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Pro-poor? Class, gender, power, and authority in faith-based education in Maharashtra, India

Martin Rew and Zara Bhatewara

Religious and secular ideologies are hotly debated within Indian educational circles, partly in response to neo-liberal trends in educational provision, which have encouraged non-state providers, including religious organisations, to increase their involvement. The paper explores similarities and differences between educational providers affiliated with different faith traditions in Maharashtra, with respect to their educational activities and the extent to which their ethos and practices are pro-poor. Drawing on six illustrative case studies of Hindu, Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist religious education providers, it concludes that although all have a stated commitment to enhancing the welfare of the poor, the ways that this is expressed in their educational activities are strongly influenced not only by their religious ideology but also by their class and gender positions.

Pro-pauvres ? Classe, genre, pouvoir et autorité dans l’éducation à base religieuse dans le Maharashtra, en Inde

Les idéologies religieuses et laïques font l’objet de débats animés dans le milieu de l’éducation indien, en partie en réponse aux tendances néolibérales dans la prestation de services d’éducation, qui ont encouragé des prestataires non étatiques, y compris les organisations religieuses, à accroître leur participation. Cet article examine les similitudes et les différences entre prestataires de services d’éducation affiliés à différentes traditions religieuses dans le Maharashtra, pour ce qui concerne leurs activités d’éducation et la mesure dans laquelle leur philosophie et leurs pratiques sont pro-pauvres. En s’inspirant de six études de cas illustratives de prestataires de services d’éducation religieux hindous, chrétiens, islamiques et bouddhistes, il conclut que, s’ils ont tous un engagement commun à améliorer le bien-être des pauvres, les manières dont cela est exprimé dans leurs activités d’éducation sont fortement influencées non seulement par leur idéologie religieuse, mais aussi par leurs positions sur le plan de la classe et du genre.

Em prol dos pobres? Classe, gênero, poder e autoridade na educação baseada na fé em Maharashtra, Índia

Ideologias religiosas e seculares são calorosamente debatidas dentro dos círculos educacionais indianos, em parte devido a tendências neoliberais na provisão educacional, que têm incentivado provedores não-estatais, inclusive organizações religiosas, a aumentar seu envolvimento. O artigo explora as semelhanças e diferenças entre provedores educacionais afiliados...
¿A favor de los pobres? Clase, género, poder y autoridad en la educación religiosa en Maharashtra, India

En India, en el ámbito educativo se han producido acalorados debates sobre las ideologías religiosas y laicas, en parte como respuesta a las tendencias neoliberales que han impulsado la participación de entes no gubernamentales, incluyendo las organizaciones religiosas, en la educación. Este ensayo analiza las similitudes y diferencias entre escuelas particulares afiliadas a varias religiones en Maharashtra. Examina sus actividades educativas y si su ética normativa y sus prácticas favorecen a los pobres. El ensayo recurre a seis ilustrativos estudios de caso de escuelas hindúes, cristianas, islámicas y budistas y concluye que, si bien todas afirman explícitamente querer mejorar el bienestar de los pobres, la ideología religiosa y las ideas sobre clase y género influyen en cómo cumplen con este compromiso a través de la educación.

KEY WORDS: Gender and diversity; Social sector – education; South Asia

Introduction

Current discussion around educational provision in India has become a key arena in which the future of religious and secular ideologies is debated. This paper is concerned with exploring that debate through the lens of faith-based education in Maharashtra. The paper concentrates on identifying and explaining similarities and differences between educational providers associated with different faith traditions, with respect to the educational activities they undertake, their contribution to reinforcing or challenging aspects of social exclusion, and the extent to which their ethos and activities are pro-poor. The case study organisations are associated with the main faith traditions in Maharashtra – Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity – and all publicly express a welfare ethos and a remit to work with ‘the poor’. A deliberately diverse set of organisations was selected, and the case studies should of course be seen as illustrative rather than representative of all faith-based educational providers.

Opinion is divided over the degree to which improved access to education for disadvantaged groups can, on its own, reduce social inequality. This paper is only concerned with a small part of this debate. At present, the relationships between education, caste, class, and gender in India are mainly understood in terms of social exclusion, emphasising the relational and multi-dimensional nature of poverty as arising from ‘unemployment, [inadequate] access to housing, minimal income and social contacts, [and a] lack of citizenship and democratic rights’ (Laderchi et al. 2003: 258). What is less clear is whether and how these bases for exclusion are reproduced or challenged within the educational system itself. While religious education providers generally claim altruistic motives and a principled commitment to improving welfare and reaching the poor, little is known about how their values and beliefs influence their educational activities. In an attempt to address this information gap, the analysis that follows seeks first to identify the stated motivations, principles, and practices of the selected faith-based education providers,
and second to assess whether and how these serve to reproduce, reinforce, or challenge the attitudes and practices that underlie various dimensions of social inequality.

The paper is split into four sections. The first provides a brief overview of the Indian and Maharashtrian educational context, while the second explains the case study methodology that was adopted and provides a brief sketch of each of the organisations studied. In the third, most substantial, part of the paper the organisational case studies are presented, each focusing on three key elements. First, we consider the ways in which institutional power, authority, and leadership is framed and organised. This has differing implications for organisational values and practices, and in particular for the scope for members or beneficiaries to have a say in the design and implementation of the organisations’ programmes. Second, we consider where the organisations lie on a spectrum from providing charity to encouraging empowerment, by analysing how they conceptualise their motivation to serve. While ‘serving the needy’ is a common practice amongst religious groups, this often takes the form of handouts rather than enabling the poor to take control of their own lives, and is generally indicative of a class and/or caste-based ideology. Finally, we analyse each organisation’s attitude to gender equality, a key development dimension, for which religious organisations are frequently criticised. The concluding section of the paper aims to clarify the arguments and to draw some preliminary inferences about the role of faith-based education in Maharashtra’s development process.

The Indian and Maharashtrian educational context

In Maharashtra, as elsewhere in India, competition over education has intensified since the introduction of the Indian government’s 1986 National Policy on Education (NPE). The policy aimed to ensure that all children aged six to 14 can gain free access to elementary education, and was later affirmed in the 2002 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, which made education ‘a fundamental right’ (GoI 2010). After some delay, the 11th ‘Five Year Plan’ (2007–12) also committed the central government to achieving universal secondary education (11–18 years) by 2017.

Types of schooling range from state-run regional language medium schools, through private fee-paying schools, to more informal NGO-run schools offering forms of ‘alternative’ education. This range includes a large number of faith-affiliated schools and educational organisations, mainly within the private sector. With the rise of interest in private providers, including religious organisations, it is important to understand these organisations and the education they provide, especially as 20 per cent of enrolled children aged seven to 10 (Pratham 2006) and 18 per cent of those in secondary education (World Bank 2003) are estimated to be attending private schools.

Despite their important role, neither the quantitative nor the qualitative contribution of Indian private schools is well documented. Studies have revealed gender and caste inequities in enrolment in private schools, with higher caste children and boys more likely to be enrolled in fee-paying institutions (Kumar et al. 2005). This reflects the wider education system, which exhibits extreme disparities in enrolment by caste and economic standing (which of course, tend to go together) (cf. World Bank 2002, 2003). The gender gap in enrolment is also substantial across castes and classes (GoI 2007), with the lowest gross enrolment rate that of Scheduled Tribe girls at only 22 per cent. The available studies reveal a general picture of caste, class, and gender inequality, but they do not tell the whole story. This paper considers in more detail what happens when children (and indeed adults) are enrolled in faith-based learning institutions: who are they, what are they taught, and to what extent is their education empowering, in particular for women?
Methodology and the case study organisations

The research was conducted in Maharashtra’s two biggest cities, Mumbai and Pune. It is based on qualitative case studies of six religious organisations engaged in various types of educational provision, using semi-structured interviews with staff and supporters of the organisations and some participant observation, to ascertain how they conceptualise poverty and inequality and how these views reflect the religious ethos of the institution. The research included observation of schools’ and organisations’ routines, analysis of organisational literature and textbooks, as well as in-depth interviews with staff and senior management.

The depth of the case studies varies. We concentrated on a comparison of two organisations associated with the dominant Hindu religion, but also sought insights into educational provision by other major religious groups in Maharashtra. The information presented here facilitates a general comparison of these institutions’ approaches to education and pro-poor development. The data enable some preliminary conclusions to be drawn with regard to whether, and if so in which contexts, Maharashtrian faith-based education can reasonably be considered ‘pro-poor’.

The most detailed of our case studies were in Pune: Sadhu Vaswani Mission (SVM) and the Mata Amritanandamayi Math (MA Math) are prominent Hindu organisations, both of which have significant guru figures as their spiritual leaders (see also Bradley 2010, 2011; Bradley and Ramsay 2010).

SVM is associated with a lineage that began with Sadhu Vaswani, a saint born in Hyderabad (Sind) in 1879. It has centres in London, the USA, and South East Asia, and generates a great deal of its funding from the Hindu diaspora communities in these countries. The current spiritual leader of the Mission, Dada Vaswani, is the Sadhu’s nephew, who received his mantle as Sadhu Vaswani’s successor after it was recognised by his uncle that he possessed divine qualities. In total the mission claims to be educating around 4,000 girls at any one time. The case study focused on St Mira’s, a girls’ secondary school with 2,700 pupils run by the organisation.

The spiritual leader of the MA Math is Guru Mata Amritanandamayi, more commonly known simply as ‘Amma’ (mother). Born in 1953 into a poor low caste family in a Keralan fishing village, Amma is described as having demonstrated divine qualities from childhood. She is portrayed as being the ultimate example of loving compassion: she spends most of her time greeting devotees, embracing everyone, no matter how dirty or diseased, presenting a strongly symbolic rejection of caste-based ideas of bodily pollution (as a result she is often referred to as ‘Hugging Ma’). In addition to spiritual activities, the MA Math runs a network of 44 primary and secondary schools aimed at both the middle classes (Amrita Vidyalayam) and low caste and poor communities (see also Bradley 2011). The case study focused on the Amrita Vidyalayam School in Pune, which has 1,500 pupils.

The third case study was of Bahujan Hitay, a neo-Buddhist organisation established in 1983 and almost entirely funded by the Karuna Trust, which is part of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. Bahujan Hitay works primarily with dalit women, almost exclusively members of the untouchable Mahar caste, seeking to broaden their educational and employment opportunities. It also works, to a much lesser extent, with other marginalised groups such as Muslim women (see also Bhatewara and Bradley 2012; Bradley and Ramsay 2010).

The final case study in Pune was of the Gandhian Memorial Society (GMS), which was founded to promote Gandhian ideals. The primary goal of the organisation is the empowerment of women, and the majority of its projects target poor women from disadvantaged communities by tackling illiteracy and economic dependence. While most staff members stress that GMS is not a religious organisation, and that Gandhi’s ideology is philosophical rather than religious, the justification for including GMS in the category of faith-based education providers was that...
religion enters into the Society’s programmes in significant ways. For example, during project initiation ceremonies, ritual lamps are lit and devotional Hindu songs are sung. There is also a clear spiritual bent to the daily routine. The staff and trainees generally study one lesson each day from the Bhagavad Gita (a principal Hindu text), although they claim to view the text as ‘philosophical, not spiritual’. In addition, every day during programmes, the participants attend prayers at 5:30am, followed by the singing of a devotional song. Not all the prayers are Hindu: for example, one programme for a group of Christian tsunami victims reportedly held all of its prayers according to the Christian faith (see also Bradley 2010; Bradley and Ramsay 2010).

In Mumbai case studies were conducted of the local Modern Educational, Social and Cultural Trust (MESCO), an Islamic charitable trust, and Shelter Don Bosco, a Catholic boys’ shelter run by an order with branches throughout India.

MESCO was chosen because of its reputation as a key Muslim development organisation. It is located in the Muslim-dominated locality of Mahim and its primary activity is providing educational aid to students who cannot afford a decent education. The organisation started by donating textbooks and notebooks to poor schoolchildren, and this developed into an Educational Adoption Scheme for both school and college level students. Initially, the trust provided assistance to students from any standard, but in order to ensure quality, assistance is now confined to students who have reached at least the VIIth standard (12/13 years of age); in addition, scholarships for higher education, particularly medical training, are provided. MESCO is affiliated to a well-known dargah dedicated to the Sufi saint Makhdum Ali Mahimi (1372–1431).

Shelter Don Bosco, located in the religiously mixed slum district of Wadala, was chosen because of its renown as a religious charity caring for male street children, whose education and upkeep it sponsors until the age of 16. It is run by the Roman Catholic order of Salesians, which, taking its pedagogical inspiration from its founder Don Bosco (1815–88), an Italian saint, states that ‘the Salesians of Don Bosco are an international educational organization that works for the development of young people especially those who are poor and abandoned’ (Don Bosco 2009).

Analysis

The Sadhu Vaswani Mission (SVM)

Power and authority: Followers of SVM showed considerable pride in the organisation’s guru figures. Authority within the organisation is vested in a form of charismatic leadership and a cult of personality, arguably indicating an authoritarian form of religion that relies on producing a sense of awe and reverence on the part of the gurus’ devotees (Kakar 1996: 138). Worship of Dada Vaswani is at the heart of religious practice in the school and sanctifies overall practice in the organisation. All of the staff members to whom we spoke expressed deep devotion to Dada, speaking of him as a living god and worker of miracles. For example, the headmistress claimed that she could feel ‘the power of Dada working through me ... there are definitely some wonders working ... a living god is there’. One graduate of the school claimed that most of the children attending the school and their families become devotees of Sadhu and Dada Vaswani. It was clear from conversations with both staff and students that Dada’s suggestions about how to engage with the poor were accepted without question as divine instruction/guidance. Sadhu and Dada Vaswani are perceived as role models who embody ‘faultless’ service, with the organisation’s philanthropic activities legitimated by their authority and charismatic leadership.
The charity-empowerment spectrum: In Hinduism, giving service to others (seva) is often tied to the concept of daan, a religiously obligated gift of material wealth. Conversations with devotees indicated that this is how donations to large spiritual organisations such as SVM tend to be perceived by their supporters and staff. A devotee of SVM talked about how observance of Dada’s spiritual practices goes hand in hand with the expectation that material support will be given to the Mission.

The emphasis on ‘selfless service’ within SVM is paramount and is reportedly reflected in the curriculum followed by all of the organisation’s educational facilities. All St Mira’s pupils are encouraged to interact with the poor and sick, in order ‘to encourage kind hearts and empathy, which are the basis of our spirituality’. Thus seva is at least partially intended to foster particular personal characteristics amongst the school’s pupils, rather than any radical restructuring of social relations (Bradley 2010; Bradley and Ramsay 2010). Pupils are occasionally involved in feeding the large numbers of people who come to the ashram daily for food, and each month they help to organise a lunch for blind people. The majority of the development efforts made by the school are similar; they are essentially charitable, they are not designed to promote long-term self-sufficiency and they do not provide the beneficiaries with any say in the type of assistance offered. This is not to suggest that the work is not valuable; the Mission provides welcome sustenance to hundreds of Pune’s poor, who are more than happy to receive it. However, it could be argued that SVM’s notion of ‘service’ as ‘giving and forgetting’, which is supposed to prevent the formation of egotistical pride in one’s own benevolence, prevents the adoption of a longer term and more inclusive approach to empowering the poor.

In practice, the organisation’s pro-poor activities indicate a middle class, charitable and philanthropic ethos. This view is confirmed by the school’s internal seva practices. The primary purpose of St Mira’s secondary school is to educate children from middle class families, whose needs it meets through its use of the prestigious Central Board of Secondary Education curriculum. However SVM also provides funding for an ‘adoption scheme’, whereby children of poor families are subsidised by the Mission so that they can attend the school. This involves paying at least 50 per cent of a child’s school fees and giving especially poor pupils extra items such as schoolbags, books and uniforms. At the time of the research, approximately 400 children had been adopted by SVM, costing, according to the head of the adoption programme, around Rs3 million (approximately £40,000) per year. The funds comes solely from ‘well-wishers’: devotees of Sadhu/Dada Vaswani.

Although it is not possible to prevent children from discovering each others’ backgrounds, the school claims that it tries to minimise socio-economic differences, for example, by keeping school uniforms simple and compulsory and forbidding any markers of wealth (such as jewellery). However, by insisting upon the seamless integration of sponsored poor children into the middle-class school body, the identities of these poor children are to some extent rendered invisible. This is indicative of the SVM’s ‘give and forget’ approach, which is also echoed in the organisation’s choice not to maintain relations with ex-adoptees after graduation: it takes no active interest in such children’s future well-being, or that of their families or communities.

Gender: It appears that SVM aims to subsume the identities of all of its pupils within a middle-class Hindu ideal. This agenda is highly gendered, focusing on women as the guiding force of the nation:

The Mira Movement has chosen to concentrate on educating girls because it was Sadhu Vaswani’s firm belief that women would play a vital role in shaping India’s destiny in the future. ‘Woman-soul shall lead us upward, on!’ he asserted, emphasizing the spiritual shakti that women represented. (SVM 2007: 31)
The Mission uses words like empowerment to describe its core objectives and claims to be dedicated to empowering women, although determining how it understands concepts like gender and equality is difficult. Nevertheless, it emerged that its concept of empowerment is rather different from western secular definitions. The latter conceive of empowerment as providing equal (or the same) opportunities for girls as for boys, whereas SVM highlights that women’s role, for which education must prepare them, differs from that of men. The Mission states that it is committed to supporting women to fulfil ‘their potential as liberated beings’ (headmistress of St Mira’s). However, although women are referred to as the ‘backbone’ of Indian culture, it became clear after even a brief inspection that the ways in which women are portrayed in the school’s curriculum are supportive of traditional gender stereotypes. In particular, the feminine role of mother is emphasised and the ‘natural’ nurturing role of women encouraged through activities such as feeding birds (see also Bradley 2010, 2011). The taught lessons clearly reveal this approach, as the following lesson outline from a SVM teaching manual (SVM n.d.) highlights.

The manual contains a total of 52 lesson plans, each of which includes opening chants of ‘Om’ followed by prayers to the Hindu god Krishna and Sadhu Vaswani, revision of a randomly selected prayer, a devotional song, a cultural question, and Dada’s ‘thought of the week’. This is followed by a story on the lesson’s theme, a summary of the story’s moral and then a game or activity. A key lesson is entitled ‘Mother: A Picture of Loving Sacrifice’. The story emphasises the domestic role of mothers, and specifically mentions that a father’s duty lies outside the domestic sphere:

> Since the day you are born [sic], your mother took care of you lovingly. She teaches you how to walk, talk, read, nurses you when you are sick, cooks for you every day. She is there for you when you are upset, and need someone to talk to ... Your father also loves you very much. He too does a lot for you but in different ways ... he supports your mother in all that she does for the house, relatives and children.

The story continues in a similar vein, finally ending with the moral: ‘A mother is a person who, seeing that there are only four pieces of pie for five people, promptly announces that she never did care for pie’ (SVM n.d.: 233–5).

It is clear from such examples that, despite SVM’s focus on educating girls, the type of pedagogy used encourages pupils to accept gender roles and relations that position them as self-effacing and subservient. The message of SVM is that women must conform to a particular role in order to fulfil their natural tendencies and feminine destinies. Passages throughout the organisation’s locally published literature reinforce this overtly patriarchal conception of gender relations that conflates womanhood with motherhood and a subservient domestic position (SVM 2007).

The Mata Amritanandamayi Math (MA Math)

Power and authority: There are many similarities between our two Hindu case study organisations, SVM and the Mata Amritanandamayi Math. The ‘cult of personality’ is arguably the most obvious: most of Amma’s devotees worship her as a manifestation of the Mother Goddess (Warrier 2003), believing her to be a fully enlightened divine and omnipotent being (S.K. Prana 2005). Amma’s devotees similarly appear to feel a personal obligation to support her organisation’s efforts. One of Amma’s devotees, for instance, talked about his duty to ‘support her work by offering material donations as well as observing her spiritual teachings’.11 Like Sadhu and Dada Vaswani, Amma is perceived by her devotees as an example of ideal humanity, and for them, the MA Math’s methods are validated by Amma, the organisation’s charismatic figurehead.
The charity-empowerment spectrum: Again mirroring St Mira’s, the Amrita Vidyalayam schools are fee-paying, English-medium, and follow the state’s Central Board of Education curriculum, combining this with religious classes and pedagogy that teach the children about Amma’s philosophy and spiritual practices. Like the MA Math’s other schools, the purpose of the school in Pune, as the headmistress explained, is to inculcate in pupils Amma’s teachings about the right way to live. Amongst these teachings, the concept of seva is prominent. Amma stresses the personal benefits of seva, emphasising in her teachings that the path to self-realisation involves serving others. Thus, according to the organisation’s website, ‘Amma inspires her children to walk towards the goal of self-realization by serving the poor and the needy’. This is stressed in the organisational and devotional literature produced by the MA Math, as well as through Amma’s speeches and personal example. In a similar manner to SVM’s school, Amrita Vidyalayam children are encouraged to imbibe and embody the principle of service or seva, together with the principles of humility, obedience, compassion, cultural awareness, patriotism, and self-discovery.

Nevertheless, the MA Math school is less overtly involved in charitable work, which is surprising given the wider organisation’s extensive involvement in pro-poor activities. The school has an adoption programme through which each year it offers funded places to a small number of poor pupils, who must demonstrate academic excellence in order to gain sponsorship. The emphasis placed on adoption is far less than at SVM, however, potentially because of the character of the school’s clientele. While the Sindhi community that supports SVM is very wealthy, families associated with Pune’s Amrita Vidyalayam were described by locals as ‘lower middle class’. School fees and parental donations are, therefore, likely to be significantly lower than at SVM, perhaps reducing the school’s ability to support poor children in addition to maintaining itself. Another possible (and perhaps more likely) explanation is that MA Math chooses not to mix its pro-poor activities with its middle-class ventures. A far larger organisation than SVM, MA Math can keep these two sets of activities separate.

Gender: MA Math’s most substantial divergence from SVM is with respect to its gender ideology, which is prominent in Amma’s written and oral teachings, and frequently filters into the classroom environment. Bradley (2011) describes how, in Amma’s teachings, there is a clear preference for the use of feminine symbolism, especially related to the role of mother. The concept of motherhood is not only central to her teachings but is also the primary motivation for her humanitarian activities, in which she portrays herself as a mother seeking to care for her suffering children. She extends this to all human beings, claiming that every person should channel the love of a mother (which is described as supreme) by seeking to help those less fortunate than themselves. Crucially, with respect to mothering, Amma does not distinguish between male and female roles. For her, both men and women are capable of channelling the love of the ultimate Mother (the goddess) and showering this love upon those around them. Interestingly, although mothering is not gender-specific in Amma’s teaching, it is unambiguously associated with femininity. Thus men are encouraged to develop their feminine sides in order to become better human beings and to progress along the spiritual path.

To some extent, Amma’s discourses on femininity reflect western feminist concepts:

Woman is Shakti (power). She is much more powerful than man . . . Many people live with the misconception that women are only supposed to give birth and raise children. A woman can rule as well as a man if she brings out the dormant masculine qualities within her. And a man can be as loving and affectionate as a mother if he works on that unmanifested feminine aspect within him. (Amma 1991: 14)
Amma clearly distinguishes between the concepts of masculinity and femininity and the sex of being a man or woman. Each sex, in her view, can display masculine and feminine ideals and characteristics. The above citation indicates that she advocates that women should be free to make their own decisions about their life paths, and that they are as capable as men of holding influential positions. This is a radical departure from the patriarchal teachings found in the literature of many other Hindu organisations, including SVM discussed above. Teachings such as these are discussed in the classroom environment, and thus children in the MA Math school are encouraged to develop a more progressive view of gender roles than the traditional norm in India.

It could be argued that almost everything about having a female guru encourages traditional ideas about gender to be reviewed – the fact that Amma hugs every devotee clearly challenges customs that limit physical contact between women and men. Her embraces can be seen as reflecting her own form of liberating feminist activism, as well as challenging caste-based ideas of bodily pollution. Moreover, as one male pupil noted, ‘our guru is Amma, she is a woman. She is the greatest guru, an incarnation of the goddess, an avatar … so obviously we must know that women are powerful’.

The variation in gendered teachings seems to indicate greater opportunities for value contestation amongst Amma devotees than amongst the devotees of Sadhu Vaswani, even though both, as discussed above, maintain forms of traditional charismatic institutional authority.

The Gandhian Memorial Society

Power and authority: The GMS is markedly different from the previous two organisations. Firstly, it works solely for the good of the poor, and has no interest in working with members of the middle class. Secondly, although it was founded to promote Gandhian ideals, it has no living spiritual head. Although Gandhian philosophy is accepted as a guiding force, therefore, the hierarchy and decision-making within the organisational structure is more flexible.

All of GMS’s projects are flexible, and are routinely adapted to the specific needs of women who attend its programmes from different areas. Women attending the classes (which range from literacy to spice production) are free to make suggestions, and aspects of a course may be altered, eliminated, or expanded to meet a group’s specific requirements. As one staff member noted, ‘we run these classes for the women themselves. Obviously we have to teach them what will be most useful in their own particular contexts’.

The charity-empowerment spectrum: Seva in the form of charitable giving and occasional voluntary participation in welfare activities, which is emphasised by the middle-class devotees described above, is valued for the spiritual growth it promotes, while organisations with working class constituencies emphasise the outward aspect of seva in terms of the need to challenge the injustices that impact on the lives of the poor (Bradley and Ramsay 2010). This was particularly clear with respect to the GMS.

At GMS, seva is geared towards individual living out of the swaraj (self-rule) that Gandhi campaigned for nationally: ‘just as a nation must be independent, so must all of its citizens’; one staff member explained. GMS is keen to emphasise the empowering aspect of its work, and staff highlighted that project participants are not ‘given’ anything as charity – instead they pay a nominal fee for classes, and are then expected to forge their own way in the world of business. However, although women are expected to be responsible for their own progress, GMS does maintain links with participants for at least two years, during which time it helps them in...
every way possible (short of actual funding) in order to ensure their entrepreneurial success. GMS’s Assistant Secretary summed it up thus: ‘training is not enough; these women also need constant support. We are there for them in every way that we can be, emotionally as well as practically’. In line with Gandhian philosophy, programme graduates are also encouraged to pass on their new knowledge to other people in need. One woman attending a tailoring course told us that she had been inspired by the Gandhian philosophy taught in her class, and that she hoped to help other people with the knowledge she had gained: ‘even when we are making money, we should not forget principles’.13

Gender: The organisation’s work has a clear focus on empowerment as a holistic process, as opposed to charity that is given to a poor ‘other’. Thus the principle of the Society’s programmes is described as stri sakti jagran (the awakening of women’s inner strength). This philosophy comes through in its approach, which focuses on raising the skills and self-worth of each individual woman. GMS’s interest in women’s empowerment is firmly embedded in the historical ideological legacy of Gandhi, who championed the cause of gender equality, arguing that if women fail to show independent thinking or initiative, this is the result of social tyranny rather than ineptitude.14 Gandhi was therefore a fervent proponent of women’s education (Gandhi 1982), and frequently emphasised during his campaign for Indian independence that any person who believes in national and individual freedom must ‘first liberate their women from the evil customs and conventions that restrict their all-round growth’ (Kishwar 1985: 1692). The activities of GMS support this philosophy; it encourages women to develop business skills and aims to foster self-reliance and confidence amongst the women with which it works.

Bahujan Hitay

Power and authority: Ambedkar, although not worshipped as a god by his followers, has an exalted status nonetheless. His teachings are revered as being ‘real’ Buddhism, his views on social justice and equality comprising the foundation of neo-Buddhist religious beliefs. In terms of pro-poor activity Ambedkar’s arguments were philosophical rather than prescriptive, however, and so neo-Buddhist groups are free to execute his ideas as they see fit. Their methodologies are therefore their own, and as a result they tend to adopt a more participatory ideology than do the organisations with living gurus discussed earlier. Bahujan Hitay’s power structure reflects this: its staff and beneficiaries are almost exclusively dalits, and so dalits both shape and lead the development projects. This ensures accurate understanding of local needs and ideas.

The charity–empowerment spectrum: As noted above, seva is often valued by middle-class Hindus as a means of attaining personal spiritual growth, with charitable giving emphasised over efforts to empower the poor, because it is sufficient for earning spiritual merit. In contrast, Gandhian ideals of equality and self-reliance naturally translate to the community level by emphasising a participatory empowerment agenda. Dalit groups like Bahujan Hitay, however, can arguably be located even further along the charity–empowerment scale. As we have argued elsewhere, seva is understood by neo-Buddhists as the essence of their ‘practical spirituality’: helping others along the path to social equality is not part of spiritual practice, earning merit for the doer, but rather the single most important manifestation of spirituality (Bhatewara and Bradley 2012). Thus, the aim of personal spiritual advancement is considered both selfish and misguided if it does not go hand in hand with efforts to improve the welfare and capacities of the needy. Ambedkar’s Buddhism therefore gives rise to a political ideology that precludes the idea of ‘giving and forgetting’: his religious-based demands for social justice
prevent any neo-Buddhist from residing at the ‘charity’ end of the seva spectrum. Moreover, the fact that the organisation is run by dalits for dalits ensures a much lesser divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’: in this sense, Bahujan Hitay is arguably an exemplar of participatory development. Seva cannot be a detached effort to benefit one’s own spiritual growth, after all, if the sevak is a member of the very group that needs assistance.

Gender: Bahujan Hitay is particularly concerned with the caste-gender interface, focusing its development efforts primarily on dalit women. The Pune branch’s leader is a committed and formidable ‘ex-dalit’ Buddhist woman who, along with male and female staff members, personally champions the cause of dalit feminism. Following Ambedkar’s goal of social equality for all, the organisation aims to educate dalit women about their entitlement to social and economic justice, empowering them to demand their due position in society by providing them with the skills necessary to earn money, and offering a safe environment in which to leave their young children while they do so. Bahujan Hitay’s gender ideology is not particularly well elucidated in its organisational literature, but staff members are clear that their goal is to ‘free the minds and bodies of dalits, especially dalit women, from ancient social injustices’. Part of this endeavour involves the cultivation of a calm mind through meditation techniques, which are a parallel aspect of the organisation’s teaching practice.

The Modern Educational, Social, and Cultural Trust (MESCO)

Power and authority: MESCO is keen to appoint former scholarship pupils to its Board, which gives its central aim of empowering ‘deprived persons of society’ a participatory dimension (MESCO 2009). Moreover, continued participation in the organisation by those it has helped is empowering. As Dr Mohammed Abbas Khatkhatay, a founder member and currently employed full time in the capacity of Executive Secretary, stated:

*We encourage our beneficiaries to become a part of various field level committees known as portfolio committees. There are around 6–7 such committees looking after our various programmes, and members are mostly involved in screening and interviewing students and beneficiaries to access our services.*

The charity-empowerment spectrum: MESCO has a distinct class base. Many members of its constituency can be described as Konkani Muslims, having migrated from the Konkan coast, where they traditionally relied on fishing and small business activities, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many members describe the organisation as an explicit religious and class response to the Mumbai riots of the early 1990s. Founder members saw the need to bolster an emerging Muslim middle class and to counter what they perceived as the sectarian communalisation of education and health services, which was made more visible by the riots. A sense of religious and class marginality therefore underlies the motivation for engaging in philanthropic activities.

MESCO’s philanthropy started in 1968 through a one rupee subscription from each member of the group, each of whom was entrusted with the task of asking other family members, relatives, and neighbours to make a similar subscription. Today, over 60 per cent of the organisation’s funds come from zakat, with the remainder from assorted national and international donors. A large but unspecified amount comes from diaspora communities in the USA and UK.

This money is used to fund educational adoption schemes, which are the organisation’s central activities. Beneficiaries are selected on the basis of good academic performance and their families’ incomes assessed. Officially, assistance is provided to any student, irrespective
of religion, but informally we were told that few non-Muslims receive support. MESCO provides a large number of scholarships for higher education, including medicine, engineering, and law. The philosophy and pedagogic rationale of the scheme reflects the aspirational goals of the organisation, which aims at a form of empowerment. As Jahanara Malik, Head of the Department of Medical Services put it, ‘MESCO strives to build lives of people so that they can overcome their economic challenge. The organisation adds personality development camps to their existing educational programmes’.17 All the educational assistance provided by MESCO is directed towards scholarships for the most able students, who are not necessarily the poorest, in keeping with the organisation’s desire to foster an educated Muslim professional middle class in Mumbai in order to mitigate perceived levels of social exclusion from some of the key professions. Instead of ‘giving and forgetting’, its encouragement to beneficiaries to continue their participation in the organisation provides a sense of religious and class empowerment which is at the far end of the charity-empowerment spectrum.

Gender: A survey of MESCO’s graduates shows a relatively high number of female graduates and a distinct pattern of social mobility, with 97 out of the 270 listed having taken up professions as varied as teaching, medicine, and banking after graduation (MESCO 2009). Unsurprisingly, more traditional gender codes are exemplified in the financial support provided for widows, ‘allowing them to live in dignity so they don’t have to go outside’,18 and where outside employment is not seen as an appropriate option. In addition, a fair amount of money is spent by the organisation on supporting the dowry payments needed by poorer families, but it is unclear to whether the organisation supports dowry as an institution or sees this assistance as a pragmatic response to community needs. Further detailed research is needed on this area.

Shelter Don Bosco

Power and authority: While the cult of personality and charismatic authority is personified in the living gurus of Sadhu Vaswani and Amma, Shelter Don Bosco’s style of leadership follows conventional Catholic modes of authority. Organisational rules dictate that the Director has to be a priest and that he has decision-making power; Shelter Don Bosco can be characterised, therefore, as fairly autocratic. However, similar to GMS, staff at Shelter Don Bosco also place great emphasis on the inspirational legacy of Don Bosco himself and his desire to foster spiritual unity. As Fr Michael Fernandes of Don Bosco put it, ‘Don Bosco said if we are one of heart we can do ten times as much’ (Shelter Don Bosco 2009: 11). While administrative and moral authority is firmly held by the priests, the Shelter relies hugely on a network of volunteers, often referred to as ‘uncles and didis (sisters)’, who do a great deal of the day-to-day pastoral care, talking to and counselling boys on the streets, and teaching.

The charity-empowerment spectrum: Similar to MESCO, Don Bosco stresses the principle of charitable action, stating that the organisation has always emphasised the need for cooperative charity in educational and pastoral service (Don Bosco 2009). Assistance is, however, not simply financial and geared towards a few individuals connected to the organisation, but is given on a daily basis, through both day-to-day care and schooling. Young male street children are adopted by the organisation, which aims at their complete rehabilitation from street life. Having been found vagrant at nearby train stations, the boys are taken on a rehabilitation retreat in a nearby holiday area, where they are given drug and general counselling. If a boy agrees to continue, he is given residence at the organisation’s hostel and formal schooling.
The majority of the boys are from predominantly working class and economically poor backgrounds, with many having migrated to Mumbai from the poorest Indian states in the east, such as Bihar and West Bengal. However, the class aspirations of the priests running the organisation are markedly different than those of MESCO: it was clear that they feel that the opportunities available to the boys in their care are more limited. Rather than valorise the ‘professions’, therefore, they emphasise vocational education and training, which provides practical skills in carpentry or mechanics; the forms of educational capital developed amongst the organisation’s beneficiaries tend to reproduce the class background from which the boys are understood to have originated. While based on religious teaching that encourages charitable giving, the Shelter seeks to enable the boys it takes in to pursue independent lives, although its ambitions for them are necessarily limited by the opportunities available and their previous education, with many never having had continuous formal schooling until joining the Shelter.

Gender: Shelter Don Bosco follows conventional Catholic norms involving the gendered segregation of schooling. It is a boys-only school, directed by male priestly authority, where women perform maternal and pastoral roles. A considerable number of the volunteers are women and many are deeply involved in the pastoral activities, where a highly gendered and familial ethos is embodied in what are known as ‘mother meetings’, which involve informal discussions, often about health (for example drugs counselling), as well as personal matters. While schooling is segregated, the organisation venerates notable Catholic women, through adherence to the Catholic cult of Mother Mary, a key inspiration to Don Bosco himself, as well as Mother Theresa, whose pictures are displayed around the school buildings and who is seen as embodying selfless charitable service. In these ways, Shelter Don Bosco tries to provide a surrogate family, with distinct gender roles, for boys who often arrive traumatised after having been orphaned, abandoned by their parents and subject to other forms of abuse, including domestic violence.

Conclusion

This research, although preliminary, shows the considerable variation in forms of power and authority within religiously affiliated education providers in Maharashtra. It raises interesting questions about the influence of charismatic personalities as motivators of faith-based education. The historical importance of the guru-disciple relationship, which requires absolute faith in the omniscience of the guru, can lead to the unquestioned implementation of one person’s ideas about social service provision. Those ideas may be appropriate in certain circumstances, but in others may prove innately antagonistic to participatory ideals. However, the philosophies of revered guru figures do not necessarily cause such problems, as illustrated by the influence of Ambedkar and Gandhi on Bahujan Hitay and the GMS respectively. This is arguably because these men did not lay down prescriptive methods for operationalising educational social service provision, but rather provided clear and accessible philosophies about the need to strive for social, economic, and political justice.

Fairly recent changes in the social contract between the Indian state and its citizens reflect an emphasis on neo-liberal economics, with serious implications for redistributive justice as far as the educational system is concerned. All the organisations studied claim to assist the poor but, by and large, the scholarship and adoption schemes they offer provide only a few scholarships to pupils from poor families. It seems that organisations which cater to the middle classes, such as the SVM’s St Mira’s school and the MA Math’s Amrita Vidyalayam, provide limited options for the poor. Moreover, providers that do focus on the poor are generally relatively small in relation to the number of poor people and severity of social inequalities in Maharashtra.
While Shelter Don Bosco and MESCO can draw respectively on the considerable institutional support of the Catholic Church in India and an increasingly wealthy Muslim middle class in India and abroad, the important contributions of Bahujan Hitay and GMS are particularly limited by their meagre funding opportunities.

As far as gender is concerned, the ideologies and activities of the organisations studied are mixed. The GMS and Bahujan Hitay attempt to empower women to participate in the labour market, while Amma challenges gendered ideas of leadership. Through the charismatic example of a dynamic female leader, physical boundaries imposed on women are challenged, and expectations of female subservience are defied. In contrast, organisations such as the SVM, while emphasising girls’ enrolment, do not necessarily view the purpose of girls’ education as enabling them to secure employment. Rather, their emphasis is on domesticity as the ideal (for similar arguments about Indian women’s education, see Donner 2006). In contrast, organisations such as MESCO do seem to have made strides by supporting women to access (limited) economic opportunities.

The activities of all the organisations studied do not simply offer opportunities for the acquisition of academic knowledge and vocational skills; they sometimes also consolidate or challenge broader regional, caste, class, and gender identities and affiliations. It seems that the larger religiously affiliated education providers studied replicate class structures, while the smaller ones, such as GMS and Bahujan Hitay, challenge them, although these differences cannot solely be attributed to the size of the organisation. At a psychodynamic level, the religious organisations studied are also involved in particular modes of religious self-improvement, through not only spiritual practices but also particular ideas about seva, in which employment and professional aspirations often intersect with religious, regional, gender, class, and caste narratives. In practice, the transformative compassion and service to a ‘poor other’ many of the predominantly Hindu middle-class organisations promote serves to replicate class and charitable philanthropic relations, rather than creating a sense of equality; while others, such as GMS, MESCO, and Bahujan Hitay, work hard to subvert or ameliorate the effects of such relations.

Notes

1. This document is an output from a project funded by UK Aid from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID. The research was carried out under the auspices of the Religions and Development Research Programme based at the University of Birmingham and the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies in New Delhi. It was undertaken by Martin Rew in collaboration with Tamsin Bradley and Zara Bhatewara (nee Ramsay) and some of the case studies built on earlier work carried out by them in Pune, also as part of the RaD programme. The fieldwork was carried out between November 2008 and October 2009. Emma Tomalin’s insightful comments on the research design and earlier drafts of this paper are much appreciated.

2. Although in India the term ‘alternative’ education covers a wide range of organisations, the label has largely become associated with NGO-delivered forms of education that emphasise a non-competitive ethos, are aimed at children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and use methods that are seen as more culturally sensitive.

3. Schools can also be divided into three types: public, aided, and independent. While public schools are fully state-run and independent institutions are entirely self-regulated, aided schools are semi-independent, given financial assistance by the state (for teachers’ salaries and various other expenses) and yet privately owned and managed. The state’s contribution to aided schools is tied to particular conditions, for example maintaining reservations for Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe/Other Backward Caste (SC/ST/OBC) pupils, and the regulation of teacher employment and the curriculum. Thus public and aided schools are often very similar, whereas private schools, which depend on income
from fees (or in the case of NGO schools, donations), are more varied.

4. According to World Bank figures, in 1999 only 2% of senior secondary pupils were from Scheduled Caste groups and 0.8% from the Scheduled Tribes, although these comprise 14% and 8% of the Indian population respectively (World Bank 2003). Furthermore, only 20% of children of school-going age from the lowest income quintile are actually enrolled in secondary education (World Bank 2002).

4. Background information was gathered during an interview with one of the executives in November 2008.

5. A dargah is a shrine built over the grave of a respected religious figure (saint).


7. According to one teacher at the school.


9. Funding for the scheme seems to depend on philanthropic giving as a religious obligation, perhaps also with some of the fees of paying pupils cross-subsidising the financial assistance to poor pupils.

10. Interview conducted with Amma devotee volunteering in the centre bookshop, November 2008.

11. Interview, April 2009.


13. Gandhi’s view of gender was that the sexes should be regarded as equal but not the same, a viewpoint in line with his ideas about caste equality.


15. Charitable giving that is obligatory for Muslims with disposable wealth (nisaab), calculated at a rate of approximately 2.5% of all disposable wealth at the end of every year.


17. Interview with Jahanana Mailk, October 2009.

References


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