

II.

Emotionen in Kunst, Ritual und Bildung

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Polished Person or Parasite?

The Implications of Education for Social Identities and Self Concepts and the Culturally Diverse Emotional Consequences. An Indian Example

Education is not only an innocent tool but leads to many conflicts all over the world as well. For an analysis of these conflicts one has to keep in mind that education as a concept is a culturally diverse construction with very different connotations in theory as much as in the everyday world. Taking the example of an empirical study on concepts of education and educated persons in an Indian urban middle class sample, the implications of cultural constructions of education for self concepts, social identities and therefore for social inclusion and exclusion will be discussed. Following the figure of Sanskritization by Srinivas, the founded pattern of argumentation in the data is called educationalization.

Introduction

Education is a hard-fought good in many parts of the world. For example, in March 2007 two men, at least one of them likely a school teacher, kidnapped a school bus with around 30 pupils in the capital of the Philippines, Manila.¹ Their request was rather unusual for kidnappers: the state should guarantee proper education for some 145 students from a school in a poor and disadvantaged district of Manila. The kidnappers wanted to draw attention to the urgent problem of the malfunctioning educational system for the underprivileged.

The inaction of the government towards education for the underprivileged is in fact a common phenomenon in many countries. Education, the differences between low-quality education and quality education, and the access to it very often stabilize social inequality, as it is very obvious in India (Clemens/Holzwarth 2009). Consequently, the awareness for education has increased, and education itself has become a battlefield in many parts of the world, especially where education has the reputation of being the way out of poverty, oppression, and marginalization and toward modernization, welfare, and wealth. This is particular true for countries in transition and what were previously referred to as developing countries, where the social gap between the winners of globalization and the losers is extremely large (Subrahmanian 2005). Supported by large campaigns of global players like the

1 URL: <http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/0,1518,474304,00.html>.

World Bank or OECD, education has become a symbol for future expectations and hopes (Resnik 2006). However, taking into consideration that the increasing number of degree holders has sharpened competition on the job market and developments like liberalization have led to a decrease in white-collar governmental jobs in countries of the global south like India, an educational provider often can't fulfill the expectations of social and economical mobility any longer, as has been shown in the various studies by, for example, Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2004, 2005).

Nevertheless, in the rising states like China and India, the symbolic power of education is enormous (for India Béteille 2002). Taking the example of the Indian context, I want to ask questions regarding the emotional implications of the cultural diverse construct of education.

Education in the Indian Context

The illiteracy rate is 34% in a country where the effort to develop nuclear weapons has long heavily influenced the research agenda and the scientific system (Raina/Habib 2004). While on the one hand the excellent IITs – Indian Institutes for Technology – are very well-known throughout the world, and Indian researchers are leaders in the area of biotechnology, for example, more than 353 million Indians are illiterate, and 32 million children do not attend school (Mehrotra et al. 2005). The comparison with China demonstrates the problem of the lopsided development in India: Both countries had similar problems in the late 1940s such as mass illiteracy and endemic poverty. However, India is today far behind China with respect to elementary education: Compared to 34% of the population being illiterate in India, only 5% of China's population is illiterate (PROBE, p. 12). On the other hand, India sends about six times more students to the universities and other higher educational establishments than its neighbor China (Varma 1999: 55). "*In fact*," the Indian author Pavank Varma states, "there is little doubt that the lopsided development of education in India is directly linked to the structure of Indian society, and 'that the inequalities in education are [...] a reflection of inequalities of economic and social powers of different groups in India'" (ibid.). In India, the term of "Whither Education" has been created to describe this undesirable trend.²

But even for those kids going to school, the situation is often far from ideal, as the drop-out rate is high and the quality of education is often poor, especially in public schools. Although school enrolment for the 1st grade is more or less 100% today, already in the 3rd grade approximately 30% have left school, and in the 7th grade, not even half of all kids remain. It is important to take note of the big difference between urban and rural areas: While 83% of kids from an urban background complete elementary school through the 5th grade, only 57% from rural areas do (NCERT 7th All India School Education Survey 2007).

2 URL: <http://www.indowindow.com/sad/article.phd?child=29&article=29>.

Apathy of the parents with regard to education is one widespread explanation for the problem. But in a large-scale survey in 1996 (the PROBE Report), the overwhelming majority of parents from rural areas agreed that education is important for their children. The survey was undertaken in five northern Indian states (Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh), and four of these states are the worst-performing in terms of elementary education (only Himachal Pradesh is performing better). More than half of all out-of-school children in India live in these states (PROBE). In fact, the conditions for the parents who are willing to send their children to school are certainly not very supporting. To single out only one aspect of the difficulties these parents are facing with regard to the education of their children, the “myth” that elementary education is free of charge in India has to be destroyed: North Indian parents spend about Rs 318 per year on average to send one child to a government primary school: on fees, books, slates, clothes, etc., of which the fees are indeed only a negligible part. Having in mind that most of the poor families in India have more than one child, an agricultural laborer in Bihar with three school-age children would have to work around 40 days per year just to send them to primary school (PROBE, p. 16), and the average real expenditure for education is even said to be much higher according to the authors of the PROBE report. Other difficulties (for more detail, see Srivastava 2007) are long distances to schools, teacher absences, very bad infrastructure (no equipment like blackboards, toilets, chairs, etc., sometimes not even a building, see Verghese 1995), high teacher/student ratios, discrimination in the classroom against lower castes and Muslims (Holzwarth et. al. 2006), and so on.

Taking this into account, and bearing in mind that the offered quality of primary education is very often awful – if teaching activities are taking place at all (Gupta 2002), it would be understandable if even more parents would refuse to send their children to school. It is not unusual that after five years of school attendance in a single-teacher village school with the teacher more or less absent most of the time, a student is not even able to read or write (PROBE; Aikara 1998). So even the smallest hopes of the parents, for example that their son could manage the finances of the family, are not fulfilled. On the other hand, his working power was missed, he didn’t learn a handicraft in the meantime, and the money spent on his education might have been missing for medicine or other required investments.

Education as a Valuable Good

Nevertheless, education has an extremely good reputation in India, and it is indeed a hard-fought good. Due to historical reasons, education has a special place in Indian society. With the likely unique phenomenon of the Brahmins, as the intellectual elite, heading the caste system, education has been connected to hierarchy since ancient times (e.g., Weber 1988; Oldenberg o.J. a, b; Kaviraj 1992), which has great emotional consequences as well, of course. Gaining an education means being included in this elite system or cognitive construct. Education was even pro-

hibited in pre-colonial times for the low castes and the casteless (Nancharaiiah 2002). Colonization further consolidated the situation, as the occupying force included only some Brahmins in its educational system due to the demand for administrative staff, excluding the rest of the people from the educational institutions it established (Bhattacharya 2002). It was only in the course of the occupation and mainly due to missionary interests that the British Empire got involved in general education to some extent in India, but the half-hearted attempts were not very successful. After independence in 1947, the new government wanted to overcome the old discrimination, especially against the untouchables and tribal people. Education was one major point on the agenda, and a reservation system with positive discrimination for the so-called backward communities was implemented. Seats at institutions of higher education and jobs in government positions were reserved for these groups (Rolly 2002). However, 60 years later, the situation has not changed fundamentally. Caste discrimination is still very striking, especially in rural areas, and educational institutions are heavily affected (Kulke/Rothermund 1998). The situation shows “the apathy of the Indian elite towards education for the common people,” as Acharya states (1998: 230).

The fight for education is still in full swing today. In 1990, the protests from higher caste members against a recommendation of a commission to further increase the reservation quota for the backward communities³ led to the resignation of Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh in the end (Srivastava 2007). And the struggle for education regularly culminates in self-immolations of students from higher castes,⁴ accepting such a horrifying death to protest the educational policy and their reduced chances of getting a seat at an institution of higher education. Hunger strikes are another common tool for fighting the quota system. Other alarming signs are the periodic suicides committed by students failing to get a university seat⁵ or in case of exam failure,⁶ and the recent attempt to also include the elite IITs in the quota system has led to an outcry and is seen by parts of the society as an attack on the developmental chances of the whole country (Radhakrishnan 2007).

To summarize, the resignation of a prime minister, hunger strikes, and self-immolations of students are examples that show what dramatic relevance education has in Indian society and the enormous emotional intensity of this fight for education. The importance of education in the Indian context can also be shown on the individual level when, for example, education becomes within only one generation the most important criterion for the highly structured arranged marriage process

3 Similar to the U.S., India has implemented a quota system for educational institutions and government jobs to increase the number of so-called “Backward Communities” and lower-caste members in these organizations.

4 URL: <http://www.indiadaily.com/editorial/9177.asp>; self-immolation against quota for government jobs URL: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE7D71F39F93AA35753C1A966958260&n=Top%2fReference%2fTimes%20Topics%2fSubjects%2fA%2fAffirmative%20Action>.

5 URL: <http://cities.expressindia.com/fullstory.php?newsid=89330>.

6 URL: http://www.hindustantimes.com/news/5922_954254,0015002200000001.htm.

(Karve 1993). Education has replaced caste or even religion as the most powerful criterion for a suitable match (Dube 1997; Merz 2000; Clemens 2004). The “Cultural Production of the Educated Person” (see Levinson/Holland 1996) in the case of India is characterized by extremely positive connotations. Consequently, my assumption is that in addition to powerful economic considerations, the enormous influence of education on the construction of the self and the social identity and therefore on emotions towards oneself and the emotional embeddedness⁷ in this context is at least partly responsible for the emotional intensity of the described conflict as well. This will be discussed in the next section on the basis of an empirical study which focuses on an urban Indian context.

The Study

In 2003 I did a field study on the lay understanding of education and its influence on individual and social constructions in Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh in southern India. To gain a first impression of the topic and to obtain as much indigenous material as possible, short association interviews were first carried out by an indigenous scientist in the Telugu language. Through this approach we gained access to a very broad sample including army officers, vegetable vendors, housemaids, carpenters, plumbers, etc., who I would not have been able to interview due to language problems. Their ages varied between 18 and 83 years. Even at this early stage of research we found a tendency in individuals to use an *evolutional perspective* in their argumentation. In this view education not only helps individuals to develop their personality, but is also a pre-condition for becoming a valuable human being at all. The underlying assumption is that only education establishes the difference between humans and non-humans. Statements like the following are typical for these constructions:

- “If you are not educated, society will consider you [to be] an animal”.
- “I have to remain like this till I die, can’t see any betterment” (absence of education).
- (about uneducated persons) “lack entertainment, so they are producing [greater] numbers of children.”

Referring to the cyclical proceeding of Grounded Theory (Glaser/Strauss 1967), the findings of the association interviews in the first step have been integrated in the further design of the study. We used this information from the empirical field to continue developing the research question. In a second step, educational experts were interviewed (university professors, trainers, administrators of educational organizations, etc.) for two reasons: On the one hand, we were trying to gain as much information about education in India as possible, and on the other hand, we used

7 The term emotional embeddedness refers to the general concept of embeddedness developed by Harrison C. White (2008).

these expert interviews as a trial run for in-depth interviews in the field. It was not certain in advance whether a scientist from abroad (Germany) would be able to gain access to the field and to obtain meaningful data at all. Being aware of the *evolutional perspectives*, we integrated questions concerning this theme into these interviews.

The main study consists of 26 open, problem-orientated interviews with a sample of well-educated (degree-holding) urban, Indian middleclass people: employed (male and female), unemployed (male), and housewives. The meaning construction of education and an educated person, the attributions, associations, biographical hopes, ideas, or even “fantasims” (Boesch 1991) related to education have been analyzed (for more detail, see Clemens 2007). The understanding of “meaning” is guided by the sociology of knowledge (Schütz 1974) and accordingly conceptualized as a basic category for any human action and society. The concept of “semantics” by Niklas Luhmann (1998a, b) as a kind of *generalized meaning at a higher level* or a *store of possible themes of communication* available to a given social system adds a cultural perspective to the production of meaning and emotional embeddedness. The semantics is always structurally coupled with the society in which it has occurred, and accordingly the evolution of ideas is interrelated to the social evolution. Therefore, evolutions of ideas are not accidental but, if they are “stored” in the semantics at least for some time for further communication, part of the culture itself. Consequently, it can be assumed that the meaning of ideas like education and therefore the emotions attached to these ideas will vary between different societies or cultures (Clemens 2007a).

Additionally, one can assume that the attributions to education in a certain context and the associated emotions will deeply influence the educational aspirations of the people and their emotional involvement as well as their self concepts. There is a great difference between contexts in which the educational success of a child affects the honor of the whole family, as is the case in parts of Asia, for example (Kim 2004), and contexts in which failing in school is taken as a rather normal incident that can be assumed for parts of German society. Consequently, the construction of education and an educated person influences social observations and individual behavior in many aspects. Especially the creation of a positive self concept with all emotional consequences relies heavily on educational success in this perspective.

Findings

I will focus only on selected parts of the findings here. However, it must be stressed that the findings are not representative of “the” Indian context, which is non-existent in my view in any case, taking into consideration the cultural diversity of the sub-continent. The study aims to give hints and thought-provoking impulses about social developments without making any claim to be representative.

With regard to the figure of *Sanskritization* (Srinivas 1989) in the Indian literature, I called the founded pattern of argumentation *educationalization* (Clemens 2007). The argumentation follows the logic of perfectibility (Luhmann/Schorr 1979) through education. The interviews show that this includes the beliefs that only education can ensure: a) intellectual development, b) moral development, c) development of an intact, decent, and individualized personality, d) development of competencies like social behavior and communication competencies, as well as being helpful to other people. Conversely, an uneducated person is seen as a kind of unfinished, not fully developed human being, and the arguments found in the study suggest that he or she is seen at a level somewhere between a human being and an animal: “*He will be a total parasite,*” like an employed male stated in the study. This also implies to some extent that an educated person is a better person from a moral point of view, not just with respect to the pure competencies. Consequently, a satisfying conception of identity and a positive emotional self concept need to refer to a successful educational provider nowadays in this context. Education as reference for identity construction is also vital for the identity construction of the disadvantaged – the uneducated persons. Feelings of inferiority are the consequence. They see themselves as excluded from the process of civilization and the community of “full” human beings. Consequently, the struggle for education is also a struggle for social recognition as well as for positive emotional embeddedness in the private environment, which explains the great emotional involvement in this battle.

To see the explosive nature of these findings, one has to reflect not only on the low literacy rate, but also on the judgment that the interviewed persons only describe someone as an “educated person” if he or she is at least a “degree holder” (of a bachelor’s or master’s degree). There are no valid statistics, but only 5 to 6% of recent generations have been involved in higher education (Pinto 2002: 182), so that perhaps 1 to 5% of the population are degree holders in India. The rest are excluded from the category of “educated person” in the perspective pointed out by the study, and therefore from being a fully developed human being.

An analogy can be drawn between the dichotomy of educated/uneducated and an older one that is specific to the Indian context: the dichotomy of clean/unclean (Dumont 1976) that underlies the caste system. The three main characteristics of the dichotomy clean/unclean of (1) hierarchy, (2) social separation, and (3) division of labor are now more and more established and supported through education and no longer through caste. Consequently, there are indications that support the hypothesis that education is replacing caste in social structuring and as the leading social identification. I will refer to this change of the leading observation pattern regarding social recognition, self-construction, and emotional embeddedness as *educationalization*. The findings of Jeffrey et. al. (2004) in their ethnographic field research comparing educated Muslim and Dalits suggest a similar interpretation: “Education is a particularly attractive development idea because it offers marginalized groups a model of achieved status distinct from ascribed definitions of respect” (ibid.: 975; for a detailed differentiation of the historical shift from ascribed definitions of respect to those achieved in Europe, see especially Bourdieu 1987).

The reference to the concept of perfectibility through education and the differentiation between human beings and animals, between “valuable beings” and “parasites” clearly uses older meaning patterns and ways of thinking rooted in the caste ideology, in which the Dalits (untouchables) are excluded from the category of full human beings as well. At the same time, new meaning forms are established in regard to education, based on an older duality but better adapted to the demands of a modern society with functional differentiation instead of a stratified organization (Luhmann 1987), where respect and recognition is granted now because of personal achievement instead of bequeathed status. The semantics implies connectivity to more democratic and modern argumentations, as it empowers the individual as the creator of his or her own destiny. The status as educated person and accordingly as a “fully developed human being” is the merit of his or her personal efforts and has therefore an egalitarian legitimation. In return, these semantics may also suggest some responsibility of the individual in the case of failures by the educational provider. On the emotional level, this leads to feelings of superiority and inferiority.

The semantics of perfectibility through education is also used by the unemployed interviewees. Their argumentation is that although education has not helped them settle down in life and achieve economic success, they have improved their personality and only due to their education have they become decent, valuable individuals. The conflicts related to education get another connotation through observations like this. Being excluded from education, or having reduced chances for a seat at a university due to the quota system, is an elementary danger not only in regard to economic facts, but also for social recognition and identity and therefore for being accepted in society, as well as for a positive emotional embeddedness. This makes it understandable why the struggle for education and equality in access to it is hard-fought even to the death in India: It is not only an economic question – white-collar salaried employment has even been reduced due to economic liberalization in India –, but also a question of being accepted and valued as a full human being, also by oneself and of having positive emotions about oneself as a consequence.

The empirical findings show that both aspects (positive as well as negative emotions for oneself depending on whether one was able to become educated or not) can be found in the Indian context. Because the main sample contains only well-educated persons, I will focus on the positive aspects here. The individuals describe themselves as happy because of their education: “I myself am very happy that I have gained some knowledge and have be(come?) something,” “everybody can’t do that, only a few people can [...] So I feel very happy, good about what I’m doing.” Education makes them feel good and honorable: “[...] hundred percent, I have been polished by my education.” It has helped them to develop their personality and capabilities and to become a unique, valuable person. They are very proud of their achievements, regardless of any further benefits from this education (e.g., being able to support their families etc.): “I am educated, I can move around.” The argument that only educated persons are able to talk about their emotions is wide-

spread: “can express better [...] what you feel, in a narrative, in a step-by-step manner.”

Education as “Self-Commitment”

Because of these deep-rooted positive connotations and emotions regarding education in this Indian urban sample, one could even argue that education implies a “self-commitment” (Blasi 1986) for the individuals. I want to prove this in regard to three aspects:

1. *Autonomy of efforts to obtain one’s education*: If education implies “self-commitment” for the individuals, they should describe their own efforts to obtain education as voluntary. No pressure from outside (for example by the family) should be reported, but rather an intrinsic motivation to obtain education to improve one’s own personality should be expected.

2. *Need to explain failures or limitations in one’s educational career*: If the individuals apply the evolutionary conceptions of education to their own personality, they should try to obtain as much education as possible within the limits of their abilities. So if the educational career has stopped, this should not be regarded as a matter of course; rather, there should be an internal need for explanations.

3. *Personal enhancement of one’s own personality through education*: If education implies “self-commitment” for the individuals because they believe that education will make them more valuable persons, they should report some concrete positive impact of education on their own personality.

All three aspects are supported by the data. (1) Making an effort for one’s own education seems to be natural for the individuals; external outside pressure is not reported. All subjects describe their efforts as voluntary. In some cases, when problems in school are reported, individuals describe changes in their behavior towards attaining better achievement as a process of changing their personality initiated by themselves: “[...] in my school standard, I was very dull. So after that – after tenth, when I was struggling to get a seat at my college, then I realized what was – like what has happened to me. Then I [...] changed myself.”

(2) If for any reason the educational career has been broken off, the individuals in fact seem to feel a need to explain this. Most explanations for the limitations or failure are extrinsic; their causes were seen in the environment and personal circumstances, like in the examples of a housewife and an engineer: “I’ve just [a] B.A., and I’d have just done [an] M.A. or such. But if he [my husband] would have supported [me], I would have done [it], [...] but he didn’t. Because children were there and all [...] He didn’t give me chance.” – “I thought of continuing my studies [...], but [at the] same time I got a job in railways. So civil engineering – actually in India civil engineering people don’t get jobs [...] – job opportunit[ies are] very [sparse]. Getting a job is very important [...], so I thought of opting [in favor of] this, [of] going for a job.”

(3) Regarding the personal enhancement of one's own personality through education, very few deny that education has had an influence on their personality and consequently led to a positive emotional self concept. Most of the individuals argued that education is a powerful means of developing their own personality. Indeed they describe enhancement of their social competencies (e.g., communication skills), integrity (e.g., courage to stand up to social pressure), self-control (e.g., not drinking alcohol, controlling emotions and thoughts) and self-esteem (e.g., speaking confidently and being respected). Examples for the positive impact on social competencies, integrity, self-control, and self-esteem are: "Education [...] has given me [...] confidence. If I [was] not educated, [I'd] definitely [...] have been in a corner and weeping only." – "The empty mind is [the] devil's den. I take education as one of the tool[s] to avoid that [...], to keep myself busy." – "Education has helped me to live as a social animal [...] Suppose [...] I [was] uneducated, illiterate – I'd have been a coolie or laborer without culture drinking wildly with other people." – "How could you get so much [...] courage to [contradict] a person who is the highest person in the [government] (like he did)? That I [ascribe to] education." – „[...] because [of] the social setup of India, [if the] elder [brother – himself] is [unmarried, the] younger brother cannot get married. But my education made me to get a clearance [for] my younger brother, and I [...] kept avoid[ing] [...] getting married [myself], [...] and I forced my younger brother to get married. This kind of major decision in the social aspect, [...] [only] through education [...] could [I] make it out."

Only a few individuals of the sample have a rather ambivalent perspective regarding the influence of education on their personality and emotional embeddedness. They also agree that education has had a positive impact on their personality, but they report some negative influences too. It has made them more and more demanding and has reduced their willingness to adjust, as well as their flexibility in dealing with their lives. They feel superior to less educated persons. For them, education creates problems of inadequate adaptation. There are references to an imbalance between the person and the social environment. Because of their educational level, they argue, they are not willing to compromise or to adjust to certain circumstances. One Ph.D. holder gave an example for this ambivalent perspective and the problem of inadequate adaptation: "After [my] Ph.D., [...] I [certainly] could not compromise [...] [O]ne of the best events in my life is obtaining the degree, and [the greatest] curse [in] my [life] is that degree [...]."

One housewife speaks about wife/husband relations (both should be equally educated in her opinion), and she is better educated than her husband: "They get a superior/inferiority complex. She is getting higher [...] I didn't want that, but [...] I have to go through with it."

Conclusion

The concept of education as a source of diverse emotions attached to it is a striking example for cultural diversification in emotional experiences and the culturally-specific coupling of cognitive concepts with emotions. Taking into consideration the decrease in attraction and emotional attachment to education in many Western contexts – very clearly in parts of German society, for example – one can ask for the consequences of this missing emotional involvement. What does it mean when education is (no longer?) a hard-fought good in the West, apart from the bourgeois elite? Or what does it mean when education cannot mobilize positive emotions in a large part of the Western societies in the so-called knowledge society, bearing in mind that education is the entrance ticket to this society? Assuming that emotional involvement with education is a precondition for any ambition in that field, this development must be seen critical.

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