The State, Local Community and Participatory Governance Practices: Prospects of Change

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Abstract—In policy discourse of 1990s, more inclusive spaces have been constructed for realizing full and meaningful participation of common people in education. These participatory spaces provide an alternative possibility for universalizing elementary education against the backdrop of a history of entrenched forms of social and economical exclusion; inequitable education provisions; and shrinking role of the state in today's neo-liberal times. Drawing on case-studies of bottom-up approaches to school governance, the study examines an array of innovative ways through which poor people gained a sense of identity and agency by evolving indigenous solutions to issues regarding schooling of their children. In the process, state's institutions and practices became more accountable and responsive to educational concerns of the marginalized people. The deliberative participation emerged as an active way of experiencing deeper forms of empowerment and democracy than its passive realization as mere bearers of citizen rights.

Keywords—Deliberative Forum, Inclusive Spaces, Participatory Governance, People's Agency

I. THE STATE AND GOVERNANCE OF EDUCATION

IN context of the Indian State, governance of education is largely understood as a state-controlled and state-run welfare activity. However, state's traditionally assumed role is changing in response to emerging economic compulsions necessitating an ideological shift from state to market, growing disenchantment with state's uniform view of education that does not take into account local people's aspirations and values, and marked distrust in state's dysfunctional institutional arrangements. All these pressing compulsions have fuelled the search for an alternative, appropriate 'institutional mix' of modes of governance for realizing an effective state-society synergy in the sphere of education. The 'state intervention' in education is generally conceptualized in terms of three distinct and separate activities: how it is funded, how it is provided (or delivered), and how it is regulated (or controlled). Situating the argument in the context of 'hollowing out' of the state in the globalized world, Dale holds that it is not necessary for the state to primarily, if not exclusively carry out all of these activities, rather some of those activities can be shared with a wide variety of public and private, state and non-state institutions and actors [1]. It implies that while education continues to be a public issue along with other state activities, its co-ordination ceases to be sole preserve of the state or government.

Instead it becomes coordinated through a range of devolved forms of governance, with decentralization and privatization being the major forces. In the emerging framework of governance, the power of the central government gets redistributed upwards, downwards, and sideways. Jayal and others hold that in a globalizing world, this tendency towards the displacement of national power to supranational/global as well as sub-national (both regional and local) institutions of governance is inevitable [2]. However, state by virtue of being the major founder and regulator of education continues to be in the driving seat.

The development theorists largely view this devolved form of governance not as scaling down of state's engagement with education but rather as a way of re-locating and disaggregating its activities for making the state more *responsive* and *accountable* to people; and for building a democratic culture of public *participation* and deliberation in education. It is envisioned that a serious culture of active citizenship in education would have the potential to prioritize community before market, people before consumer, and public good before individual self-interest.

II. RIGHT-BASED APPROACH TO EDUCATION

In the context of development discourse in the globalizing time, the questions of how people, especially the poor, articulate their voice to influence larger institutions and policies, and how institutional responsiveness and accountability can be ensured, have become paramount. To be meaningful, arguments for participation and institutional accountability must become grounded in a conception of 'right-based approach' that strengthens the status of people from mere bearers of rights to its rightful and legitimate claimants [3].

Mahmud views that active participation in decision-making practices is itself the 'real' realization of rights as it enables people to gain a sense of agency by allowing them to define their own spaces for participation and their own 'entry points of change'. Collective people action is defined as the process of conscious and purposeful mobilization of people around a shared concern, such as right to education, land, or natural resources. It is also the process of acquiring social and political space and the operational mechanisms for making 'voices' heard in influencing the action of others. Collective people action then is a meaningful way of materialising rights in developing countries and of realizing this agentive view of citizen role [4].

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In context of India with persisting inequalities in educational access and achievement, the challenge is to make the right to education a reality. According to Pratham ASER Study, nearly 14 million children are out of the schooling system, and most children leave government primary schools without gaining basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. It is not difficult to discern the identity of these excluded children: children of landless labourers, marginal farmers and other socio-economically marginalized people that are largely located in rural and poor urban tracts [5]. This pattern of exclusion reflects inequalities within the wider social, economic, and political fabric, particularly those of caste, class, and gender.

Mehrotra observes that economic and social policies of last two decades have substantially weakened the resolve of government to provide equitable educational opportunity to all children, diluted the quality of education, debilitated teacher morale, and also considerably undermined the capacity of poor households to invest in education [6]. The private schooling, gaining *de facto* ascendency through the state's under-provided educational provisions has complicated the picture by further dividing population in terms of social positioning of caste, class and gender. In the resulting configuration, the most disadvantaged tend to get clustered in largely dysfunctional government schools and this further erodes wider public interest in the state of government schools. Thus, education policy itself spells out who is included or excluded from the schooling system.

Subrahmanian attributes non-realization of the constitutional mandate of free and compulsory education for all children under the age of 14 years to decades of policy failure. Analyzing the policy discourse, she observes that 93rd Constitutional Amendment that would guarantee education as the fundamental right is not shaped by the broader vision set by the 'right' but is largely framed by the dictates of pre-decided policy priorities and approaches. By yoking the vision of 'right' to pre-existing government policy practices in the education sector, economic considerations of the state have visibly distorted the ways and means of realizing education as a fundamental component of the 'right to life', and hence the right to live with 'human dignity'. Financial allocations for education that have consistently stayed below the six percent of GDP level have further marred the possibility for providing equitable educational opportunities to all children in traditionally unequal Indian society [7], [8].

The fore grounded discussion points to seemingly inherent contradiction between a right-based approach to education and the mental intent of various governments in determining what constitutes equitable educational provisions. A policy perspective that largely views instrumental value of education in terms of harnessing human capital in existing globalizing times is bound to run-over the view that intrinsically regards education as an entitlement for realizing wider social and economic choices and nurturing human potential. The imminent challenge then is how to frame and structure rights to ensure full and meaningful participation of all in education.

III. PARTICIPATORY SPACES FOR REALIZING THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

The right-based approach to education provides a framework for accepting that education is an entitlement of each and every citizen irrespective of one's social, class, spatial, and gender identity. However narrowly conceived policy agenda that are largely geared to meet targets for universalizing enrolment fail to take into account the power relationships that have traditionally shaped the exclusion processes in education. Subrahmanian observes that the right to education would not be meaningfully realized without reordering the relationships between state administrators, teachers, dominant social groups, and the poorer, low-caste groups within the communities. Building more inclusive, participatory, and accountable spaces, particularly for those who are outside the education system to articulate their concerns and aspirations, then seem to be a meaningful alternative [9].

Cornwall holds that nature of these spaces and dynamics of participation within them is crucial for realizing a sense of agency and entitlement by the most disadvantaged people. Participation means more than taking up invitation to participate; it extends to autonomous forms of action through which people create their own opportunities and terms of engagement. It entails reconfiguring space between people and the institutions that affect their education and life options, particularly those of the state. An attendant feature is repositioning people with regard to traditional forms of institutional governance and dominant social groups so as to enable them to demand their entitlements and press for accountability. Within the liberal frame of democracy, it amounts to more direct form of democratic participation through which people set priorities, plan and explore alternatives through deliberative processes [10].

The academic discourse on 'participation' regards it as a situated practice and calls for locating spaces for participation in the places in which they occur, "framing their possibilities with reference to actual political, social, cultural, and historical peculiarities rather than idealised notions of democratic practice"[11, pp.51].The forms and ways through which these spaces are made available to the marginalized people to seek their rights and to reconfigure power relationships within them are of crucial importance.

Lefebvre views that at any given place, there are many different domains for participation, constitutionally and legally provided 'official' spaces that exist alongside 'unofficial' spaces of everyday life. These spaces are not separable; what happens in one impinges on what happens in others, as relations of power within and across them are constantly reconfigured. However, there is always a risk that space in which people are invited to participate, as well as those that they create for themselves, may come to be infused with existing power relations, thus further reproducing existing relations of rule [12].

In the context of India, constitutional provisions like *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs), a three-tiered local governance system in India, with formations at village cluster,

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block and district levels offer a significant opportunity for strengthening people voice, even though they too may be subject to elite capture. Reference [8] shows that they can provide a strong counterpoint to the bureaucracy at sub-district level , and are the only local institutions capable of questioning and challenging administrative decisions that affect education delivery.

With institutionalization of local governance structures, there has been a discernible trend to deregulate centralized educational bureaucracy and create in its place a devolved system of schooling, entailing an increased involvement of parents, teachers, and other community members in school management and decision-making practices. At the most inclusive end of the spectrum, people select their roles, and activities may extend to the level of influencing school practices, teacher support and policy-making; and at the other end, participation may be limited to school construction, food distribution and resource mobilization activities. The institutional forms that facilitate community participation are largely people-collective bodies such as community-school management committees, parent-teacher associations, village education committees, mothers' groups and other grassroots forums. Thus, decentralization has emerged as a common rallying point for bringing together diverse actors such as the state bureaucracy, community-based organizations, women groups and civic society to work jointly on improving education.

The role of state in the decentralized framework of educational governance, particularly in the Third World societies has generated much heated controversy and debate in policy forums. Cornwall, Gaventa and its other advocates hold that a devolved framework having an adequate scope for local self-management will release abundant energy, innovative spirit, leadership talents, vibrancy and innate problem-solving capacity that reside in common people, but that usually gets stifled in the existing over-centralized system of governance. Community participation holds weight when it carries the crucial promise of reconstructing social fabric that has been traditionally unequal or otherwise destroyed after a conflict. From this standpoint, decentralization gets equated with democracy on the basis of greater local sovereignty, increased people participation and enhanced state responsiveness to the needs of marginalized groups.

From the neoliberal perspective of World Bank and IMF, decentralization is a way to channel badly needed resources into the under-funded education sector and provide schooling where none existed previously. For activists and Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) workers, it has the potential to empower communities by including many marginalized groups in decision-making processes, enhance the accountability and responsiveness both of local government institutions to their constituencies and of local schools to the context around them. In context of rural India, Dreze and Sen observe that endemic problem of teacher absenteeism can be successfully tackled by involving the proximate and informed agency of village communities [13]. The larger political lobby supports the meaningful

decentralization of state system as a way of further consolidating their electoral base. Manor, on basis of his work in India and Africa concludes that decentralization holds a considerable promise in promoting citizen participation, increasing information flow between governments and citizens, enhancing transparency and accountability, integrating society with the state and invigorating democracy at the national level [14].

However, the critics of decentralization question the genuineness of civic engagement and empowerment in state's devolved framework of governance. They view community participation as a rhetoric, a ploy for the reduced role of State in education as envisaged in the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) designed by the IMF and the World Bank. The critical education observers of ilk of Sadgopal take serious objection to the ways through which neo-liberal agenda has unfolded in education [7]: shrinking state investment in education; increasing the number of students per class so as to cut down on teaching cost; creating more flexible framework for hiring teachers, largely untrained and arbitrarily fixing their salaries at lower levels and at the same time continuing with centralized evaluation systems; changing curricula as per the needs of emerging global markets; decentralizing governance so as to reduce the central government's financial and administrative responsibilities for education; and creating space for total privatization of education. Balagopalan on basis of her study of educational provisions for working children in Kolkata slums concludes that such minimal provisions have distorted the very idea of school and community and dialectics between them [15].

The intended gains of decentralized mode of governance are also a suspect: devolution of responsibility but not power, risk of resource and power capture by local elites, weak accountability mechanisms leading to corruption, complexities arising out of lack of clearly defined roles and functions of and relationships between the different levels of governance, etc.[13], [16].

Summing up, a caution is needed as in the neo-liberal times the state may falter in its constitutional mandate to provide equitable education to all children, the spatial metaphors like 'opening-up' or 'widening' spaces; 'deepening' democratic practices; and associated notions like 'participation' and 'empowerment' may be craftily deployed to promote citizen participation as their 'duty' rather than as state responsibility.

IV. LOCATING PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE PRACTICES IN EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES: AN EMERGING PICTURE

The Constitution of India (1950) aimed for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years and this national commitment was to be realized through a more egalitarian, inclusionistic and equitable public education system. Yet, the goal to Universalize Elementary Education (UEE) continues to be elusive, both in qualitative and quantitative terms, in spite of the much-publicized education reform programs of the Nineties. This dismal state of education has sharpened the

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vacuities underlying the state's ways of perceiving, implementing and organizing schooling experiences for common children.

A great deal of recent policy discourse holds that the failing public education stems largely from state's mainstream institutional arrangements and governance practices that lack accountability and responsiveness as their distant positioning has alienated them from ground realities and needs of ordinary people, particularly the marginalized. Expanding and deepening community participation in state's actions seems to be the most promising strategy to shore up this institutional deficit. An emerging perspective in social theorizing constructs a more inclusive, people-centric, decentralized form of participatory governance through which the traditionally excluded social groups gain a sense of agency by articulating their voice in decision-making practices that shape schooling and life-options of their children.

In response to mounting criticism against the centralized structures and approaches of educational governance, the various government reports and policies started rooting for an education system that is more responsive and accountable to the 'community'. The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 and 1992 not only recommended decentralized management of education at all levels but also created a context for empowering the local community to take major management decisions, in this regard. These National Policy initiatives building on the recommendations of the Education Commission of India, 1966, advocated for a meaningful engagement of the community in primary education management. Some of the key management initiatives suggested over the years are: decentralize educational planning and management, bring it closer to people and make it more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the community; involve the community in managing/ monitoring the school and establish village education committees (school management committees, parent-teacher associations, school betterment committee); introduce flexible school timings and a region-specific school calendar.

The strategy of proactive involvement of community in school's planning and management got further fillip with institutional revival of the *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (PRI) through the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution in 1992 that made the setting up of local bodies at the village, block, district and municipal levels, through a process of democratic elections, mandatory. PRIs created a context for reforming the school system by providing a forum for institutionalising community and parental participation in school management [2].

As a policy response, the Indian Government initiated several programmes, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the erstwhile District Primary Education Program (DPEP, 1994) being one of them. DPEP's strategies aimed at achieving gender and social equity through shared responsibility of the community in promoting enrolment, retention, achievement and school effectiveness. Thus, the 1990s witnessed perhaps the most significant moves towards decentralization both in terms of policy reformulations and interventions in the field of education.

However, in operationlization of these enabling frameworks of decentralization, varying trends started emerging. Raina holds that the notion of decentralized educational governance does not genuinely gets reflected at the school-level as pedagogic processes and management practices supporting it continues to be largely located in the state's centralized structures and mechanisms. The Pedagogical questions such as "the production and diffusion of knowledge, linkage of social, cultural and natural environments with the teaching-learning process, and enhancement of the quality of education by making it relevant and interesting to the child are" are not seriously taken into account [17]. Govinda views that as most of the critical decision-making areas are retained by the state government, genuine spread of empowerment as realized through building decision making practices in common people is a suspect [16].

Amidst these centralization debates, *Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program*, *Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad*, and *Lok Jumbish*, largely the non-governmental projects stand out as a 'people's collective' initiative to reinvigorate the existing programme of primary education by making the schools more responsive and inclusive and in the process, the community's own development in terms of its quality of life gets advanced. By involving community in the process of school mapping and micro planning, the people's-collective was initiated into the 'democratic culture' of rational decision-making and self-determination. The guiding assumption is that capabilities for self-management among the community members evolve through practice rather than prescription. Flexibility to evolve its own curricula and teacher-training approaches brought the programme nearer to the community. Thus, these projects demonstrated the possibility of building a system of local governance for primary education from below – the grass root level. Community empowerment is then, not a notional idea. Rather, it aims at building social synergy and cohesion by drawing all stakeholders in a process of informed decision-making that is tied to an action.

The potentiality of such people's-collective initiatives in revitalizing the education system and the role of NGOs as partners in the process of realizing the UEE agenda was increasingly getting recognized at the state's policy and programme levels. Formal spaces are created for NGOs to collaborate with the state in supporting government schools in terms of strengthening community-owned management practices, evolving interesting curriculum and supporting teachers [18]. *Pratham*, an initiative by UNICEF and Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) is a fine illustration of public-centred development in the field of primary education. Building on partnership between citizens, corporate sector, communities, and the state government, *Pratham* is engaged in universalizing primary education in Mumbai by strengthening mainstream education system.

However, under SSA's effort to universalize and improve the quality of education, there is a growing realization that urban poor children are getting excluded from many of such

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UEE initiatives. Unprecedented urban population growth in the last decade, inadequate schooling infrastructure to cope with the continuing influx of migrants, lack of micro-level units for planning implementation, a multiplicity of agencies, generally uncoordinated and a very heterogeneous community, are some of the officially stated factors that are affecting education and coverage of deprived urban children.

The problem further gets compounded in the context of urban governance. Urban dwellers are finding themselves in a governance vacuum as there are no bottom-up structures to create more proximity and accountability between the citizen and their urban local government. This is unlike the rural context where the stratum of governance is getting strengthened through the PRI structures. The centrality of the citizen and the bottom-up nature of local self government thus get marginalized in the urban planning policy perspectives. And the situation is becoming worse, because while India was 28 percent urban at the turn of the century, it is projected to be 46 percent by 2030. Given the state of urban governance and its ramifications for education of the slum children, under SSA, spaces are created in the mainstream formal system for the government, civil society and community to address social and educational needs of such children in a collaborative mode [18].

V. THE RESEARCH STUDY

The data for this article is drawn from the larger Programme for Enhancement of School Level Education (PESLE) Assessment Study that was commissioned by the Aga Khan Foundation, India (AKF-I), an International NGO(I-NGO). In its pursuit to support innovative 'school-based education reform' initiatives, AKF-I launched PESLE with the mandate to improve enrolment, retention and achievement of children by impacting government school systems and practices. Disadvantaged children, especially girls belonging to economically weaker, socially marginalized and minority communities in urban and rural areas were the intended beneficiaries of the PESLE initiative (1999-2007).

The project objective was to bring together a consortium of civil society initiatives working in elementary education under the PESLE's umbrella for consolidating, scaling up and mainstreaming the best school practices that emerged in their specific socio-geographical contextual realities. The idea was to build a rich collection of experiences, approaches, processes, and strategies to inform academic debates and discourse for possibility of qualitatively improving the larger public education system.

Mobilizing community and building its perspective on education, continuous professional support to teachers, evolving culturally relevant pedagogic practices to improve educational outcomes, influencing state machinery with informed field realities, and building social bridges among all stakeholders were some of the positive PESLE Project achievements. Children, teachers, parents, community, state officials, local social and political activists all were regarded as both critical actors and stakeholders in the process. Developing critical faculties in historically marginalized for

experiencing empowerment by meaningfully participating in more inclusive people-collective forums was the underlying project approach.

With PESLE coming to an end in 2007, the objective of the PESLE Assessment Study (2006-7) was to document the 'best practices' that emerged during the project intervention and have the potentiality to strengthen the mainstream school system. Early childhood education, professional development of teachers, learning teaching processes in schools, school governance and management practices; and community involvement were the broad project components that were to be assessed. The assessment study sites were spread across the states of Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra, both rural and urban.

The objective of present micro study, sub-part of larger PESLE Assessment Study was to understand:

- the institutional arrangements and enabling ways through which previously marginalized groups increased their access to and representation in process of school governance;
- the educational gains of this enhanced participation in terms of enrolment, and retention;
- the ways in which the state-society initiatives promote the capacity building and self-identity of these groups, resulting in their enhanced confidence and self-esteem;
- how does the shift in the mind-sets of the government teachers, Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), and bureaucracy take place?
- the key insights, issues and challenges.

A working framework was evolved to understand which strategies or combination of strategies contributed to the emergence of these shifts or changes in different contexts. The framework incorporated direct observations, informal conversations, open-ended interviews and focus-group discussions (FGD) to empirically capture the dynamics of field realities. FGDs provided a useful platform to build discussions for understanding the perception and experiences of various stakeholders in the decentralized school management practices. The children, parents, community members, teachers, local politicians, social activists, and government officials were primary focus groups of the study. In addition, records of community meetings, parent meetings, school development meetings were examined to understand the nature and quality of deliberations and decision-making processes that take place in these forums in the context of school practices. School records also provided an insight into the patterns of enrolment, attendance and retention. Operationally, a school and its alignment with other social actors such as children, parents, teachers, community members, social activists and government officials constituted the project- site for the study.

In consultation with the local NGO, those intervention-sites were identified as a study sample that held the promise of offering evidence of discernable educational and social gains as realized through participatory practices. The purposively

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selected sample sites were located in the urban settings of state of Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, the educationally lagging Indian States with schooling outcomes skewed against girls, lower classes and religious minorities.

In this article, four projects of urban community involvement are discussed- *Rana Basti*, *Chetna Basti*, *Amagarh*, and *Janathanagar*. Each case reflects the hard work of social activists, parents, community, teachers, and practitioners for strengthening people's presence inside the school and around concerns of education. Parent-teacher associations, school management and betterment committees, mothers groups and other community-based organizations are few instances that afford urban community the context to experience empowerment by participating in activities that support schools, generally the hierarchically governed institutions. However, as these artifactual instances were purposively selected to look for the likely possibility of social and educational gains stemming from the project initiative, the emerging conclusions are to be held with caution. As substantiated below, education created a context for realizing 'collective empowerment' spreading across a diversified network of stakeholders.

A. The Government Primary School, Rana Basti, Jaipur

With shrinking of agrarian economy and frequent crop failure, the Jaipur city is experiencing an unprecedented influx of migrants who are descending on the state capital in search of better livelihood opportunities and life options. In absence of well-intended social welfare policies, the incoming mass of the dispossessed people settles down on any available vacant stretch of state land. Their settlements are built without valid permission, without infrastructure, and without any modicum of planning. From the state's perspective, these migrants are the illegal inhabitants and hence are excluded from the basic entitlements that are being conferred by the state on its people. Consequently, there are no specific policy directives or provisions to address the schooling needs of the children dwelling on the encroached state land. This official posturing contravenes the constitutional mandate that any child irrespective of her spatial location is entitled to education.

Rana Basti slum is an instance of one such informal slum settlement. Against this exclusionary backdrop, the people organized themselves into a slum-level association – the' *Basti Committee'* and resolved that school is the basic right of children and children should not be denied education on account of their spatial location. The '*Basti Committee'* moved an application to the Principal Secretary, School Education and Commissioner, Jaipur Development Authority for constructing a temporary structure for a government school in their *Kacchi Basti*, an informal slum settlement. The local municipality made the land available to the school, free of cost. In the foundation laying ceremony of the primary school, also attended by the author, the local political representative, state functionaries, government teachers, parents, local social activists and community converged on a single platform to mark the occasion.

With the setting up of a government school, a 'state institution' on an unauthorized public land, a heightened sense of empowerment was visible in the community that till now had perceived itself merely as an 'electorate mass'. The community experienced a shift from the 'representative democracy' as exercised through voting as a periodic elector to the 'participatory democracy' where the system took into account the local people's needs and aspirations as the basis for taking up action. In such an expanded framework of collaborative partnership that cuts across various levels of power structure, there is a 'wider ownership' of the school and its practices. The process of setting-up of school has being initiated in some 324 slums in Jaipur city with the help of *Bodh*, the local NGO [19].

As of now, the government school is functioning from a temporary make-shift structure. The teacher has started the process of enrolling and orienting children to the basic schooling competencies. The case of Rana Basti symbolizes a struggle to seek identity, social justice and equitable entitlement by those excluded from the state's misplaced development policies. In the process, the assumptions perpetuated by the dominant development discourse that the subalterns are neither cognitively able to articulate their own world view nor can validly interpret their own oppression also gets dismantled. The school has emerged as a primary site for deepening the meaning of democracy as an ongoing struggle and for anchoring the transformatory processes that can be spread to the other sites like health, food and livelihood security.

Transformation in Rana Basti could be realized because of a visible shift in the mind-set of policy planners, bureaucracy and state officials. The rigid government system is 'opening-up' to give space to local, community-based initiatives. It clearly emerged in a discussion I had with Akhil Arora, Director, SSA, Rajasthan Council of Elementary Education. He opined that "*urban marginalized never figured prominently in state's planning exercises. However, the government has now realized that rather than prescribing a universalistic strategy, it will be more meaningful to partner with local people to strengthen the school system"*.

B. The Government Primary School, Chetna Basti, Jaipur

Chetna Basti is a slum having a conglomeration of families that migrated from rural areas at different points of time in search of better livelihood opportunities and settled on an unused government land in 1990. *Jaribotiwale, Dholewale* and *Singriwale* communities constitute the main social fabric of the basti. Selling forest products, beating drums and making bamboo curtains is their traditional occupation. Besides these traditional occupations, families are engaged in garbage-sorting, shoe-polishing and begging. A Basti Survey conducted by *Bodh*, the local NGO in 2006 indicated that 84% of 6-14 years of children are out of school and 69% is the drop-out rate among these children. At the time of survey, only eight children were attending the school and the school was functioning on an average for two hours. There was very

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little communication between the school and community city [19].

Two sets of varying perspectives emerged from the survey regarding dismal state of government school's functioning: One, teachers' negative perception regarding educability of slum children and tendency to attribute non-enrolment as an inherent social character of migrating communities. Two, for the families subsisting below poverty line, working children are perceived as an additional support system and, if school turns out to be dysfunctional, it dampens parents' belief in school's ability to improve their life-options city [19].

In collaboration with state officials, the local NGO started addressing the problem from both ends from the platform of "*School-Basti Manch*"- School-Slum Community Platform. On one hand, the government teachers were sensitized to community's social dynamics as lived and inducted in contextually relevant pedagogic practices. On the other hand, community was made to realize its stake and responsibility towards owning the government school. With these initiatives, the process of building trust and confidence between the school and community was set into motion.

As on March 2007, eighty five children have been integrated into school and regularly held community-school meetings are well-attended. The government teacher, Renuka is optimistic about the potential role of community in ensuring children's enrolment and attendance. She told me in an interview that she always doubted educability of these slum children, but now stands corrected after closely interacting with children, parents, and their lived realities.

Roshni, Kalia, Puja have discontinued the practice of garbage-sorting and begging; Hasan, Ayub and Altaf no longer miss school to accompany their father on ferrying trips; Reshma, Rani, and other girl children are freed from drudgery of domestic chores and sibling care to attend school. For Neelu Devi, Razia, and other mothers, family's social life is increasingly getting organized around schooling experiences of their children.

The case study of *Chetna Basti* gives an insight into how a discontinuity in relationship between teachers and parents can lead to disengagement of community from schooling processes. It then takes extra effort and resources to re-build and revitalize the relationship.

C. The Community School, Amagarh, Jaipur

Amagarh symbolises story of a community's journey of experiencing empowerment by rallying itself around the school. Topographically, Amagarh is a shanty colony in Jaipur city and is largely inhabited by the migrant Muslim families engaged in gem-polishing work. The distantly located government school was out of reach of young children, especially girls. In 1993, with the help of the local NGO, a community-based school, *Bodhshala was* setup with 40 children and 1 teacher in Amagarh. The school currently caters to the educational needs of 763 children of 3-18 years of age, and also acts as a nodal resource centre for disseminating innovative pedagogic practices to the neighbouring schools.

As of now, enrolment rate is above 90 percent and retention rate is around 80 percent.

Amagarh's case-study is constructed by analyzing proceedings of the 'school-community meetings' held since 1994 for showcasing a discernible trend in changing perspective of community; focused – group discussions with fathers, mothers, children and other community members; clergy at local *Madarsa*; and in-depth interviews with teachers and state officials. The records of school-community meetings held since 1990s is well documented and are available in the school for reference [20].

Amagarh Bodhshala has demonstrated the possibility of mobilizing, organizing and empowering the community to the level from where it can articulate demand of a responsible and answerable quality school system. 'Dialogue', a democratic way of engaging in informed deliberations was consensually adapted as an organizational culture for conduct of regularly held '*school-community meetings*'. Dialogue is not a mechanical process of sharing views and experiences in a conversational style, rather, it is a reflective practice of engaging in a critical analysis of contextual issues – social, political, ideological and educational. It is a process of knowing, learning, organizing one's thought processes, and taking an appropriate action. Bakhtin regards dialogue as the 'social DNA' of human community. Through dialogue, power relations penetrate the inner speech of individuals, subsequently modifying their consciousness and external communication [21]. Through sustained engagement with this dialogical culture, community's social capital was harnessed to realize the distinct social and educational gains. It is a long-drawn out process as evidenced by the Amagarh Community that almost took a decade to graduate to this reflective practice.

Box I : Amagarh Bodhshala : Graduating from Community-based to Community-owned School

1994 – 1997 : ***Major focus on school infra-structural and organisational issues***
Identifying site for constructing school; participating in school construction activities by providing local materials, masonry and labour; enrolment and attendance issues; timings of Madarsa and Bodhshala; mooting the idea of school fee.

1998 – 2001 : ***Evolving concerns***
Attainment level of children; staggering timing of the school to have multiple shifts; upgrading school to the next level; ways to stabilize children's attendance; developing broader understanding of school practices and processes; demand for teaching English as a subject; and seriousness in addressing issues of girl child education.

2002 – 2007 : ***Emergence of reflective perspective***
Seeing pedagogy as integral to learning; developing an understanding of curricular and assessment practices from the perspective of educational psychology; acknowledging criticality of women's participation in school processes and resolving to constitute a women's group *Mahila Samooh*; constantly watching teachers' performance and demanding explanation for any

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laxness or irregularity; developing a perspective on innovative vs. traditional ways of learning and teaching; concerns about quality of educational practices and processes gain currency in the discussions; linking education to future life options; analysing result of class VIII and suggesting strategies to support weak children; and deciding the agenda of the next meeting.

Source: Year-wise culling out of issues from School-Community Meeting Registers, Amagarh Bodhshala [20].

Box I illustrates evolving shifts in the nature of deliberations in the school-community meetings. The first phase (1994-97) can be termed as NGO-centric as because of civil initiative, the community got initiated into culture of thinking and engaging itself in discussions regarding school issues. In the second phase (1998-2001), there is a positive change in the mindset of the community towards education, especially that of the girl child. In the third phase (2002-2007), there is a reflective shift towards community ownership, as the community started articulating issues about the quality of educational practices, teacher competency and accountability, learner achievement and deciding the agenda of its next meeting. The shift in quality of deliberations from exteriority of the school to the interiority of classroom, from student absenteeism and achievement to teacher absenteeism and competency, from women being personae non grate to their criticality in decision-making and from the local NGO deciding agenda of the next meeting to community deciding the agenda signifies emergence of an empowered, 'reflective community' that has started regarding the Bodhshala School as its own enterprise with role of the state as that of a facilitator.

With the increasing ownership of the school, the social character and familial dynamics of the community is also changing. As put by Akhtar, Member, Madarsa Committee and School-Community Committee, "*the entire community is organized around the schooling concerns of their children. Parents feel more responsive towards education of their children, and the families have started sending their adolescent girls to the residential hostel*". Yusuf, gave up eating *Paan* (betel-leaf) and Talib, started working overtime to support educational needs and aspirations of their school-going children.

In a FGD with mothers' group, women clearly articulated changing perceptions toward education of girl child in their closely knit community where brother favouritism is a norm. Bano, a mother of two girls opinionated that, "*keeping girls illiterate is akin to digging their graves. In changing times, a right mix of religious and school education would give strength to a girl to face any eventuality in life*". In Amagarh, school is emerging as a potent change agent, infusing a sense of social cohesion and consciousness toward education, especially girl child. Saira, an eight year old girl beamingly announced that, "*my abu says that I would become a District Collector*". The District Collector is the highest bureaucratic position in a district. She has confidently started treading the unchartered trajectory.

D. The Government High School, Janathanagar, Hyderabad

In large metropolises, especially in the old industrial cities like Hyderabad, spatial dispossession as concentrated in tracts of slums and squatter settlements is the most visible and evident form of social exclusion. For slum-based community, material impoverishment, social dislocation, and exclusion from society's strategic resources, in particular the school is an inscribed way of life. The landless and marginal farmers, local artisans, weavers, potters, and other dispossessed groups who have been unwittingly subsumed in industrial economic order constitute the social fabric of a typical urban slum.

An education survey was conducted by the state government in 2006 in select child-labour intensive slums or *Basti* in *Balanagar Mandal* of the Hyderabad City. The survey found that many slums lacked basic schooling facility, while others were served by an under-resourced school system that was largely dysfunctional in terms of quality of schooling and other stimulating experiences, teachers' pre-constructed stereotypic beliefs about educability of these children, and a limited horizon of realizable social and occupational mobility as seen by parents and children city [22].

Madhusudan, Additional Project Coordinator (ACP) of state SSA Program further informed me that, "*Though enrolment is over 95%, but only 27% of children in class five can read and write. The major challenge is to improve quality of schooling experiences so as to retain children and raise level of their academic competencies*". He visualized an active civic society support in realizing SSA targets and educational outcomes.

At every point, both inside and outside the formal education system, there are social forces which systematically create a context for children to disengage from school and to get appropriated into dynamics of informal labour economy. Rolling of *beedis* (local cigarette), making incense sticks, manually moulding iron stripes into safety pins, working in liquor shops, auto repair workstations, bootlegging and domestic helpers are some of the occupational destination of school drop-out children. Children are highly vulnerable to physical and mental health hazards.

In response to ground realities of slum children, some of the interventionist measures that were evolved to bring back school drop-out, never-enrolled working children into fold of formal education system were: mobilizing community for building perspective on education, strengthening teacher training program, linking school practices to community's contextual realities and building a wider network of ownership that is collectively responsible for improving educational level of children who otherwise run the risk of either receiving poor quality schooling or missing out on it altogether. The civil society was an active partner in implementing and owning SSA processes.

With support from a local NGO, '*The School Development Committee' (SDC)* was constituted as a forum for multiple stakeholders – children, parents, families, communities, local social and political activists, teachers and government officials to converge on a common platform to engage in a continuous

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process of collective reflection, decision-making and evolving action to revive the failing neighbourhood school. For an enduring change to occur, all of them were visualized to be strategically equal partners in the process. SDC was envisioned as an innovative participatory approach for rallying people's collective around common agenda of owning the neighbourhood school. SDC was constituted in each of the some 44 elementary and high schools in the *Balanagar Mandal* by an official order city [22].

The Government High School in Janathnagar is one such school that figured near the bottom of annual academic league tables published by the state education department. One of the major tasks of School Development Committee of Janathanagar was to stabilize school attendance. The Community Volunteer (CVs) played a crucial role in ensuring students' regularity. Every day, after the roll-call is over, they collect list of absentee children from headmaster, make a hurried visit to these children's homes, try to sort out their problems, if any, and then persuade children to come to school with them. Laxmi and Swarnalatha, the CVs attached to the school informed me that, "*sibling care, storing drinking water, seasonal illness, and family's economic uncertainties are some of the reasons that compel children to miss school*". On day of the field visit, Community Volunteers were able to bring back five out of fourteen absentee children.

Box II affirms that SDC has gone far beyond its intended mandate. It is emerging as a pressure group for liberating children from their work places and reinstating them in school; ensuring that Basti children stay connected with school; and influencing the larger society and local political-administrative system. Ramesh, a SDC Member used to employ children in his flour mill as it was a form of cheap labour. However, with the intervention of SDC, he not only stopped the practice but felt morally responsible for education of Bala and Suresh, his former employees. Ramesh got both children enrolled in the Janthanagar School and is taking care of their educational needs. As an active member of the School Development Committee, he is also campaigning against child labour. Suresh wants to become a computer operator. Rama, her mother visualizes that education would enable the family to break the vicious circle of poverty, lack of livelihood options and social denigration, a way out of *fait accompli*.

In a well-attended SDC meeting, I was the participant observer. Over twenty members assembled in the principal's room, listened to each other, questioned, argued, and systematically worked out solutions for a range of issues such as : fixing malfunctioning flushes in toilets, requisitioning the zone education officer to release grant for procuring text-books, deciding to retain poor performing students for an extra year in the primary school before they reach the examination – oriented senior classes, finalizing modalities for selecting para-teaches, and reviewing the impact of book reading club, a after school programme for improving students' literary competency. The community in Janathanagar is today positioned as the primary decision maker within school. However, it has yet to cover a considerable ground as the material power is still held by the central administration.

Nevertheless, school reform practices in Balanagar Mandal provide a framework of collective resolve and synergy between the state administration and the civil society to resurrect a failing government school.

The extent to which SDC, an informal body could wield influence on the mainstream school was evidenced as on my request, S. Rao SDC Member, was able to procure student-wise and class-wise result, an official record from the school principal. He was further able to point-out the cases of absentee and failing students. Such cases are regularly considered in SDC meetings that are held with the teachers, headmaster and community volunteers.

Box II: School Development Committee (SDC), Govt. High School, Janathanagar, Moosapet Cluster

Area Profile
Child labour intensive industrial area; parents are largely illiterate and are engaged as construction labourers, scavengers, sweepers, or domestic helpers.

SDC Profile
Members are petty shop owners, a civil contractor, an electric sub-contractor, auto-drivers, a retired government teacher, a flour-mill owner, a labour contractor and parents.

School Vision, assumptions, accomplishments and impact as articulated by SDC members

Vision
Providing an equitable education to all disadvantaged children drawn from the specified neighbourhood

Working Assumptions
A dysfunctional school contributes to child labour; a meaningful engagement of community in school functioning in terms of active SDC will ensure retention and achievement; one teacher per class till primary and subject-specialists from class – VI onwards; school atmosphere should be child friendly, stress free, collegiality among staff members; and activities like library and reading club will further strengthen school functioning

Accomplishments
Up-gradation of school till class – X ; waiving-off examination fees; free textbooks for class – X students; realising transfer of incompetent teachers; SDC generated funds to provide for five additional 'qualified' teachers to further reinforce school's teaching resources

Impact
Sharp increase in student enrolment and retention; Growing concern and realization on part of the parents towards education of their children; Impressed upon the larger community to discontinue employing children in their establishments; Attained the status of the best school with respect to academic achievements in *Moosapet* Cluster;

Exodus of children from government to private school has been reduced; Community has easy access to school functioning in terms of its records, data and results; Process of owning of the government school by the local community has firmed up.

SDC is emerging as an empowered body that is capable of developing a school competency checklist, critically analyzing

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school results and questioning teachers for failing results

Summing up

"P. Abhimanyu, a SDC Member is of view that, "community has to start owning up the neighbourhood government school as private education is becoming unaffordable. It is time for community to respond to needs of the school or otherwise it will be too late to revive the government school system".

Source: As constructed on basis of school records, minutes of SDC meetings and FGD held with SDC members, parents and governments teachers, High School, Janathnagar, Moosapet Cluster, Balanagar Mandal, Hyderabad [22].

VI. POST-SCRIPT: PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

This paper examined some of the possible ways, both theoretically and practically, through which potential of ordinary people drawn from the lowest strata of the society was harnessed in a concerted fashion to influence larger institutional practices that affect schooling and life options of their children. The strength of these participatory practices lie in their artifactual nature, i.e., *'The Basti Committee'*, *'The School Development Committee'* and *'School Community Meeting'* were largely the informal intermediaries, non-state people-collective arrangements that evolved naturally in response to exigencies of the local situation rather than passively relying upon top-down institutional arrangements that are either defunct or fail to take into account contextual needs and specificities. An additional gain was that the people who got initiated into deliberative culture through these intermediaries have started demanding the same consultative mode to be practised in formal state bodies like village education committee, school management committee and other social or political arrangements.

The data signal that a distinct possibility of realizing education and social change has emerged at two levels. Firstly, it affirms the potentiality of a common person as an active agent in change process. In an intrinsically participatory framework of governance as practiced in schools of Rana Basti, Chetna Basti, Amagarh and Janathanagar the people experienced empowerment by raising concerns, holding the state accountable, setting agendas, building social capital and evolving indigenous solutions. The synergy between people and teachers was also maximized. In fact, teachers were equal partners in the school renewal process and not the defaulters as they are often made to be.

These people-collective efforts assume significance as in neo-liberal statecraft, decentralization is being widely promoted as a major instrument for deregulating and disaggregating state's functioning by opening up the space for multiple other actors, primarily the market, state's own 'delivery agency' model of public education and the others to intervene. Krishna Kumar cautions that neo-liberal perspective is often whipped in the education discourse to cover- up the inefficiency and responsibility of the Indian State in providing equitable quality of education to all children. An instrumentalist notion of the state poses a grave risk for the role of education in harnessing the intellectual and creative

potential of people [23]. In a traditionally unequal and sizable society like India, the space vacated by the State does not necessarily translate into genuine people participation. Rather, in absence of a strong communicative channel between state and its people, chances of it being usurped by market forces or socially powerful groups or target bound statist programmes are amplified. From this viewpoint, a more nuanced theory of the state is needed than is usually available from the liberal state-versus-market debate.

In order to full-fill its constitutional mandate of providing free and compulsory education to all children till they attain the age of fourteen years, the Indian State needs to be positioned in a way that it is strong (literally speaking) enough to offset the impact of supranational forces on the one hand, while on the other, it strives to evolve a framework of governance in which all the stakeholders gain agency as their concerns and interests are systemically addressed. To realize the intended transformative potential of education, it is then imperative that state-society relationship should be reconfigured in a manner that the state continues to be the major provider of equitable quality of education to all children, creates more inclusive opportunity structures to build a democratic culture of public participation and deliberation in education, provides some coordination in the face of externalities across social locations, and organizes the field of possibilities for maximal accrual of social and educational gains. The task of everyday conduct and governance is devolved to people to strengthen local school's functioning by engaging in deliberative social practices. It is envisioned that synergy between a strong state (not necessarily decentred) and an empowered community would have potentiality to move towards universalizing elementary education, to ensure equitable distribution of state resources across different strata of the society, and to keep the market forces at bay. Keeping an eye on the emerging forms of policy discourse and government intervention programmes that tend to undermine the notion of school and formal education is an equally critical function.

These findings also gain significance as a dysfunctional school is likely to impact poor people with greater force as they lack meaningful alternatives. With privatization of education getting an active push in policy discourse, in the context of present study, constituting vibrant public culture within the state's schooling system emerged as a viable countervailing strategy for realizing access to quality education. An interlinked observation is that if governance space is reconfigured from the people's perspective, then the community emerges as a decisive force by virtue of self-steering ability inhered in it. The emerging reflective community is not a residual, an adjunct to state or market as is being assumed by many political theorists. This substantiates Amartya Sen's perspective on human development approach as that of gaining of critical consciousness and a sense of agency by the common people, an alternative to the neo-liberal approach that slights human rights, freedom and agency [24].

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Secondly, it affirms the importance of a more inclusive and participatory mode of school governance as a robust way of re-constructing democracy as a 'lived' experience, the one that has possibility to practice democracy on a continuing basis. As Giroux espouses that "a radical pedagogy and transformative democratic politics must go hand in hand in evolving a vision of community developed around a shared conception of social justice, rights, and entitlement". He further observes that by doing this, one can rethink and re-experience democracy as a "struggle over values, practices, social relations, and subject positions that enlarge the terrain of human capacities and possibilities as a basis for compassionate social order" [25]. The present study signifies that in a socially stratified society, education can act as a potential site to realize democracy as an ongoing struggle by cultivating identities that seek more equitable school experiences and life options that would eventually construct a more equal social order. Thus, school created a context to develop the unrealized capacities residing in human agency to challenge and transform existing social and political forms, rather than meekly adapting to them. It affirms Sen's perspective that as democratization changes embedded institutions, it changes the bases of society: new understandings of social reality emerge, self-definitions are changed, and institutional practices are modified.

In neo-liberal times, the Indian State is struggling to meaningfully resolve the dilemmas such as the choice between centralization and decentralization, institutional and local context of education, regulatory and participatory form of school governance, bureaucratic structure and democratic culture and, singular and collectively evolved vision. It is a challenge as selecting or deselecting a 'choice' can further marginalize or empower the ordinary people, specifically the most subordinated.

VII. Concluding Remarks: Policy Implications

These people-collective efforts further gain significance as they emerged against the backdrop of enduring inequalities and asymmetries embedded in the mainstream educational and social system. However, in absence of a supporting context, these school renewal practices run a risk of either withering away, or, degenerating into piecemeal measures for crisis – intervention, leaving neither a legacy of empowerment nor a hint of systemic change.

For sustaining and scaling-up these micro-level practices in the mainstream framework, a two pronged strategy is suggested: one, to make the participatory base of the democratic provisions more inclusive so as to have a 'wider ownership' of the school in terms of its functioning; to take teachers along in the process of school renewal; to build the capacity of the local community in terms of knowledge of the rights, roles and responsibilities in the changing scenario; strengthen the practice of collective decision-making; and facilitate the emergence of a more inclusive and representative leadership at the grass-root level to support a culture of accountability and transparency. Two, the administrative machinery should be encouraged to engage with the local community and the state should be further influenced to adopt more flexible structures that have an in-built space for community participation, joint planning and accountability in managing schools.

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