

**“WE SHALL FIGHT, WE SHALL WIN”:  
ACTIVIST KNOWLEDGE IN  
INDIAN DOCUMENTARY FILM**

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**ABSTRACT** This paper scrutinizes the current politics of education in India through an analytic exposition of the film ‘We shall fight, we shall win’ (2016), a documentary about the struggle for a public common school system in India. The paper seeks to foreground the voice of the excluded indigenous communities and elaborate on the role of India’s politics and corporate media in reproducing societal stratification. Focusing on ‘activist knowledge’, which results from these struggles, the paper provides a reminder that that without the experiences of the Indigenous communities, without the listening to subaltern voices, there is an ‘epistemic break in our experiences’.

**Keywords** activist knowledge, documentary, subaltern, caste, common school.

**Introduction**

The All India Forum for the Right to Education (AIFRTE) has recently released a documentary film about the struggle for a public, common school system in India. The film titled “We shall fight, We shall win” makes a much-needed contribution to the documentation of grassroots struggles for public education in India. The 54 minute-long documentary is available in English and Hindi (narration and subtitles) and can be watched and shared online via the AIFRTE Campaign YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6HZyYbkM2Q>).

Readers are encouraged to view the film and share their feedback with AIFRTE through the YouTube page or via email to this author or the [aifрте.secretariat@gmail.com](mailto:aifрте.secretariat@gmail.com). In this paper, I discuss the significance of this documentary film about Indian education, made by grassroots education activists. I seek to

highlight particular kinds of activist knowledge (Choudry 2015) which are deployed to contest hegemonic education policy and cultural discourse and construct an alternative equitable and democratic vision for education in contemporary India.

### **Background and context**

In 2009, the government of India made its first legal guarantee for universal education to the people of India through the passage of the 2009 Right to Free and <sup>1</sup>Compulsory Education Act (RTE). Although corporate news media and civil society represented the Act as a historical moment, progressive educators and activists regard the Act as a historical betrayal of a Constitutional mandate. Despite the language of ‘rights’ in the legislation, the Act has primarily functioned to weaken a historically underfunded and unequal public education system. In a critical policy analysis of RTE (Thapliyal (2012), I use the 4A rights-based framework developed by United Nations Rapporteur for the Right to Education Katerina Tomasevski (Tomaševski 2006). This analysis shows that RTE legislation is shaped by a severely diluted conception of the right to education which ignores four decades of work in the field of human rights-based education policy development and implementation. I argue that the language of rights, instead of expanding and strengthening public education, has been coopted to accelerate the dismantling of public education through privatization and commercialization (Thapliyal 2012, 2014, 2016).

Six years on, the unfunded legislation remains virtually unimplemented. The closure of government primary schools continues apace (in both wealthy and impoverished states) as do efforts to undermine the status and working conditions of government school teachers. It is in these conditions that India has become a major destination for venture capitalists and philanthro-capitalists<sup>1</sup> who seek to profit from education

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<sup>1</sup> A venture capitalist provides funding or investment for business projects and companies with growth potential (and some risk) whereas vulture capitalists are corporate investors who seek out firms where costs can be cut in order to increase profits. The term philanthrocapitalism refers to a merging of venture philanthropy with social enterprise or the application of values, concepts and techniques from venture capital finance and corporate/business management to philanthropic activities in education and development see for example the work of Stephen Ball and 2016 World Yearbook of Education cited below.

in countries with struggling public education systems. They currently include vulture capitalist-funded actors such as Omega Schools and Bridge International Academies (funded by Pearson Affordable Learning Funds), and the Indian School Finance Company (funded by Grey Ghost Ventures).

These for-profit providers offer “low-cost” English-language private education to families who believe that learning English will secure the futures of their children. In reality, these for-profit schools have only added another tier to a multi-tiered education system which ensures that poor, low-caste, Adivasi, and Muslim children, predominantly girls, continue to be denied equitable and culturally responsive education (see for example Srivastava 2016). Instead of increased accountability, the Act has absolved the government of all responsibility for its resounding failure to provide universal and equitable education for all Indian children.

### **Origins of a people’s movement**

AIFRTE was officially founded in 2009 to launch a coordinated struggle against the forces of privatization unleashed by RTE. The coalition includes community based organizations, university student and teacher unions, social movements as well as individual educators, public intellectuals, parents, students and concerned citizens. The majority of these activist organizations have spent decades in collective struggles for human rights (for Dalits, Adivasis, women, workers, farmers) and environmental conservation. In order to maintain autonomy, AIFRTE does not accept funding from corporate or development agency sources.

Since inception, AIFRTE has worked to develop a national coalition which can sustain local and national resistance to education privatization. It currently includes 45 member organizations and social movements located in 20 out of 29 states in the country<sup>2</sup>. The goals of this coalition are captured in one of their favored slogans ‘Education is not for sale, it is a people’s right’. While specific goals and strategies are state- and context-specific, key elements of the common platform set out in the 2012 Chennai Declaration include: expansion of public

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<sup>2</sup> A complete list of member organizations is available on the AIFRTE website and at the end of the film. [www.aifрте.com.in](http://www.aifрте.com.in)

provision of quality basic education to include early childhood and secondary education; significant and progressive increase in spending on public education; opposition to the privatization of education; and the creation of a common or neighbourhood school system to bridge the growing economic and social divide (AIF-RTE, 2012).

In 2014, AIFRTE decided to organize a Shiksha Sangarsh Yatra or a March for the Struggle for Education. Activists would travel – by road - from all over the country to the central Indian city of Bhopal - the site of one of the world’s worst industrial disasters, the deadly Union Carbide gas leak in 1984. During their journey, activists would seek to raise awareness and stimulate public debate about key challenges facing the Indian public education system, including:

- the ongoing commercialization and privatization of public education through Foreign Direct Investment, so-called Public-Private Partnerships and the move to treat higher education as a tradeable commodity under the World Trade Organization-GATS framework, and
- the destruction of a secular education system through policies and practices that institutionalized prejudice and discrimination based on caste, religion, gender, disability, language, and other forms of socio-cultural difference.

As an alternative to privatization, the campaign put forward a vision of a fully-free and state-funded Common Education System based on constitutional values of democracy, egalitarianism, socialism, and secularism. It also called for the medium of education instruction in schools to reflect the diversity of languages that constitute Indian society and for Indian languages to be given primary position in all sectors of national life. The March for the Struggle for Education was held in solidarity with two other ongoing people’s struggles : the three decades-long struggle for justice and compensation for the people of Bhopal, and north-eastern movements to repeal the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) that gives security forces unrestrained powers for search, arrest, and the use of deadly force against persons suspected of acting against the Indian state.

On November 2, 2014, five ‘central yatras’ were launched from – Jammu in the North, Mhapsa in the west, Kanyakumari in the south, Bhubhaneshwar in the east, and Malom in the northeast. In addition, shorter marches were organized in every state with AIFRTE members. One month later, approximately 2000 activists arrived in Bhopal for three days of public meetings and cultural performances beginning with a meeting to observe the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bhopal gas tragedy and demand justice for its countless victims.

### **Making the film: “We shall fight, We shall win”**

Footage for the film came from photos and videos taken by activists (mainly on cellphones) during their respective marches as well as a video recording of all the events in Bhopal by a professional, not-for-profit documentary filmmaking group called Avakash Nirmati (AN)<sup>3</sup>. Several days worth of footage was accumulated through these diverse sources. A team of three members of the AIFRTE secretariat then worked intensively with the AN team over a period of six weeks spread over a year to construct a script, edit and produce the film. The team received voluntary assistance for translation with the ten-plus regional languages that are spoken in the film.

### **Messages in the film**

#### **1. Activist knowledge**

Activist knowledge is understood here as not only the ability of activists to strategically mobilize or use knowledge but also the ongoing work of learning and knowledge production that is integral to sites of collective struggle (Foley 1999; Choudry, 2015). Activist knowledge is intrinsically concerned with expressing opposition to and transforming unequal power relations and systems and cultural practices of domination and exclusion. The film “We shall fight, we shall win” foregrounds three forms of activist knowledge, namely a critical history of Indian education, a critique of educational inequality, and ‘jangeet’ or the people’s songs.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://testavn.wordpress.com/>

## **2. Critical histories: the struggle for a common school system**

The documentary provides a critical history of Indian education – a history that is rarely acknowledged in its complex entirety in mainstream education discourse (Kumar, 2006). However, this is a history that has inspired and sustained current struggles of Dalits, Adivasis, and poor women, farmers, workers, to name just a few groups that remain systematically excluded from the project of capitalist development.

In the film, activists trace the roots of the current struggle back to precolonial influences such as the Buddha and the Bhakti movements of medieval India as well as liberal social reformers in colonial India such as Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule who championed education for women and Dalits. The film also provides a concise account of the efforts of leading figures in the nationalist struggle to decolonize the colonial education system including Mahatma Gandhi, Bhimrao Ambedkar, Dadabhai Naoroji, and Gopal Krishna Gokhale (see e.g. Sadgopal, 2014). Some of their vision was eventually captured in Articles 45 and 46 of the Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution.

This Constitutional mandate was virtually ignored until the early nineties when the Supreme Court of India held that the right to education was a judicially enforceable right. The Court's initiative provided fresh momentum to struggles for access to basic education for children. Under the direction of the World Bank, the state then introduced a lowcost nonformal primary education programme delivered through multigrade teaching and 'parateachers' which provided the 'equivalent of schooling' to the most vulnerable and excluded groups of children (Thapliyal, 2014). In effect, it introduced yet another track in a multi-tier and deeply unequal education system segregated by caste, gender, class, religion, and ability (Thapliyal, 2016).

The RTE legislation added another track through a de facto voucher system where private schools received taxpayer funds to reserve 25% of seats in Class 1 for economically and socially disadvantaged children who live in the neighbourhood of the school. In short, the Act co-opted the language of rights to legalize institutionalized inequality.

### **3. Critique of unequal and segregated education**

It is this critical history that informs the critiques of Indian education that are voiced in the film. First and foremost, activists highlight an unequal and segregated education system where privileged (upper- and middle-class and caste) children receive more and higher-quality educational opportunities because of the purchasing power and (relative) social status of their families.

The second critique addresses the dominant 'human capital' orientation in Indian education – public and private – which is focused exclusively on producing students who will be productive and obedient workers for the capitalist economy. Activists argue that current curriculum and pedagogy fail to inculcate the values and traits that are necessary for informed, direct, and responsible democratic practices such as civic awareness, social responsibility, and egalitarianism.

Last but not the least, the film links the problem of unequal and segregated education in a society deeply stratified by class, caste, gender, religion, and class. The scope of injustice is reflected in the lack of access to highquality universal health care, in widespread poverty, in state-condoned violence against Dalits and religious minorities, in the displacement of Adivasi people from their traditional lands, and consequently, the destruction of their cultures and way of life.

Activists are also critical of efforts of the current government (led by the right-wing Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party) to 'Indianize' education where to be 'Indian' is equated solely with upper-caste, Sansritized Hindu worldview. In this project to de-secularize Indian education, all other 'minority' religions and cultures are deemed as foreign and potentially dangerous. While resistance to this ultranationalist project has been muted in the media and other public institutions, university students have launched a courageous struggle against the 'communalization' of higher education campuses, most notably at the Film and Television Institute of India, University of Hyderabad, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Jadavpur University.

It is important to emphasize that these critiques apply to both the public and private education systems. Relatedly,

the film seeks to challenge dominant perceptions amongst policymakers, media, and the public that ‘private is always better than public’. This rhetoric has been deployed to justify the privatization of higher education as well basic education. One of the key assumptions that fuel this discourse is that children who attend English-medium private schools can be assured of securing well-paying and respectable jobs. While this has certainly been a reality for elite Indians who can afford to and are admitted to elite private schools established during colonial rule, the rest of the picture is far more murky.

Despite sustained rhetoric of merit/ability, a complex combination of caste, gender, religion, class, and language factors continue to shape and circumvent educational and employment opportunity (see e.g. Jefferey & Chopra, 2005; Thapliyal, 2016). After almost a decade of ‘private schools for the poor’ or low-cost private schools in some states, there is no evidence to show that graduates from these schools children are able to compete with graduates of elite private and public schools. The persistent fact is that even English-speaking university graduates remain unemployed and or under-employed in overwhelmingly large numbers points to deeper structural issues, which pro-market reformers refuse to acknowledge.

The film conveys these messages through multiple narrators including students, parents, community activists, and public intellectuals. One of the most effective mediums of communication, from my point of view, is the use of *jangeet* – loosely translated as songs of the people or songs of popular struggle.

#### **4. Jangeet: Songs of the people**

The filmmakers deliberately chose poems, songs, and slogans with roots in historical and contemporary popular movements for democracy and social justice. For instance, the English version of the film starts with a Hindi poem by Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena which issues a powerful call to action:

If a room in your house is on fire, can you sleep in the next room? If there is a dead body in one room of your house, can you sing songs in the next room? If yes, then I have nothing to say to you.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Translated by author.

This powerful poem is a call to action. Other poems and songs present a powerful but humorous critique of current educational and social issues such as the role of World Bank in Indian development policy. Still others seek to inspire by evoking inspirational figures from the struggle for independence, for example through songs about the youth revolutionary Bhagat Singh. The film also includes many images of the political art - posters and banners - that have been created for various AIFRTE campaigns.

In addition to the cultural performances, what makes this film unique is the effort to represent the full linguistic and cultural diversity of India. In particular, the film foregrounds voices that are rarely heard in dominant education discourse, namely students, parents and activists from Adivasi and Dalit backgrounds. Early in the film, a youth activist from Punjab speaks eloquently about the terrible nexus of unemployment and drugs that is destroying the lives of young educated rural men. At near the midpoint of the film, an Adivasi activist and mother from central India provides a powerful testimony about how the state has abandoned schools for her indigenous community while at the same time orchestrating the exploitation of their traditional forestlands. Later, a group of Adivasi school children perform a satirical skit about the charades that constitute education in so-called private schools for the poor. In this way, the film is replete with stories of exclusion and resistance from all over the country.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the significance of this film is heightened when we recall that globalisation and satellite TV have transformed India into a media-saturated culture -- which has no place for subaltern voices and critiques of the dominant development project. In the case of education, emerging research suggests that when education reported in the news, it reflects the educational concerns of urban, middle-class, English consumers (Nambissan & Ball, 2010; Sarangapani & Vidya, 2011; Thapliyal, 2015). Extensive research has critiqued representations of subaltern groups in Indian corporate media which tend towards distorted and depoliticized portrayals which normalize and reproduce the cultural practices of a deeply stratified society.

The film 'We shall fight, We shall win' was made by a group of activists with little money, time or experience with the medium

of film as a mode of communication. However, there should be no doubt that these activists are skilled communicators who understand the power of voice and counter-stories. They have lived knowledge about educational inequality and social injustice and they have produced a film that is intended to awaken, educate and mobilize.

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