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Special Article

Libertarian, Utilitarian, Subaltern Ethics? Visualising Social Equity in India's Rural Education System

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Abstract

The world of ethics has often debated the relevance of schools of moral thought, such as utilitarianism and the libertarian doctrine, to the ideals of sustainable, inclusive development that countries across the globe aspire to reach. Utilitarianism, a philosophy which endorses actions providing maximum happiness as morally correct is ideologically unique from libertarianism, which prioritises individualist freedom and a free-market economy. Both views can be connected, although in varying degrees, to the axiom that equitable provision of education contributes to the overall economic development of the country. This concept is primarily concerned with state policies on improving the access and quality of education, such that all social groups, especially the marginalized communities, can avail the basic amenities of formal schooling and, subsequently, add value to their lives through the same. This essay will explore the two ethical philosophies of libertarianism and utilitarianism, and analyze the nature in which they engage to materialize social equity in the realm of school-level education in India's underserved rural regions. Furthermore, this essay will establish how utilitarian principles reflect a clearer template of equitable community development through education whilst engaging with some noteworthy shortcomings of the utilitarian worldview. Finally, it will recommend adoption of indigenous and subaltern ethical frameworks by the Indian educational system to ensure an all-encompassing materialization of social equity.

Keywords: *Education, social equity, rural, India, ethics, subaltern, utilitarian, libertarian*

1. The Libertarian Outlook on Educational Provision

The libertarian tradition bases itself on the purported idea of absolute autonomy and liberty of the individual, spanning across the social, economic and political dimensions. This concept of "unfettered" individual rights stipulates complete exemption from government policies and laws that seek to regulate human

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behavior and economic decisions, while relegating the role of the state solely to that of crime prevention, especially for the protection of private property (Sandel, 2011). Libertarianism extols individual agency in determining access to and provision of basic amenity systems such as infrastructure, housing, healthcare, and education. The Indian schools of libertarian thought endorse the commodified production of rural education as an excludable private good rather than a public one, wherein the system not only ensures the parents, educators and students a proper choice in determining what form of schooling, pedagogy, educational facilities and learning outcomes are favorable for them but also diminishes state intervention in educational provision through the removal of regulatory "barriers" on private institutions in order to enable the latter to thrive and expand (Ashar et al., 2021). Focusing on low-fee rural private schools, the libertarian view on education states that private schooling is of a higher quality apart from the fact that it encourages an entrepreneurial spirit in Indian citizens keen on embarking upon a career in the social sector (Mathur and Narang, 2022).

However, an important point this view seems to ignore is that even the low-fee private schools in rural India cater to the rural middle-class demographic and not those below the poverty line, let alone the children from ultra-poor households (Vasavi, 2019). With 72.9% of Indian students studying in public schools (ASER, 2022), there is an over-representation of marginalized students in such institutions and the inverse in private schools (Mehendale and Mukhopadhyay, 2021). If one were to strategize policy according to the libertarian doctrine, how such an overwhelmingly large cohort of socioeconomically disadvantaged students can be incorporated into private schools in greater numbers, which are significantly more expensive, is an issue to which this doctrine seems hesitant in providing a solution. One can try arriving at an answer by analyzing this issue through the lens of deontological and consequentialist libertarianism.

Determining the morality of an action based on whether it aligns with a certain principle, such as absolute individual freedom, without considering the impacts or consequences of that action, is the essence of deontological libertarianism (Bradford, 2008). The promotion of private schooling sans governmental regulation satisfies the principle of personal choice and liberty, as individuals now have the right to start their own schools and choose from a variegated set of pedagogies and curricula. If we were to place this in the context of India's rural educational setup, we would have to look at the prevalence of resource ownership quite critically. Rural India is marked by higher levels of poverty, lower incomes and lesser livelihood opportunities (Sahasranaman and Kumar, 2022), hence the possibility of individuals, facing financial insecurity, choosing to invest money into starting their own schools is much lower. This is evident from the fact that agriculture is the major employer of the rural workforce, followed by predominantly wage labor in construction, manufacturing and micro and small enterprises (Rathore, 2024). Therefore, in principle, socioeconomic vulnerabilities discourage individuals from partaking in the production of education as a private good, which represents the supply-side predicament prevalent in ensuring individual, privatized ownership of educational institutions, as proposed by deontological libertarianism.

Theoretically, such a philosophy would act as an obstacle to achieving social equity in the rural education system, as only the economically privileged- middle or upper-class and upper-caste - individuals would be able to establish educational institutions; thus effectuating an unequal distribution of livelihood opportunities. Individuals from poor, marginalized communities are more empathetic and generous to fellow poverty-stricken people, thus donating more to social welfare and poverty alleviation initiatives. (Piff et al., 2010). If an argument is made by libertarians of partial state intervention through financial support to relatively poor private school owners, in India in the form of government grants or tax credits in the United States (McCluskey, 2020), this proposition in itself would stand as a violation of the libertarian first-principles of absolute private ownership of resources (Hornberger, 2020). Hence, there is simply no ethical provision under the libertarian philosophy that caters to the crucial objective of socially equitable distribution of resource ownership, such as educational institutions.

With such ownership of educational provision being concentrated in the hands of those with some generational wealth, hailing from privileged communities, there is a reduced possibility of an inclusive learning environment, and poor communities' accessibility to such educational opportunities, along with an increased institutionalization of practices, norms reproduced by an elitist moral ideology. Libertarianism essentially endorses a self-sustaining hegemonic system, where elite, privileged individuals set up exclusivist rules, ideologies, and customs that coalesce to form an institution; and this institution further indoctrinates more individuals into becoming subscribers of such exclusivist intellectual traditions.

On the other end of this spectrum lies consequentialist libertarianism, which adjudges individual liberty and a capitalist economy as morally good since it is believed to effectuate socio-economic prosperity and political freedom (Wolff, 2006). Consequentialist libertarian thought, partially divergent from other consequentialist philosophies such as utilitarianism, bases itself on two fundamentals. The first is based on the consequentialist crux, that certain policies, actions and decisions are morally good because they yield substantial benefits, and maximize the well-being or happiness of the people as part of their consequences or impact (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2003).

The second fundamental builds on the first and focuses on an expected consequentialist view which prioritizes individual liberty and the free market as morally good policy endeavours since the consequences of such policies, according to philosophical proponents, yield the aforementioned benefits and maximize happiness and well-being. Hence, consequentialist libertarianism attempts to calculate or estimate the utilities of a decision prior to its implementation and subsequent consequences, while assigning a mandate to a particular principle- like individual liberty- which must be adhered to or satisfied by the outcomes of that decision; akin to how rule utilitarianism stipulates rules to be adhered to since they are perceived to maximize utility or pleasure (Brink, 2022).

Under the ambit of consequentialist libertarianism, privatized educational provision is again encouraged because the philosophy claims that such an education is of a better quality and that it provides the freedom of choice to the students and their guardians (Mathur and Narang, 2022). However, this freedom is

selective and disproportionate. When school education is privatized, all its components are priced. Parents now have to pay the school tuition fees, compiled with additional fees for infrastructural maintenance of the school, admission and co-curricular charges. This stands starkly in contrast to public schools, wherein not only is the tuition and infrastructure fee waived, but also essential school supplies such as textbooks, uniforms, and writing materials are free of cost (Mehendale et al., 2015). This is the case for Indian public schools till grade eight, after which parents or guardians need to incur costs on school supplies and tuition- although quite minimal since secondary education is largely subsidized. Despite this, even in rural public schools, we observe students from marginalized communities dropping out significantly after completing middle school, mostly due to poverty, as they now start seeking livelihood options to support their households financially (Walia, 2021). A bigger brunt is borne by the girls, who not only drop out to earn but also to partake in domestic chores.

Evidence clearly shows that the consequences of privatizing educational opportunities, to any degree, always harm the poorest, structurally disenfranchised students the most. With almost half of India's rural marginalized castes and tribes, Dalits and Adivasis, living in poverty (Shroff, 2022), and a significant proportion of other poor households who rely on public education for a dignified life, such mass privatization would simply not allow socioeconomically disadvantaged children from accessing basic school education in the first place, let alone cause them to drop-out after they enrol. A consequentialist libertarian policy would be self-defeating, since the utility provided by education would not be experienced by more than half of India's current school-going child population, therefore coming nowhere close to the purported objective of utility maximization. As put forth earlier, such a system offers an illusion of choice; as a significant proportion of India's poor rural families do not have the power to choose the private school in the first place. Complementing the earlier supply-side predicament in educational provision, curbing people's access to education represents the socially inequitable demand-side patterns that emerge when libertarian views of educational provision are materialized.

Furthermore, the idea of private schools providing quality education can only be true to some extent for the high-fee-paying subcategories within this cohort. Most of the other low-fee-paying, small-scale rural private schools often do not even meet the basic infrastructural criteria, as complying with such regulatory norms is often costly (Central Square Foundation, 2020), and schools are often penalized if they do not adhere to the same (Mathur and Narang, 2022). Apart from this, such schools often do not employ teachers who have an appropriate professional degree in education or those who have cleared a basic teacher eligibility test- as a measure of cost-cutting- simply because they are not obligated to under the law (Ashar et al., 2021). This substantiates that government regulation of private institutions still ensures some level of accountability, as its absence would allow the expansion of poor-quality private centres of education by an order of magnitude, with consistently worsening infrastructural and pedagogical quality.

Therefore, the libertarian logic of deregulating private schools to ensure socioeconomic prosperity and development holds no water since the less such private institutes are publicly held accountable, the less they tend to spend on basic education necessities.

2. How Does Utilitarianism Approach the Education System?

The utilitarian philosophy determines the moral goodness of an action if its consequences maximize happiness or the well-being of as many people as possible (Boston et al., 2010), essentially entailing a cost-benefit analysis of a policy to understand the extent to which it can provide satisfaction to the citizens, and whether its utility-ensuring provisions significantly outweigh the inconvenience or disruption experienced by the citizens through that policy. Utilitarian ideas have often been viewed as reinforcement to policies on educational provision, especially by their foremost proponent, Jeremy Bentham, to endorse basic education for child labourers residing in industrial England's poor houses (Komatsu, 2003). Since then, several scholars, administrators and public sector actors have attempted to restructure educational provision in their respective countries through utilitarian principles.

This has been the case for the system of higher education in the United States, often touted as a chain of institutions that cater to societal interests and impart relevant knowledge for resolving pressing socioeconomic issues (Ebersole, 1979). This implies an apparent adherence to the moral objective of ensuring overall societal well-being or collective happiness of the people. Through the perspectives of act and rule utilitarianism, one can uncover what kind of configuration the rural Indian education system would have, particularly when it comes to ensuring social equity in its mechanisms.

Act utilitarianism as a concept speaks about a more direct application of the utilitarian crux of happiness maximization, where an act is deemed morally good if its consequences have produced a realization of collective welfare by the people, that ultimately stands out as a better option compared to its alternatives, or one that is at least as favorable (Brink, 2022). Therefore, in the context of rural Indian educational provision, utilitarianism does not explicitly articulate a template that configures the nature of education as either a public or a private good, to the extent that libertarianism does.

Specifically focusing on this aspect, we would find that, ideally, utilitarianism may be more inclined towards a public provision of education in rural India, considering that this structure would enable all demographics, especially the poor, to access and partake in educational activities; hence, adheres to the idea of happiness maximization to a far greater extent. In fact, we see such utilitarian underpinnings of public education prevalent even in countries such as Soviet Russia, where large-scale state-led educational provision was ensured for the purpose of intellectually strengthening the poorest citizens, such that the country's aims of rapid industrialization are accelerated (Yarkova, 2016).

Even though this public system should be prioritized, as a largely privatized provision is detrimental to the rural masses as explained previously, the question of this public system actually maximizing the well-being and utility of its students, in a truly holistic sense, seems questionable. Despite India's rural public education system being recognized for its last-mile delivery of essential social development, it is, has been, and continues to be, widely critiqued for its poor standard of pedagogy, facilities, and administration, resulting in abysmal learning outcomes for the children. This is why rural households, even those that are marginally non-poor, prefer to send their children to nearby private schools, due to relatively better teaching and infrastructure, as well as their provision of English as the primary medium of instruction; as this equips the students with verbal skills which lower-middle class rural citizens rightfully consider a necessity for obtaining social and occupational mobility in the present economy (Faust and Nagar, 2001; cited in Vasavi, 2019). My interviews with the residents of local villages in India's northern state of Haryana confirmed this fact.

In fact, children in India's rural public schools face extreme difficulty in understanding concepts of grades much lower than those they currently study (ASER, 2023). This seems to contradict the earlier discussion wherein several low-cost private schools were also operating in a substandard fashion. However, despite their limited quality, such low-cost private schools, generally, still tend to offer a better standard than their public counterparts (Tooley and Dixon, 2006; cited in Mathur and Narang, 2022). Hence, even though social equity may be somewhat instituted by public schools through universal access to education in India's villages, quantified by enrollment, this principle is not materialized with respect to ensuring that school-going children receive an education which they and their parents derive enough utility out of.

Under this ideological subset of utilitarianism, one can then argue, that encouraging school-level educational privatization, for those sections who can afford it, could be a morally correct policy decision, with the diminishing socialist welfare state now being strictly limited to catering to the most marginalized sections of the society; as this measure may maximize utility for all socioeconomic groups, by allowing as many of them an opportunity to obtain an improved, private education. However, this trend will eventually lead to a highly commercialized (Vasavi, 2019), socially-unconscious and elitist design of education being imparted (Stumm and Plomin, 2021), potentially resulting in students aspiring to become financially lucrative job-seeking youth, instead of passionate, socially-driven changemakers willing to create sustainable local development systems. In fact, the more students migrate to private schools, the less the government is keen on continuing adequate spending on public education, due to the now-increased per-pupil expenditure (Kingdon, 2020).

It must be noted, however, that under act utilitarianism, a single or a set of low-cost, good-quality private educational initiatives, such as the kind undertaken by renowned Indian non-profits like Pratham Education Foundation, can be encouraged and supported, on a case-by-case basis, till the state builds enough capacity to provide a high-quality public education system.

This temporary measure can be analyzed as a relatively better option that maximizes benefits for all stakeholders as it retains the low-cost accessibility of schools while infusing it with a high-quality pedagogy. This is because act utilitarianism looks at the consequences of an individual act, and checks whether it yields the highest net benefits compared to available alternatives at that point in time. Hence, even though this form of private provision is not beneficial as a rule of thumb, to be replicated throughout as an institutional model backed by policy, in certain exceptional, isolated instances, it may act as a worthy decision for a limited time period.

Basing itself on the framework of act utilitarian thought, rule utilitarianism is concerned with defining the morality of an act or a set of actions based on whether its consequences satisfy a general norm or rule (Dragas, 2018). The rule is decided upon by observing the consequences of a particular act being repeated multiple times, over a large timespan, wherein such consequences have had in most cases, if not all, a large net benefit for as many people in society as possible (Brink, 2022). With regards to educational provision, rule utilitarian thought would endorse a system wherein its access and quality would be shaped by the norm which the stakeholders consider to be worthwhile, based on past experiences.

For instance, the increasing trend of school privatization in India and budget cuts by the government on education are symptomatic of the government adhering to a rule that considers the supply of education as a private good to be a higher utility-providing option. However, the larger sections of society- the poor communities, as well as several other stakeholders such as civil society members and academicians, are bound to find this warped conceptualization of rule utilitarianism extremely flawed (Kumari, 2015). The opponents could argue that since this event of privatization, repeated over a long span of time and in multiple areas, produces similar effects of dispossession, therefore disutility in the form of social inequity, for demographically large low-income communities, it cannot be considered as a rule which policies must adhere to for the purpose of providing "the greatest good of the greatest number."

Hence, at a comparative level, utilitarian ideas can be understood as those being more resonant with the objective of an equitable education system than the philosophy of libertarianism. This can be posited since utilitarianism can be interpreted as an ethical framework aimed at maximizing utility, or welfare, for as many individuals as possible. Although there lies a possibility of well-being being construed in a strictly profit-centric or financial sense (Ortega Landa, 2004), the existence of the aforementioned counterargument opens up a substantial space for justifying social equity through the lens of utilitarian thought; unlike libertarianism which is strictly encircled around the principle of private resource ownership.

However, despite utilitarianism being a more empathetic ideology to social equity in the educational system, there are some serious limitations to this philosophy that have been largely unmet with any form of philosophical redressal. It was evident in the discussion on rule utilitarianism that a general rule is solidified when its application on many events over a span of time yields large net benefits.

However, this moral epistemology, specifically in the context of education, does not provide a solution to the issue of dominant social groups monopolizing the power to not only decide which rule is to be chosen but also the ethical underpinnings forming that rule. For example, in the context of the American racial segregation laws in the school system, the dominant White population, using their social capital and political muscle, created a seemingly ethical concept of "separate but equal," based on which the utilitarian rule of racially segregating public spaces between the White and African American populations was instituted (Hanson, 2011). The White majority here argued that this policy did not cause pain or suffering to either racial group, as it did not directly stop African Americans from accessing schools but only legally mandated them to seek separate institutions for fulfilling their educational aspirations. Therefore, such a rule, according to the dominant social group in this context, seemed to maximize utility for all stakeholders, as it allowed, or rather coerced, people to "protect their culture and racial purity," as well as access basic socioeconomic amenities.

Similarly, this question can be asked in the context of rural India: which social group would decide what kind of rule would benefit as many people as possible? The educational curriculum and the social atmosphere in India's public schools largely do not reflect a positive attitude towards India's marginalized castes and tribes; which contributes to atrociously high school drop-out rates for these social groups, especially at the secondary stages (MoE, 2023; Video Volunteers, 2016). Although Mill's utilitarianism does speak about the harm principle to discourage or legally prevent actions that may cause harm to another individual (Mill, 1859), the continued attendance of some Dalit and Adivasi students in schools despite such multidimensional ostracization, often results in the upper-caste and dominant caste majority taking nil responsibility for perpetrating such treatment and not acknowledging it as a cause of educational inequity, as these groups now pinpoint other structural issues such as poverty as the primary reason for drop-outs.

This reveals the innate weaknesses prevalent in the harm principle, because Mill himself defines harm as a violation of an individual's rights, by another, which results in a serious "setback" to that individual (Mill, 1861), and is thus starkly different from what he terms to be a "mere offence." Therefore, any form of psycho-social indignity caused to marginalized students, if it does not violate any of their constitutional rights, would not even count as them being "harm;" especially when such acts of indignity are difficult to prove as those which are done with malintent. Hence, in such a situation, trying to regulate or institutionally prevent individual actions, which perpetrate indignity but no harm- according to definition- could be considered as a violation of individual liberty by the socially dominant groups (Sandel, 2011). Similarly, trying to institute a more socially and culturally equitable curriculum and learning environment could also be considered as act that yields disutility to the dominant groups, because it seeks to redistribute social capital which was earlier concentrated in the hands of the rural elite; thus, taking away their monopoly, which does not sit well with hegemons.

The poor standard of education in India's public schools, coupled with the regimented division of subjects, solely for catering to a collapsing job market is also reflective of a narrow strand of utilitarian thought (Yarkova, 2016). Although there is some discussion on creating a holistic, multidisciplinary learning approach in the New Education Policy, 2020, as an attempt to incorporate "large-scale utilitarian" instruments and foster social innovation, the leeway given to privatization through the same policy raises serious concerns as to whether such large-scale utilitarian education can even be availed by the masses (Vaishali and Thakur, 2024). The resolution of such existential challenges in incorporating a holistic vision of utilitarianism would still not provide adequate redressal to the aforementioned loopholes within the utilitarian thought; thereby exacerbating social inequity in the system of educational provision.

3. Social Equity in Education: Identifying a Moral Framework

Even as a relatively more inclusive philosophy, utilitarian ideals are marked by arbitrary definitions and a serious incognizance of power dynamics in social superstructures. This could be traced to the fact that its modern founder-proponent, Jeremy Bentham, often employed this philosophy as a moral basis for providing rudimentary education to child labourers in England's Industry Houses (Komatsu, 2003). However, it is to be noted that such education was not viewed as a human right belonging to the children, out of ethical goodwill, but rather as remuneration to them for their arduous labour services and for making them more obedient workers; essentially operationalizing utilitarianism to justify and institutionalize hazardous child labour for spurring England's industrial growth.

Not only were the foundations of utilitarian thought based on structuring moral validation for exploiting the most vulnerable working-class populations, but this philosophy was also fundamental in facilitating the British colonization of India through the establishment of colonial educational institutions. The prioritization of English education and the impartment of "European sciences" (Hilliker, 1975), in order to "civilize" a class of native gentry that would assist British executives in creating essential industrial infrastructure for the extraction and transportation of resources from India's hinterlands, the periphery, to Britain's processing units, the core, was based on the seemingly ethical framework of racial-cultural supremacy; to be reproduced by the general rule of hegemonic colonial subjugation. The realization of this rule was effectuated through the establishment of elitist, exclusivist colonial schools- designed to strictly cater to upper-caste Hindus and Muslims; thereby emboldening caste oppression and widening social inequity between marginalized and privileged castes (Rao, 2019a). This is because the invigoration of the utilitarian framework took place largely to transform Britain into a global hegemon, as in this way the British Empire and its citizens could maximize their utility through the appropriated wealth, which explains the ethical validation this framework extended to industrial child labour exploitation and colonial oppression. These structural problems within utilitarianism preclude it from being completely in tandem with the objective of social equity in the starkly caste-entrenched rural regions of the postcolonial Indian nation.

Could there be a characteristically different moral worldview that works to build socially just institutions? Social equity is, in actuality, a moral priority that was historically conceptualized in a truly holistic, systemic and all-encompassing framework not by elite philosophers belonging to dominant social groups, but rather by the structurally oppressed and disenfranchised social groups in different parts of the world. As it is evident in the aforementioned discussion, the elite view of morality and social welfare- whether Eurocentric or upper-caste-centric- has always imagined these ideas in a reductionist, incomplete and selective sense; since in both these worldviews, the collective good exists only for the individuals belonging to their respective identities and communities. Eurocentric philosophers deemed the colonial enslavement of Indigenous people and Global South countries a necessary instrument for ensuring the socioeconomic prosperity and welfare of European countries, evident from the ideas that John Stuart Mill postulated in his works (Hilliker, 1975). Similarly, in the privileged Indian upper-caste view, the institution of caste in conjunction with the capitalist economic system, is morally essential for the concentration of power, masked as intra-community welfare, to perpetually rest in the hands of the upper-castes; as the subjugation of Dalits and Adivasis ensures, to the elites, a steady supply of resources, social capital, assets, and political hegemony.

Therefore, there is a critical need for actualizing the moral epistemologies that have been practiced by oppressed communities across the world for millennia. Freedom from oppressive structures is ensured when ethical frameworks informing the resistance to those oppressive structures are acknowledged, preserved, and endorsed. Naturally, adopting an ethical framework devised by the elites to solve the problems of disempowerment they instituted will lead to no tangible positive impact. The knowledge traditions of the poor and the oppressed need to be institutionally recognized, as this would ensure the overarching intellectual sovereignty of the oppressed communities from elitist moral structures. Since ethics form the moral basis for all social, economic and political decisions, autonomous ethical epistemologies of the oppressed would configure significantly more socially equitable, economically just, and environmentally sustainable policy decisions, including but evidently not limited to the context of the education system; since those impacted by oppression know the most potent ways to dismantle it.

To foreground this proposition, one can take a critical sociological look at Indian history itself. Prior to the British colonization of India, there were several knowledge-producing educational institutions established by multiple rural communities, including caste-oppressed ones, not only to increase subject expertise across disciplines but also to democratize Indigenous ethics of social cohesion, equity and inclusivity; with Dalit and Adivasi presence being recorded in these institutions not only as knowledge seekers but also knowledge producers (Rao, 2019b). However, with the fortifying symbiotic monopoly of the upper-caste landlords and the British officials they reported to, a series of disempowerment policies were imposed, targeted towards the Dalits in particular, to ensure that their socioeconomic assets, such as land and natural resources were appropriated by the upper-caste landlords, which pushed them into abject poverty

(Gunasekaran, 2021). With the loss of basic capital, a significant proportion of Dalits now faced a dual predicament: lacking assets to access local institutions such as indigenous schools and being systematically excluded from most colonial, missionary schools till the first half of the 19th century (Rao, 2019a).

However, in the case of the Bengal Presidency, the large-scale establishment of schools for Dalits occurred primarily after the reinvigoration of the Dalit-led anti-caste movement of Matua Dharma, which operationalized subaltern Hindu Vaishnava principles as the ethical framework for assertively negotiating with the British colonial government to acquire educational opportunities and dignified livelihoods for their community since the decade of 1880 (Mukherjee, 2018; Pal, 2018). These moral structures were epistemologically autonomous, as they were formed by, of and for Dalits, and laid the foundations of the Bengali Dalit resistance to both Brahminical systems as well as British colonial exploitation of the poverty-stricken working class (Mandal, 2022). Even in the Madras Presidency, the agency of the Dalits prior to colonial industrialization, with respect to land ownership, financially stable self-employed leather-making businesses of the Arunthathiyar community, tangible participation in local government institutions as administrative officials and thus as agents of transdisciplinary knowledge-production in domains such as infrastructure, enterprise and sustainable consumption practices (Gunasekaran, 2021), was not an incidental development; but an astounding accomplishment that was attained through centuries of resistance to and making attempts for dismantling caste-perpetuating superstructures through the moral sanction of subaltern ethics, which Dalits independently conceptualized.

Such indigenous ethical frameworks do not just prioritize principles of social equity and economic justice by vying for an equitable distribution of resources and power, as evident in the aforementioned examples, but are also concerned with environmental sustainability; since marginalized communities of India, through conceptions such as Dalit Ecologies, have traditionally viewed the environment not as a commodity which would maximize utility if commercialized, but as a self-evolving system which must be preserved and with which communities should contently co-exist (Sharma, 2017). Hence, the institutional incorporation of these subaltern philosophical frameworks in the sphere of rural India's school system, by its concerned stakeholders, while adequately acknowledging marginalized groups' intellectual sovereignty over these knowledge traditions, could potentially overhaul learning outcomes, reconfigure moral priorities of the policymakers towards more socially inclusive objectives, and inculcate a holistic education that equips students with the values to create compassionate yet efficient local public systems in the present neoliberal world (Zivkovic, 2022). The very foundations of universal education provision in India were laid down by proponents of subaltern ethics, as evidenced by the establishment of equitable modern schools by Savitribai and Mahatma Jyotirao Phule in Maharashtra and by Shanti Devi, Sri Guruchand and Sri Harichand Thakur in undivided Bengal.

The basic principles of subaltern ethics can thus be understood as a non-negotiable prioritization of the rights and interests of most disenfranchised communities while formulating policies on educational access and quality, by

incorporating their grievances and feedback into the decision-making process and reinstating their role as important stakeholders. Secondly, ensuring mirror representation: through special attention given to the appointment of Dalit and Adivasi school teachers thereby reinvigorating the moral priority of marginalized communities as knowledge producers and not just knowledge seekers. Thirdly, a pronounced importance of welfare spending on education to not be looked at as a simple expenditure but as an investment in human capital, and therefore a robust presence of the state in educational provision, particularly in ensuring universal access, is not an optional preference, but a matter of mandate; since the socialist welfare state acts as a powerful expression of the poor communities' political aspirations and as their safety net. Fourthly, the invigoration of a learning environment and curriculum that focuses on a socio-ecologically conscious education, since oppressed communities are most affected by both social and environmental adversities.

Subaltern ethics therefore does not limit itself to the provision of abstract moral ideals as normative injunctions but also provides actionable policy instruments to materialize the same. Unlike utilitarianism, which mostly speaks about the concept of increasing utility attainment but does not explicitly demarcate what policy decision would classify as a valid realization of utilitarian principles. Moreover, subaltern ethics does largely provide for a more socialist, welfare-oriented provision of education, but it does not discount the involvement of non-state actors and even a few private entities that have and continue to contribute towards improving educational provision; considering it was largely the civil society movement which yielded the Right to Education Act, 2009 (ADB, 2023). Since the principle of social equity is the most fundamental moral priority for subaltern ethics, it encourages policy measures that would maximize socially equitable outcomes at each level and aspect of educational provision; even if some form of occasional private engagement takes place that effectuates largely beneficial outcomes for the marginalized school students.

The fundamental moral importance attached to social equity as a guiding principle resonates with a deontological approach to ethics, whereas a promotion of the public sector by a systematic evaluation of its preceding outcomes is a relatively consequentialist view, and subaltern ethics manages to balance both with the right posture. Occasional support to private intervention, only where feasible, but retaining a largely socialist characterization of school management and ownership is what distinguishes a subaltern ethical framework from the libertarian ideology, as the latter has straight-jacketed mandates of educational provision strictly being privately controlled; demonstrating a greater prescriptive flexibility according to the context.

4. Conclusion

Libertarian ideas, with the first principles of individual liberty and private resource ownership, do not offer a robust philosophical architecture to effectuate socially equitable outcomes in rural India's educational provision system. Somewhat divergently, utilitarianism does come close to this objective of an equitable

education system but harbours certain foundational shortcomings with respect to its proto-capitalist underpinnings of the idea of utility maximization, as well as socially incognizant definitions of rules and the harm principle.

Nevertheless, despite its severe drawbacks, utilitarianism still stands closer to the objective of socially equitable education, due to the philosophical leeway it offers through its first principles of collective welfare. However, the marginally higher net benefit derived from -utilitarian thought must not preclude the stakeholders, especially the policymakers, from making a choice that stands out as the most impactful one, which is best reflected in the holistic ethical frameworks of subaltern and indigenous Indian thought.

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