

# Education and the Constitution of the Contested Social-National: A Conceptual Excursus

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## Abstract

This article, with its main focus on the colonial period, highlights two interrelated aspects as far as education and the constitution of the social are concerned: (a) the centrality of the state in the constitution of the social through the instrumentality of education, and (b) a deep and continuing contestation of the intermeshing of the social and the national. Whereas colonial modern education offered nationalist elites an opportunity to conceive the social qua national, the same impetus gave rise to the very questioning of the national by the subaltern thinkers. While nationalist elites invariably drew upon the conceptual resources of the high culture emanating from Sanskritic intellectual traditions to forge and forage an oppositional discourse against colonial rule, the subaltern thinkers incessantly questioned the feigned inclusivity of the nationalist discourse owing to its lack of engagement with the social question of the day. By demonstrating the deep-seated fault lines of the nationalist imagination of India, they brought to the fore such uncomfortable questions that undermined the supposed historical roots of the Indian nation. The subaltern thinkers' privileging of the urgency of the social question, as against that of the nationalists' political one, is symptomatic of this cavernous conceptual divide, nay, competing imaginations of the

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national and the social. Viewed thus, the larger ideational movement from the colonial-modern to the national-modern has been implicated in the fractious conceptualisation of the social. And, modern education has been the seeding ground for these contending visions of the social, and by implication, the national. As a consequence, it would be a trifle premature to assert the fraying role of the state in the shaping of the social simply because the field of education appears hospitable to a range of non-state actors. By mainly drawing upon the works of Sudipto Kaviraj, this article is a preliminary attempt to engage with the conceptual landscapes of the colonial-modern and the social-national in its analysis of the state apparatus and practices of regulating the educational discourse in India.

**Keywords**

Colonialism, education, social, national, India

**Introduction: The Intimate Embrace of Colonial Education**

Education, as conceived and practised in contemporary India, is widely seen to be part and parcel of the gradual unfolding of colonial modernity. Intellectual historians have plausibly demonstrated how a new set of cognitive skills and systems that entered India with colonial culture acquired hegemonic legitimacy during British rule and continued to expand its reach and scope thereafter. Whatever be the processes of this transition, there is no doubt that traditional education was quickly replaced by Western-derived models, Western theories and techniques of knowledge production.<sup>1</sup> As Kaviraj (2005a: 133) rightly notes, ‘the colonial transformation of knowledges was an epistemic rupture on the vastest possible scale—one of the greatest known in history’. The implications of this rupture, indeed, did not remain confined to the domain of

<sup>1</sup> It is a different matter that, in the colonial setting, advancing systems of modern knowledge disgraced and rejected the existing forms of knowledge without subjecting them to a verificationist procedure for the confirmation or rejection of scientific ideas. Modern colonial knowledge rejected them wholesale, rather ideologically. In fact, the disqualification was not of discrete, atomistic propositions, but of the whole systems. Thus, the victory of the new rationalist science over its adversaries was done against its own methodological procedure, by breaking the rules it proclaimed as the fundamental rules of good scientific practice (Kaviraj 2005a; for a detailed history of the unfolding of colonial modern education in India, particularly elementary education, see Tschurennev 2019).

education alone, but acquired constitutive prowess of shaping our ideas of the national and the social. In this article, our focus is not on the fundamental differences of such epistemic transformation in a colony like India and the overall Western process of cognitive rationalisation (see Kaviraj 2005b, 2005c, 2010, 2023), but on its aftermath for the constitution of the social in India. In any case, as Kaviraj (2023: 498) puts it succinctly, ‘The social life world of power is profoundly altered by interventions of modernity and colonialism, making it impossible to reapply insights from indigenous systems of social knowledge by simply willing away the dominance of colonial epistemology’.

The rapidity and comprehensiveness with which *Pax Britannica* disqualified and stigmatised earlier knowledge systems (‘and not individual propositions, theories, fields’, as Kaviraj (2005a: 133) emphatically notes) rendered an entire cognitive universe (pre-existing, pre-modern or indigenous) illegitimate. It was a literal epistemological break. Notwithstanding the pace of the spread of Western knowledge systems in India during the colonial era, one message comes out strikingly: Europe is progressive and changing, whereas India is static and stagnant. It was this crude dualism that enabled the colonialists to look at India as a kind of living fossil bed of the European past (see also Cohn 1997: 78–79). In this sense, colonialism, as a form of knowledge, has shaped much of the modern history of colonised places and peoples. It went on to amass knowledge to enable itself ‘to classify, categorise, and bound the vast social world that was India so that it could be controlled’ (Cohn 1997: 5).<sup>2</sup> Dirks (in his foreword to Cohn 1997: ix–xii) has argued that colonial knowledge both enabled conquest and was produced by it. In certain important ways, knowledge was what colonialism was all about. In this

<sup>2</sup> There were different forms of what Cohn terms ‘investigative modalities’ which the British devised and employed to further their imperial interests:

An *investigative modality* includes the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes and encyclopaedias. (Cohn 1997: 5)

He identifies: (a) the historiographic modality, (b) the observational/travel modality, (c) the survey modality, (d) the enumerative modality, (e) the museological modality, and (f) the surveillance modality. They are important, as some of these modalities were transformed into sciences such as economics, ethnology, tropical medicine, comparative law or cartography (Cohn 1997: 5–11). Further, ‘these modalities and their outcomes can be seen as establishing a discursive formation, defining an epistemological space, creating a discourse and had the effect of converting Indian forms of knowledge into European objects’ (Cohn 1997: 21). Also, sociology would not have been possible without its grounding in the outcomes of such British investigative modalities.

view, colonialism was also, nay primarily, a cultural project of control. For him, the historical anthropology of the colonial state must not be separated from the historical anthropology of the modern nation-state in general, as there was a range of institutional contexts in which colonial knowledge and colonial power were implicated. Indeed, what Dirks calls 'the epistemological violence of the British rule' has left its imprint on the categories of contemporary thinking. Clearly, India constituted a vast field on which the British could impose their own version of history, theory, science and legitimate knowledge—the entire cognitive and institutional complex of what we designate as education today, with far-reaching consequences.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, the growing anti-colonial consciousness did not mean a pan-Indian clamour for the preservation of the indigenous knowledges. The fact that the new knowledges did not even have the slightest pretence of any continuity, or an elementary connection, with an extraordinarily long tradition of knowledge in the subcontinent did not appear to stir the emergent intelligentsia. Rather, their demand was for the scaling up of the dissemination and cultivation of the new modern Western knowledge. As Seth (2015) remarks, this appears evident in their overall indifference to any engagement with the earlier knowledge system, even as 'dead', forget about any attempt at cultivating them simultaneously as a parallel ongoing tradition. Indians accorded modern Western education, from its beginnings in the colonial period to the contemporary moment, an extraordinary importance. Despite the minuscule numbers involved, or meagre budgetary allocation, modern education has had a disproportionate discursive presence because of its newness and its imputed modernity. Modern education, thereby, presents the classic case of a phenomenon whose symbolic value outweighs its instrumental value, 'testifying to the special place it came to occupy in the Indian social imaginary' (Seth 2015: 1835). Elsewhere, Seth (2007) presents evidence of the extraordinarily dramatic and epochal invocation of this education by some of the most articulate members of the emergent

<sup>3</sup> At all events, modern education appeared as a distinct and peculiar institution in the sociocultural landscape of colonial India. Most importantly, it signalled for the first time that a single agency, the colonial state in this case, has appropriated the final authority to control the social reproduction of all classes of people, in the process, as Kumar (2000: 14) writes, 'rendering local truths, ways of life, cosmologies, epistemologies, logics and ethics progressively marginal'. The traces of past practices amidst colonially-introduced new practices of education should not obviate the fact that colonial education was centred round modern scientific knowledge and its cognitive styles. After all, colonial education did necessitate new institutional structures like schools/universities with highly specific internal rules of operation and personal conduct (see Kaviraj 2005c: 517).

intelligentsia. It was seen as an unparalleled experiment in world history in terms of its scale and scope. It attracted fulsome praise as one of the most momentous events the world has ever seen. Noticeably, this sense of 'wide-eyed wonder that modern Western education once evoked' (Seth 2007) has not disappeared. Instead, it has become an everyday aspect of the Indian social landscape, animating all our institutions, modes of instruction, and protocols of knowledge production and dissemination.<sup>4</sup> Aspiring groups and communities took to the new education with gusto, and they desired it only in English. Revealingly, they frowned upon their colonial masters whenever the latter feebly talked about providing new knowledge in Indian vernaculars.

Yet, there is nothing surprising about this wholesale acceptance of Western education, for it opened up (or at least had the potential and promise to do so) an additional pathway to employment and status, as well as a new source of privilege and power. Sociologically speaking, another mode of status differentiation came into being alongside the ones associated with the older indigenous social order. Whereas almost all Indians continued to inhabit their older world, and remained well-versed to operate with and within its codes, they now had access to the second world (made possible through modern education), which carried elements of exclusivity. An understanding of the mutuality of education and the constitution of the social necessarily means an acknowledgement of this historical braiding together of these two social worlds, the nature and character of their interpenetration and their continuing implications for our times.<sup>5</sup>

This article, with its main focus on the colonial period, highlights two interrelated aspects, as far as education and the constitution of the social are concerned: (a) the centrality of the state in the constitution of the social through the instrumentality of education, and (b) a deep and continuing contestation of the intermeshing of the social and the national. Whereas colonial modern education offered nationalist elites an opportunity to conceive the social qua national, the same

<sup>4</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), an early interpreter of Indian arts and culture, appears to be highly critical of the general celebration of Western education. He not only questioned literacy and modern education as unqualified goods but also thought of modern education as a destroyer of peoples' memories and cultures. He remained sceptical of what he called 'the proselytizing fury' (1945: 20) towards modern education. According to him (1945: 20), 'systems of education should be extensions of the cultures of peoples concerned' rather than the imposition of one culture over another.

<sup>5</sup> As Seth (2015) illustrates, these two worlds come together in the usual matrimonial advertisements, where traditional criteria of match-making (caste, family, wealth and so on) sit easily with the search for a convent-educated bride/well-educated groom.

impetus gave rise to the very questioning of the national by the subaltern thinkers. While nationalist elites invariably drew upon the conceptual resources of the high culture emanating from Sanskrit intellectual traditions to forge and forage an oppositional discourse against the colonial rule, the subaltern thinkers incessantly questioned the feigned inclusivity of the nationalist discourse owing to its lack of engagement with the social question of the day. By demonstrating the deep-seated fault lines of the nationalist imagination of India, they brought to the fore such uncomfortable questions that undermined the supposed historical roots of the Indian nation. The subaltern thinkers' privileging of the urgency of the social question, as against that of the nationalists' political one, is symptomatic of this cavernous conceptual divide, nay, competing imaginations of the national and the social. Viewed thus, the larger ideational movement from the colonial-modern to the national-modern has been implicated in the fractious conceptualisation of the social. And, modern education has been the seeding ground for these contending visions of the social, and by implication, the national. As a consequence, it would be a trifle premature to assert the fraying role of the state in the shaping of the social simply because the field of education appears hospitable to a range of non-state actors. By drawing mainly upon the works of Sudipto Kaviraj, this article is a preliminary attempt to engage with the conceptual landscapes of the colonial-modern and the social-national (used interchangeably with the expression national-social depending on the context and intended emphasis) in its analysis of the state apparatus and practices of regulating the educational discourse in India.

## **The Allure of the Modern**

We know from the work of historians of education that colonial education policy was revised in 1854 to partially encourage modern education in vernaculars through the grant-in-aid system. However, it did not generate much enthusiasm among the colonised subjects. The prevailing sentiments favoured more and more schools imparting education in English rather than in vernaculars. It would be foolhardy to dismiss this collective urge for English education through a crude sociology of interests: that aspiring Indians valued Western education in English merely to join the expanding public employment at whatever rungs of the colonial bureaucratic ladder. In fact, it also stemmed from the importance that it acquired in the nationalist imagination. Amidst the early nationalist rhetoric of an alien and incompatible culture symbolised by the colonial

education in India, there was an equally all-pervasive awe for the British, and in particular, their mastery of modern scientific knowledge. The latter was frequently seen as the bedrock of the British imperial success in India, as elsewhere. In other words, there was this tacit acceptance that the British prosperity and power emanated from their access to a type of knowledge that modern education endowed them with, something that Indians lacked sorely to begin with. This probably explains the reverence that the Western education commanded from its very beginnings among the middle classes, including Indian nationalists. Equally, it explains the general reluctance of the middle classes towards the establishment of vernacular schools. Western knowledge in English had so much valence that the public-spirited Indians were only interested in contributing to the establishment of English schools and would ‘not lift a finger to aid in the establishment of a Vernacular School’, as if their motto were ‘they will be taught English or not taught at all’ (Seth 2015: 1361).

No wonder, homages to Western education were staple fare of nationalist rhetoric in its early moderate phase. The annual sessions of the Indian National Congress were often occasions for encomiums to British rule and the new education it had so generously provided. The chief misgiving expressed was that not enough of it was being provided, and the Congress regularly urged the colonial government to provide more. As Seth (2015: 1561) writes, ‘education was desired, then, because a class was emerging that was partly defined by its possession of this new good, one that promised to secure access to the new colonial civil society and the possibilities and privileges afforded by it’. According to him, an equally important factor, though, was the general nationalist consensus around the superiority of modern knowledge. In this reading, India squarely needed modern knowledge for its national regeneration, and to realise its goals of building a powerful and modern nation through intermediate self-government and full independence later.

True, by the late nineteenth century, one comes across the idea of national education. Some nationalists started critiquing colonial Western education for its cultural incompatibility with the life world of its recipients. They started listing its pernicious effects on the colonised society and culture. For example, Lala Lajpat Rai, a well-known Congress leader of the early twentieth century, found the existing system of Western education as ‘emasculating and enervating ... denationalising and degrading’, while Har Dayal, his contemporary Hindu revolutionary and rationalist, referred to ‘the utter wreck of national self-respect which has followed the establishment of the British schools and colleges in India’ (cited in Seth 2015: 1362). And yet, all these criticisms and

complaints did not diminish the allure of colonial education. With all their criticisms, nationalists (with few exceptions apart) did not advocate a return to the indigenous education, whatever it meant. At most, they argued for a different kind of modern education, albeit with Indian values thrown in. Their primary concerns revolved around (a) the growing chasm between the masses and the educated classes, and (b) its utter neglect of India's past culture, traditions, philosophy, arts, learning and history, leading to a kind of weak patriotism. For example, the 1938 annual session of the Indian National Congress found the objectives of the then-existing system of education in India to be anti-national and anti-social (Seth 2015: 1363).

Does the nationalist critique of the colonial system of education in India then connote a singular refusal of Western modernity? Or, does it reveal a conscious appropriation of colonial education by the nationalist intelligentsia—a shift from colonial-modern to the national-modern in the language of the present article?<sup>6</sup> At the larger discursive level, Western education symbolised a new world, a desirable world for the colonised as well. It was yearned for not only because it assured one of a better place in the existing and familiar world but also because of its assurance of felicity to operate in a differently coded world with fundamentally different organising principles, values and emancipatory (howsoever limited) possibilities. It is not for nothing that the leaders of the depressed classes embraced this education without much nationalist qualm. To extend the arguments put forth by the historian Sanjay Seth, it was not simply the dynamic between the instrumental and the symbolic that explains the allure of Western education. Nor was it pre-eminently

<sup>6</sup> According to Sudipta Kaviraj (2010: 106), the metamorphosis of anti-colonial consciousness into the nationalist one witnessed the articulation of a new set of questions. It was no longer a dichotomous question of simple acceptance or rejection of the colonial rule. He writes: ...Significantly, it was appreciated that the major question was not one involving the relation between British colonialism and India, but rather one of fashioning an adequate theoretical response to the historical phenomenon of modernity. Accordingly, the focus of historical reflection would shift from the British Empire to the civilisation of modernity as a whole. And this critique of modernity coincided with a self-understanding that became eventually nationalist in the full sense of the term. Further, while examining the relation between nationalist thinking and the rationalist discourse of modernity, he (2010: 198) avers:

By introducing modernity in their intellectual world, doing much institutional change in its name and making modernity the last argument in its own justification, colonial education forced these people to take up considered stances about the whole project of enlightenment modernity. It is its partial acceptance of a modern theoretical view of the world, especially enlightenment's social epistemics, which demarcates this stage of nationalist thought from earlier less historically conscious patriotism against English 'invaders'.

linked to the new nationalist social imaginary envisaging India as a modern and powerful nation-state. Its promise of sidelining, if not undermining, the existing social hierarchies and fault lines with new notions of human dignity, rights and social justice was particularly attractive to the bottom rungs of the Hindu social order and similar other historically disadvantaged groups. Its power to generate new idioms of social differentiation in a stultifying hierarchical society was no less a source of its perennial embrace. Sure enough, its, as yet, untested prowess in everyday struggles for social identity and social position in a system where opportunities for upward mobility were, by and large, ritually ordained made it particularly appealing for lower caste groups and communities. And, one is not merely here referring to the numerous binaries that modern education necessarily gave rise to: modern/traditional, urban/rural, cultivated-genteel/unsophisticated-rustic. These binaries, at least in theory, offered those located on their wrong side the possibility to shift to their right side through the acquisition of education. Even otherwise, to the extent modern education is seen as one of the most important signs or markers of a modern/developed/urban/genteel rather than traditional/backward/rural/rough identity, it did unsettle some of the elements of the older hierarchical social world. For example, it is important to ponder as to why, in the aftermath of modern education, the possessors of classical languages and knowledge traditions (somehow not seen as modern) lost their earlier prestige and social esteem without much ado.<sup>7</sup> Viewed thus, education was not just the signifier of white man's colonial world; it was the very embodiment of the Indian modern, notwithstanding the persistent and the present cacophony around Indian systems of knowledge. In a way, the Indian nation-state, since 1947, has merely expanded our aspirations around this Indian-modern, at least aspirationally if not substantially (see, e.g., Advani 2009; Chopra and Jeffrey 2005; Srivastava 1998; Tukdeo 2019). As it stands today, a growing number of Indians already experience this modern, while others are jostling in the waiting room to catch the modern bus as and when it comes to them by their good luck, political assertions, state policies or a combination thereof.<sup>8</sup> In a manner of speaking, education is the pre-eminent field exemplifying 'the story of modernity as inextricably linked to the story of colonialism' (Kaviraj 2010: 10). It is here that colonial modernity succeeded in

<sup>7</sup> The case of Sanskrit pandits is illustrative of this phenomenon (see, e.g., Dalmia 1996). Hatcher (2005: 699) writes of Bengal Pandits '...by the latter half of the nineteenth century, the pandit was increasingly viewed as unreliable, irrelevant, reactionary, or ridiculous (or any combination thereof)'.

<sup>8</sup> This section heavily draws upon Seth (2015).

decimating the very logic of pre-existing structures of knowledge production and dissemination, and through their ideological undermining anchored its own inherent superiority as part of the societal common sense. This is why, as Kaviraj (2010: 18) writes, ‘the question of education, the instrumentality through which the common sense of a society is created, was of such central concern to British colonial authority’.

## The National and the Social: Competing Primacies

Be that as it may, colonial education was a significant exogenous trigger for the emergent idea of India. Indeed, there was an efflorescence of competing ideas of India.<sup>9</sup> Historians of nationalism have debated endlessly about the derivative character of many strands of the emergent nationalist thought in India. Some strands of these thoughts have been claimed to be successful in reversing the Orientalist gaze and thereby being epistemologically autonomous of the West (Kaviraj 2010). However, what interests us here is the contending vision of the social as discerned in these irreconcilable understandings of the national against the backdrop of the historical experience of colonial modernity. Of necessity, any vision of the national is predicated upon a particular construction of the social that the national is going to encompass. Broadly speaking, this construction of the social has to reveal its stance vis-à-vis (a) the existing configuration of the social, and (b) its place in the futuristic vision of the national. In this context, it is instructive to bring in the non-Brahminical thinking and its relation with the nationalist thinking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, Guru (2011: 36) finds an alternative, rather oppositional, imagination of India in the non-Brahminical thinking as articulated by Phule and Ambedkar. According to him, Ambedkar’s imagination of India as ‘bahishkrut Bharat’ (ostracised India) is a particular configuration of the social that sits uncomfortably with, and goes beyond, what he terms ‘derivative’ and ‘desi’ discourses of India.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Kaviraj (2010: 13) has consistently reminded us that there was nothing historically inevitable about the ultimate triumph of the Nehruvian idea of India privileging a new conceptual language wherein the modern nation-state is accorded the singular legitimacy of acting ‘on behalf of the society as a whole’. Likewise, one can think of the idea of ‘village India’ or ‘Ram Rajya’ of M. K. Gandhi, the idea of ‘father India’ and ‘holy India’ of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the Mother India of the Bengali nationalist imagination, the idea of Baliraja-ruled India of Jyotiba Phule, and the idea of *Prabuddha Bharat* (enlightened India) of Babasaheb Ambedkar (Guru 2011).

Given the adversarial intellectual conditions prevalent among low caste groups, their thinkers<sup>10</sup> did not have access to, or could not fall back on, the intellectual-cultural resources available to savarna nationalists. Put differently, the intellectual practices of the Shudra-Atishudra remained experientially circumscribed and spatially localised. Evidently, the thinkers from these groups fail to fit into the definitional framework of hegemonic nationalism and exist in the beyond and exude difference both in terms of style and substance. While challenging the inherent inequalities of the nationalist thought, the non-Brahminical discourse very often appears negative or grotesque to the nationalist elites. Whereas Indian nationalism articulated itself through the canonised language of self-rule, swadeshi, home rule and swarajya, the subaltern thought from the margins put forth its deep scepticism towards the former's historical claims, conceptual stability and universal validity. In other words, the subaltern thought kept nagging the overarching nationalist discourse by putting forth the social question to its self-evidently political project of Independence from the colonial rule.

In Guru's reading, the non-Brahminical discourse suggests the possibility of a parallel problematic of nationalist thought, and thereby a defiantly constructed social.<sup>11</sup> Thinkers like Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar, despite the historical odds stacked against them, manage to force collective reflection on issues which have been embarrassing to the nationalist ideologues; the place of untouchables in Hindu society being a case in point. Through the employment of the negative language, these subaltern thinkers sought to undercut the significance of the canonised language of the national-social as the only legitimate form of expression. Their negative vocabulary seeks to challenge the mechanical language of unity as proposed by the nationalist thinkers, thus questioning the make-believe world of a homogeneous social. They puncture the nationalist political urgency to confront the imperial first. For example, the language of political freedom overshadowed the concept of social freedom in the nationalist thought. However, the nationalist thought in India was forced to engage with the Dalit question owing to the efforts of thinkers like Ambedkar. In fact, Ambedkar's tract *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) can very well be read as a manifesto of the most stringent assertion of

<sup>10</sup> This article uses subaltern, non-Brahminical, Shudra-Atishudra, low-caste interchangeably in this context.

<sup>11</sup> For Guru, 'the nationalistic problematic provides a negative reference point that triggers off a parallel problematic. Thus, the parallel problematic seeks to bring into the fore front questions relating to normative concerns like justice, equality and dignity that get buried in the backyard of nation question' (2011: 41).

the social against the then prevalent consensus around the national. A close reading of the text reaffirms Ambedkar's conceptualising of the social as encompassing both the political and the economic. While concluding his non-delivered address, he unequivocally puts the social on a much higher pedestal than the political: 'But it [annihilation of caste] is more important than Swaraj' and without addressing the social 'Swaraj for Hindus may turn out to be only a step towards slavery' (1936: 40). Likewise, by invoking Ferdinand Lassalle, the friend and co-worker of Karl Marx, he asserts that the makers of political constitutions must take account of social forces and that political constitutions have value and permanence only when they accurately express those conditions of forces which exist in practice within a society. Thus, the very moral order of the nation is brought face to face with the reproduction of social ghettos through a new conceptual vocabulary of discrimination, humiliation and segregation. Concepts like inequality and injustice are given as much valence as political freedom and social harmony. In a nutshell, the nationalist vision gets demonstrated as inherently incomplete, as Mother India appears to have discarded a large number of her historically disadvantaged children. It hesitates to drumbeat of India as an epitome of glory and tolerance. It challenges the invisible conflation of the twice-born castes and the nation, as if the former were the constitutive core of modern India.

More importantly, they bring in the alternative affirmative language of self-respect and dignity into public discourse. They are not apologetic about their modernist language for the purpose of political mobilisation. They have fewer qualms about demonstrating their distance from (autonomy of) Western modernist paradigms. It is well known that Ambedkar's thought entails modern vocabulary such as equality, justice, self-respect and dignity. More brusquely, it asks for a substantive treatment of the question of caste. While invoking caste to interrogate the local configuration of power (the very constitution of the Hindu social), it frequently, and unashamedly, borrows from Western thought facilitated through colonial education. Also, it unabashedly seeks the intervention of the colonial state in the social domain. Phule's Memorandum to Hunter Commission (1882) exemplifies this fractious social very well.

Phule (1882)<sup>12</sup> shows his clear opposition to what he considers to be a rather disproportionate allocation of public funds to higher education, as the *latter* 'tended ignorance to educate Brahmins and the higher classes only, and to leave the masses wallowing in and poverty'. He rants against

<sup>12</sup> All the citations of Phule (1882) are from the Memorandum to the Hunter Commission, with no clearly discernible page numbers.

‘the virtual monopoly of all the higher offices by Brahmins’<sup>13</sup> and pleads for narrowing ‘this monopoly day by day so as to allow a sprinkling of the other castes, to get into the public services’. He invokes the glory of the British Empire for emancipating ‘my Shudra brethren from the trammels of bondage which the Brahmins have woven around them like the coils of a serpent’. To contain Brahmin thralldom over ‘my Shudra brethren’, he proclaims: ‘Let there be schools for the Shudras in every village; but away with all Brahmin school-masters!’ More importantly, Phule’s particular vision of the national-social makes him assert:

The Shudras are the life and sinews of the country, and it is to them alone, and not to the Brahmins, that Government must ever look to tide over their difficulties, financial as well as political. If the hearts and minds of the Shudras are made happy and content, the British Government need have no fear for their loyalty in the future.

Noticeably, there is the offer of Shudra loyalty to the British Government in lieu of the latter’s assurance of education to the former. His Memorandum makes a special case for education to the Mahars, Mangs and other lower classes, as they were practically excluded from all schools owing to caste prejudices and were not allowed to sit with the children of higher castes. He calls for special schools for these groups. Further, Phule adds, ‘the teachers now employed in the primary schools are almost all Brahmins’... ‘[A]nd their attainments also very meagre. But as a rule they are all unpractical men, and the boys who learn under them generally imbibe inactive habits and try to obtain service, to the avoidance of their hereditary or other hardy or independent professions’. Quite apart from his advocacy for the recruitment of primary teachers from among the cultivating classes, ‘who will be able to mix freely with them and understand their wants and wishes much better than a Brahmin teacher who generally holds himself aloof under religious prejudices’, Phule’s is an open acknowledgement of the primacy of the fractious social over the all-encompassing national of caste Hindus. Moreover, there is a categorical urge for ‘all the fostering care and attention’ to be bestowed on education by the Government.

<sup>13</sup> One can see consistency in this idea of Brahminical dominance across generations of subaltern thinkers. For example, Ambedkar (1936: 33) avers: You may think it a pity that the intellectual class in India is simply another name for the Brahmin caste. You may regret that the two are one; that the existence of the intellectual class should be bound up with one single caste; that this intellectual class should share the interest and the aspirations of that Brahmin caste, and should be a class which has regarded itself as the custodian of the interest of that caste, rather than of the interests of the country.

## Conclusion: The Political and the Social

Whereas colonial modern education offered nationalist elites an opportunity to conceive the social *qua* national, the same impetus gave rise to the very questioning of the national-social by the subaltern thinkers. Expectedly, nationalist elites invariably drew upon the conceptual resources of high culture emanating from Sanskritic traditions to forge and forage an oppositional discourse against the colonial rule (see, e.g., Acharya 1994; Crook 1996; Thakur and Bhattacharjee 2013). In this task, they were surely aided by Orientalist scholarship, which had helped resurrect a golden civilisational past for the country.<sup>14</sup> Through powerful political mobilisation, they could garner support for a discourse of India, which was largely a somnolent nation coming to terms with its delayed historical awakening. By contrast, the subaltern discourse was not only unapologetic in acknowledging the, howsoever limited, liberatory role of the colonial state but was also critical of the feigned inclusivity of the nationalist discourse. By demonstrating the deep-seated fault lines of the nationalist imagination of India, they brought to the fore such uncomfortable questions that undermined the supposed historical roots of the Indian nation. The subaltern thinkers' privileging of the urgency of the social question as against that of the nationalists' political one is symptomatic of this deeper conceptual divide, nay, competing imaginations of the nation. Arguably, despite colonial conditions, the subaltern thinkers appear concerned about creating what (Giroux 1987: 108) calls 'democratic public spheres ... where students learn the knowledge and skills of citizenship within forms of solidarity that provide the basis for reconstituting emancipatory forms of community life'.

More importantly, these competing visions of the social remain deeply anchored in what Kaviraj (2005b: 295) terms 'Indian society's strange enchantment with the modern state'. The modern state emerges as the ultimate arbiter of the emergent social. It is the final addressee for one and all. In fact, much of the resentment with the subaltern thinkers is

<sup>14</sup> It is well-known that the specific representation of the Orient was not unrelated to the self-representation of the modern West; indeed, it was the precondition... the predominant but inexplicit purpose of Orientalist knowledge was to reinforce an idea of the West to itself. Nor was it unconnected with colonial political enterprise... the plausibility of the self-representation of Western modernity crucially depended on the convincing contrastive representation of the Orient. Even as Orientalist knowledge opened a door towards the textual corpus of civilisations like India, in subtle, hardly noticed ways, it inculcated an attitude of condescension towards their cultures or texts. However, the larger debate surrounding Orientalist knowledge as an erroneous mode of representation is beyond the scope of the present discussion (see Kaviraj 2023: 488–490).

linked to the fact of their frequent appeal to the colonial state for addressing such demands, which nationalists thought to have belonged to the domain of the national state. Noticeably, it is not the appeal to the state as such which was being seen as illegitimate, but it was the appeal to the colonial state, which was regarded as inopportune. Even today, the state is called upon to act all the time and for all kinds of people. It is expected to be the most impartial custodian of ideas of justice, equality and dignity. It is frequently urged upon to meet all kinds of expectations of ordinary citizens. It remains for them the most tangible entity, the very fulcrum of their aspirations. To quote Kaviraj (2005b): 'it is capable of knowing everything, doing everything, removing all obstacles, punishing wrongs, showing mercy, averting evil; it is expected to be nearly omniscient and omnipotent'. This transformation in the very idea of the state in India, nay, the moral idea of the modern state, as the only repository of people's identity, imparts to it immense discursive power as well. Given our astonishing attachment to the very idea of the state, it would not be off the mark to argue that it is the state which constitutes the social, or at least, creates conditions for contestation around the very idea of the social, education, howsoever important, being one of the instrumentalities in its arsenal.

Arguably, education has been a pre-eminent site where one can observe the workings of the triadic relationship between the social, the national and the state. The Indian state, particularly in the post-Independence period, has had to consistently address this challenge of the national versus the social through its public policy interventions. In the process, both the national and the social have acquired new contents owing to their incessant discursive contestations dating back to colonial times. Very often, the Indian state, as the embodiment of the national, has attempted to embrace the inherent capaciousness of the social as elaborated by thinkers like Phule and Ambedkar. While this debate around the national/social has a historicity of its own, its echo can be heard in the contemporary debates on education in India, particularly in the aftermath of the avowed goal of reviving the glories of the Indian knowledge systems in the New Education Policy 2020.

In a different way, the historical contestation around the national/social brings to the fore the intermeshing of caste privileges and the making of merit, especially in Indian higher education. While upper caste groups were enthusiastically responding to colonial higher education, thinkers like Phule were trying to appeal for the alteration of these new privileges through concerted focus on elementary education to address the lack of dignity for the most oppressed members of the population, marked as they were by hunger, inequities and social injustice.

In this reading, policy priority to higher education can be seen as clearly exemplifying the national as against the social imaginary, which, from its early inception, emphasised the greater need for basic and elementary education.

Modern English education, once democratised, at least has the potential to address these inequities of quotidian life requiring immediate remedies. Viewed thus, the terms of the debate on Western education get refracted into a broader debate between the claims and counter-claims of the social and the national imaginary as they portray contesting visions of *Indian* people. And as mentioned earlier, thinkers on both sides of the debate look up to the state as the final arbiter to decide which imaginary would be of greater valence and therefore would be accorded greater priority. In this sense, colonial education, besides its inherent epistemic violence, becomes a generative force for re-imagining both the national and the social. We do not have to remind ourselves of the tenacity of the national imaginary with its continuing discursive appeals to the timeless Indic tradition as the fountainhead of knowledge, expertise and wisdom. At the same time, we are also witnesses to political contestations and ideological counter-claims of the need for creating structures of justice and equity by the modern Indian state so that an inclusive social ends up writing the foundational edifice of the national. Be that as it may, these contestations inhere ultimately in the institutions of modern education, and their fundamental appeals rest ultimately with the modern Indian state. What is certain, though, is that many new articulations of communities and identities in India are bound to pass through these contestations and through the ever-evolving and ever-changing interstices of the national and the social. As elsewhere, in the field of education too, the past is as much part of the present.

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