated to cities to situations of urban

marginality and work informality as a result of processes of capitalist accumulation. But these measures—emerging either out of populist necessity or from agendas that fall into the inclusive growth paradigm—are met with the hostility of the middle and elite classes, often directed against the poor. This is a very specific phenomenon: that of the manifestation of class antagonism following the provision of welfare within the paradigm of neoliberal economic growth. In the following section, I work with Partha Chatterjee's much-debated framework of the structural opposition between political society and civil society, to see how far it might take us towards an understanding of class politics that is in a dialectical relationship with the neoliberal project.

## **CLASS ANTAGONISMS**

Partha Chatterjee's (2008) conceptual framework that differentiates civil society from political society is of some utility in understanding the nature of political agency of the urban and rural poor, as well as for connecting the political economy of hegemonic corporate capital with the regeneration of welfare politics that leads to urban class hostility. This framework therefore is useful in order to understand class lines and what happens when they are reconfigured, or when the traditional markers of class and caste—indicated by consumption, lifestyle, and opportunity—are trespassed, so to speak.

Chatterjee's framework sees middle and upper-middle class Indians as occupying the realm of civil society, which is fully incorporated into the logic of corporate capital accumulation and economic growth. The rural and urban poor, on the other hand, constitute political society--marked by informal economies not functioning purely according to the logic of capitalist accumulation. Political society,

unlike civil society, does not exist within the parameters of a rationalised legal system; it is instead a realm of political negotiations between its members and the state—negotiations marked by specific contextual needs and identitarian assertions and impositions. These are the people who are dispossessed by primitive accumulation, but their subsistence is necessary in order for the continuation of processes of economic growth and accumulation. This subsistence therefore takes shape as state-directed poverty alleviation programs, welfare measures, and rights schemes, and is "a necessary political condition for the continued rapid growth of corporate capital" (Chatterjee 2008, 61). Therefore, this can be understood as welfare within the logic of the neoliberal project.

To Chatterjee, civil society is the socio-political category that enjoys its status as normative or universal and rights-bearing, whose negotiations with the state take place through a clearly delineated rule of law. On the other hand, political society, embedded as it is in the informal economy, lives in the hinterlands of the corporatized economy and of legality vis-à-vis the state; political negotiations and articulations do not uniformly summon the legitimacy of the rule of law (Baviskar and Sundar, 88). Instead, this is the site of political negotiations that are direct, contextual, and lead to unstable and “exceptional” (Chatterjee 2008, 61) arrangements.

This framework of a political society that is differentiated from the universalized and rights-bearing civil society that is formally and completely embedded in the logic of corporate capital is useful in that it helps us understand urban class relations in the context of the hegemony of capital, and the rationality of accumulation inherent in the neoliberal project. Additionally, the idea of political society is a foundational “effort to conceptualize political agency in the informal sector” (RoyChowdhury 2018)—an effort I have undertaken earlier in this paper.

However, as I emphasized then, this political agency (I am writing specifically about poor people's framing of their politics and desires in the wake of the RTE ruling) is directed towards demands for inclusion in the private sector, therefore providing legitimacy for the state's withdrawal from the arena of welfare, and demonstrating the extent to which the privileging of the private is now the common sense.

In this situation, those who in Chatterjee's framework would constitute political society have demonstrated consent for and cooperation with the expansion of private capital. This consent brings to light the teleology of aspiration: one where the *real* trajectory towards upward mobility involves inclusion in an expanded private sector. This is where Chatterjee's neat structural opposition of civil versus political society, respectively mapped onto another structural opposition, that of the market versus the state as the arena of negotiation, begins to come apart at the seams. In the case of RTE, political society looks towards the private sector for welfare, albeit with the state, as the legislative body, still performing the role of the intermediary. But the preference of the poor for private education points towards a future where there is no need for an intermediary—when political society negotiates directly and exclusively with private capital.

In a response to Chatterjee's article laying out the framework of the structural opposition between civil and political society, Nandini Sundar and Amita Baviskar argue for a collapse, and in some cases even an inversion, of many of the oppositions that Chatterjee sets up. Their focus is on the relationship of civil and political societies with the state through legal and extra-legal or exceptional avenues, respectively. They cite examples of corporate capital and the urban middle class' disdain for the rule of law and the impunity with which this indifference is met. The acquisition of land alongside the crushing of peasant revolt, the ability of large corporations to violate

environmental and labour laws, and, in contrast, the eviction of squatters and the criminalization of begging<sup>9</sup> are but few illustrations of that fact that “generally, it is members of the so-called civil society who break laws with impunity and who demand that the rules be waived for them, whereas members of political society strive to become legal, to gain recognition and entitlements from the state” (88).

Following Sundar and Baviskar I too suggest that Chatterjee’s neat oppositional framework is viable in certain instances. One of Chatterjee’s main arguments is that welfare directed at political society in the wake of their dispossession by primitive accumulation constitutes a *reversal* of the effects of primitive accumulation (Chatterjee 2008, 55). This leads him to the thesis that the narrative of transition typically associated with capitalist development is no longer feasible in the particular case of postcolonial development. So while I find his narrative of the “reversal of the effects of primitive accumulation” to be valuable, I suggest that we think of it instead as primitive accumulation with compensation. This frames evokes an understanding of primitive accumulation that embodies the teleology of upward mobility that is aligned with that of capital. This compensation, taking the shape of poverty alleviation programs, is necessary for the continued growth of capital. It is also necessary, I would add, for the moral legitimacy of the neoliberal project. And further, I suggest that it is perhaps the transition narrative that can help us understand this iteration of urban class friction. Elite revolt manifests when the traditional markers of class status and opportunity, as well as conditions of caste exclusivity and purity, are threatened. This revolt, such as the mobilization of private school associations in opposition to the RTE Act, is often extra-legal in nature.

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<sup>9</sup> Consider, for instance, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill in consideration, which criminalizes organized begging.

The case of the forged documentation illuminates the ease with which recourse to extra-legal means is employed.

The term “moral panic” is particularly apt for the elite politics displayed here. The “inclusive growth” paradigm poses a threat only to the markers of class and caste exclusivity. It suggests a certain teleology of social mobility that is tied to the market. It does not undo the structural problem of actually-existing social and economic inequality.

Scholarship on caste has demonstrated how, through the accumulation of caste capital alongside their “secularization,” the welfare of upper-castes

“need no longer be pursued in visible fashion through the mediation of public politics. It can now be made congruent with impersonal collective goals like nation-building, development, or later in the story, by equally anonymous forces like the market or globalisation.... The unmarked universal becomes the abode of normal, naturalised power, its transparent invisibility being a sign of its privilege in contrast to the compulsory markings that subaltern identities were forced to display” (Deshpande 2013, 37).

In this article, Satish Deshpande illustrates the political and identitarian consequences of the caste binary created by the institution of caste-based reservations in the public sector. The implementation of reservations with the intention to provide redress to those historically marginalized and exploited due to caste has led, Deshpande writes, to the invisibility of caste amongst upper-caste communities, with the burden of caste—both experienced and performed—placed on lower-casteness. Upper caste castelessness, then, comes to embody certain notions of universality and rights-bearing citizenship, against which lower-casteness can be only ever be relational. So while caste capital still exists, it is experienced and presented in its modern depoliticized manifestations; in its conversion to other, modern forms of capital like property, higher educational credentials, and strongholds in lucrative professions.

This discussion about the secularization of upper-caste identity and the subsequent relational nature of lower-casteness is very pertinent to my study of the class politics that emerged in the wake of the RTE Act, not least because Article 12(1)(c) set another form of reservations in place. It would be reductive to map caste directly onto class, but there is a strong correlation, particularly in urban metropolises, where the middle and elite classes typically receive specialized higher education and enjoy a monopoly over access to private capital.<sup>10</sup> This relationship between caste and class reproduces itself, a process aided by the depoliticization of modern capital and its isolation from historical forms of oppression. Castelessness indicates an erasure of power and historically embedded forms of capital, masking upper-casteness instead as modern and universal, concerned with such secular endeavors as economic development and neoliberal growth.

In this context, the welfare—by which I mean, the political and economic measures that ensure the well being, lifestyle, and prosperity—of the upper-castes can be masked as universal and impersonal projects of development and globalization. So even though—or precisely because—capitalist development is inherently “unequal and combined” (Trotsky 1930) in nature, leaving millions to wallow while the rest make profits; this discourse is construed as being concerned with the universal goal of modernity.

Caste subalterns and members of political society (these categories have significant overlap)--all those who live in the relational outside of the so-called secular universal—are the targets of welfare measures such as the RTE that

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<sup>10</sup> A useful historicization of upper-caste monopoly over knowledge and skilled work is: Fuller C. J. and Haripriya Narasimhan. 2008. “From Landlords to Software Engineers: Migration and Urbanization among Tamil Brahmins.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, 1: 170-96.

themselves exist squarely within the coordinates of neoliberal rationality. When the poor are enfolded into the neoliberal project, they enter spaces that they previously were not able to, such as elite private schools. I suggest that it is the idea of the lost sanctity and purity of private property that underlies the middle and elite class' revolt.

I suggest then, that the transition narrative does exist, although not in the classical Marxist sense that Chatterjee evokes, concerning the displaced peasant cut off from the means of production and bound thereafter to the capitalist. Instead, this transition is embodied in the aspiration for participation in private capital, in demands for reservations, and in the undoing of traditional class markers.<sup>11</sup> This iteration of the transition narrative no doubt does keep the poor grid-locked within the parameters of unequal capitalist development, or co-opts their movements for self-determination. But it is a reality, and it is the suggestion of this transition that generates elite resistance. It is a unique feature of the political conjuncture that we see identitarian politics emerging in response to liberal state policy, as demonstrated by schools attempting to gain legal recognition for minority status in order to retain their exclusivity and purity; ironically, state policy itself inadvertently exposes the *myth* of the secularism and castelessness of the privileged.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to locate welfare policies within the broader dynamics of the state's relationship to capital, the hegemony of the neoliberal

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<sup>11</sup> In another response to Chatterjee's essay, Satish Deshpande and Mary E. John argue along the same lines: "If classical narratives of transition are no longer the only ones available, can some of the significant socio-political trajectories of today qualify as transition narratives? For example, could we conceive of the desire for the city on the part of rural youth as a sort of script for other futures? Or what of some other narratives of transformation not considered in DET—from exclusion to power-sharing in contemporary demands for reservations, for instance?" (85)

rationality, and class and caste politics. The fallout of RTE in Bengaluru provides a window into this analysis insofar as it represents the state's efforts to involve the private sector in measures that seek, to an extent, to overturn historically embedded structures of privilege. It does so by extending the advantages of private education, free of cost, to the poor.

Empirical findings revealed elite and middle class panic at the idea of having to share their privileges with the urban underclass; also significant is the phenomenon of the collective organization of the poor, engaged in RTE activism, being drawn into the paradigm of the privatization of education. This is an example of the broader implications of welfare located within the framework of privatization: it manufactures consent for the neoliberal project.

Theoretically, this paper engages the many levels of debates on the developmental state. Akhil Gupta draws attention to the important issue of the normalization of poverty in India, all the more critical with his framing of it as a form of structural violence. His argument places responsibility on the "arbitrariness" in the delivery of care, due to the inherent nature of the bureaucracy and the slippages it allows for. My argument, however, diverges from his, and points to the inherent limitations of a regime of welfare that is located within the logic of capitalist accumulation. I make this point by grounding my findings related to the RTE Act in Bengaluru in other critiques stemming from a more structural, economic understanding of the marginalisation and dispossession of the poor, as well as critiques of welfare itself as pulling attention away from more urgent issues relating to work, livelihood, and redistribution.

It is a feature of the neoliberal conjuncture and its discourse of individual freedom and equality, particularly in regards to pathways to success and upward

mobility, that acknowledgement of systemic and historically generated relations of power can be pushed under the rug. But there they simmer, boiling over when there is a threat of destabilization to the markers of exclusivity and inequality. Reminders of systemic power and inequality manifest in the form of moral panic, regardless of the fact that these welfare measures pose little threat to any structural and systemic conditions of inequality. Within the neoliberal paradigm, then, the only change that we can expect to see is a re-drawing of the lines of exclusivity and privilege. We see this in the the reaction of the middle and elite classes to welfare measures such as RTE, even though, in the broad scheme of things, the latter mainly seek to include the poor in the neoliberal project through the manufacturing of their consent.

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