Social Stratification and the Distribution of Capital in Kerala, India:

Applying Bourdieu to the Centre for Research and Education for Social Transformation

Sam Tait
University of Toronto

Long heralded as an oasis of caste consciousness and political mobilization against the formalized caste system in India, in truth, structural inequality arranged across caste lines persists in the state of Kerala. In Kerala, and in India more broadly, inequality is maintained through social categorization; social networks emerging from and mirroring the divisions between castes impart dis/advantages to their members. In the midst of India's economic liberalization, neoliberal trends including the privatization of education have ossified structures of access to higher education and, as such, competitive employment opportunities. Members of the dominant or 'upper' castes continue to be awarded disproportionate access to valued resources and the tools necessary to succeed, while Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities operate at a structural disadvantage. This systemic unequal access is precisely what the Centre for Research and Education for Social transformation (CREST) – an institution that seeks to enhance the employability of Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, and other eligible communities in Kerala – aims to address. I situate the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted at CREST within the theoretical framework outlined in Bourdieu's (1986) The forms of capital. *This approach elucidates the mechanisms through which the centre prepares graduates to succeed in contemporary Kerala's competitive job market. I demonstrate how the institution facilitates the cultivation, adoption, and transmission of cultural and social capital among its students and their communities, effectively increasing their capacity for socioeconomic mobility. Furthermore, I discuss the potential of CREST to encourage its students' development of critical perspectives on caste-disparity in their home state.*

Introduction

I could feel that a small crowd was forming around me. They looked on, beaming expectantly as the untrained fingers of my right hand fumbled gracelessly with the fat, wet grains of rice piled high on my aluminum plate. It was the third day of my internship at the Centre for Research and Education for Social Transformation (CREST) in Kozhikode, Kerala, India and I had accepted an invitation to dinner at the male students' residence. CREST is a national institute of liberal arts, science and professional studies conceived in an effort to address the marginalization - and promote the advancement - of India's scheduled communities: populations officially recognized by the Government of India as being historically disenfranchised (known as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Eligible Communities). Formerly the Centre of Excellence

(established in 2002 by the Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode), in April 2008, under its new moniker, the centre became an autonomous public institution under the government of Kerala. Today, the school receives funding and oversight from the Government of Kerala's Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Development Department (Centre for Research and Education for Social Transformation, n.d., para 1). My placement had been arranged as part of a collaborative initiative between the school and my own: the University of Toronto (at which I was an undergraduate student in anthropology). The goal of this project is to establish a cooperative relationship between institutions, whereby the University of Toronto commits to sending a number of advanced undergraduate students to the centre each summer to work as interns assisting in the implementation of its flagship program (Post Graduate Certificate Course for Professional Development or PGCCPD) while completing an independent research course focusing on social exclusion in the state of Kerala in the context of India's neoliberalization. My fieldwork was conducted during an internship I held at the institution from April to June, 2015 under the supervision of Dr. Tania Li, a Canada Research Chair and professor at the University of Toronto who - with the help of Vinod Krishnan, the Associate Program Coordinator at CREST - masterminded the project and secured funding for the students selected to undertake its pilot iteration.

In an attempt to elucidate the mechanisms through which the centre prepares students from scheduled communities to succeed in contemporary Kerala's competitive job market, I situate ethnographic data I collected during my internship within the theoretical framework outlined in Bourdieu's (1986) seminal work, *The forms of capital*. This analysis takes shape through an exploration of CREST's curriculum, focusing on how the centre's methodology facilitates students' cultivation, adoption and transmission of non-economic forms of capital (i.e., cultural, social,

and symbolic capital) (Bourdieu, 1986). The program's successful development of students' non-economic capital potential is essential to the enhancement of their capacity for socioeconomic mobility. A closer inspection of the institution's pedagogical approach, however, yields an unexpected paradox. In response to the changing demands of an economically liberalizing Kerala, the centre has produced a curriculum consistent with the dominant neoliberal paradigm. While demonstrably successful, the centre's programming espouses and reinforces the tenets of neoliberal discourse, creating greater potential for the mystification of social stratification and the mechanisms by which it is engendered and sustained among its student body. Perhaps the unintended consequence of promoting its students' upward mobility, despite the considerable systemic social and economic barriers they face, is the avoidance of critical engagement with the reality of these barriers in the classroom. This paper attempts to bring these tensions to light in an effort to begin (or contribute to) a dialogue about the potential for the centre's program - and prospective programs like it - to foster a critical consciousness of the repressive structures that subjugate scheduled students and their communities. Can a program designed to teach its students to succeed in an inequitable society through adapting and adhering to its ideological structures also equip them with the tools to question, challenge, and subvert them?

Research Context

The students who invited to me to dinner belonged to CREST's 25th class and ranged in age from 22 to 28. Almost every student had travelled from a hamlet, town, or city from somewhere else in the state of Kerala (one student came from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu) to study at the school in Kozhikode - also known as Calicut - the third largest city in Kerala. For the duration of their enrolment, the school's male and female students may take up lodging in separate

hostels, each within walking distance of the centre's campus. Both hostels may accommodate the total number of students admitted each semester (15 male and 25 female); the male hostel, a three-bedroom one-floor home, is noticeably cramped compared to the two-story gated complex reserved for female students. That said, rent for the boys' and girls' hostels (as they were commonly referred) differed significantly, costing 1,200 INR and 1,500INR per month[1] per occupant, respectively, to be deducted from the monthly stipend provided to each student[2].

The dinner was to be my first encounter with my interlocutors outside of the school's campus limits and, thus, the purview of its teachers and administration. I was concerned about how the students would receive me and whether or not they would be open and willing to share their experiences and perspectives with an 'outsider.' Almost immediately upon entering the hostel's common room, though, my mind was put at ease. Within minutes of my arrival, my hosts had launched into a spirited dialogue with one another about their experiences at the school and the paths that had led them each to enrol in the program. In the time it took to manoeuvre two heaping plates of crimson fish curry, mango pickles, and rice into my mouth (struggling to adapt to the custom of eating with one's right hand), the conversation - ranging in topic from upcoming presentations and exams to students' hometowns, families and their ambitions for the future - had continued without respite. The students went to every length to ensure that I felt engaged; as such, apart from brief and infrequent asides in Malayalam[3], our discussion took place entirely in English.

During my orientation, CREST's administrators had warned of an initial 'opening up' period wherein my questions and even my presence would inevitably be met with shyness and restraint on the part of the students. Consequently, I was astonished at my hosts' eagerness to share, especially when the conversation turned to caste: a topic my research supervisor and other

University of Toronto faculty had cautioned me to avoid discussing directly, let alone within the first week of my fieldwork. On that night in the hostel, the dialogue was animated by the voices of five or so of the most outgoing men, but invariably revolved around the articulate contributions of Sreejith[4], a charismatic 23-year-old holding a Bachelor of Technology in chemical engineering:

> "I don't think *you* would understand… A long time ago there were kings and then their slaves. The people who are descended them make those who are rich and who are poor. This is what it means by caste. Those are who we call socially upward and socially backward."

Sreejith was responding to a question I had asked about the term 'backward,' which I heard CREST's students and faculty use to refer to individuals living in 'tribal' communities. Admittedly, this question had been engineered to give the impression that I was wholly ignorant of the existence of caste and the role that it plays in contemporary Kerala. I hoped that this approach would encourage my interlocutors to 'fill in the blanks,' that is, to explain to me how they perceived and related to caste while assuming that I had no prior understanding of the subject and, thus, no preconceived opinion on it myself. Hyper-aware of the sensitivity of the subject, I followed up apprehensively: "What is it like here [in Kozhikode, Kerala] for those you refer to as 'backward'? Do they have different opportunities? Are they treated differently from others?" Sreejith responded patiently: "No, Sam. No, it is no longer important. Today, in Kerala nobody cares about caste." He spoke with calm assurance among his peers; some nodded their heads earnestly in agreement.

It is important to note that, by virtue of his enrolment in CREST's program (in which admission eligibility is determined, partly, on the basis of caste membership)[5], it can be concluded that Sreejith belongs to a Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste or Other Eligible Community.

The Indian caste system is somewhat analogous to Canada's class system in that it constitutes a categorization of the population into disparate socioeconomic strata. The caste system is unique, however, in that India's social classes are defined by thousands of rigid, endogamous hereditary groups (*jatis* or sub-castes) organized roughly according to a hierarchy of four overarching castes (*varnas*), originally classified in ancient Hindu scriptures (i.e., *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*) as well as 'outcasted' or 'lower-caste' groups existing external to and below these castes: recognized officially through India's Constitution in 1950 as Scheduled Castes (also known as *Dalits* or, formerly, 'untouchables') (Manoram, 2011, pp. 69-74). Scheduled Tribes (referred to unofficially as *Adivasi*) comprise a diverse range of India's indigenous communities that have historically been disadvantaged and often live on the remote margins of Indian society (Manoram, 2011, p. 74). According to India's 2011 census, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes comprise approximately 16% and 7% of the total Indian population, respectively (Manoram, 2011, p. 74). Finally, Other Eligible Communities (also known as Other Backward Classes, or OBC) is a broad umbrella category used to refer to a number of sub-castes that experience systematic social and economic disenfranchisement. In 1979, the Mandal Commission[6] identified over 3000 sub-castes under the OBC Category, claiming that they form approximately 52% of the Indian population. However, when a national sample survey was conducted in 2006, the figure was 32% (Manoram, 2011, p. 74). Through the census, the Government of India has officially documented *jatis*, castes, SCs and STs, and OBCs primarily in an effort to determine those eligible for reservation, "positive discrimination in education and jobs" (Manoram, 2011, p. 74) akin to employment and admission equity in Canada and affirmative action in the U.S. Both Sreejith's statment that "caste does not

matter in Kerala" and his rhetorical distancing of himself from those he refers to as 'backward' may seem irreconcilable with these facts. At the least, it is puzzling that a student enrolled in a program that specifically targets scheduled populations and whose focus is "employability enhancement, personality development, communication skills, information technology, quantitative & analytical skills, general awareness and entrepreneurship development" (Centre for Research and Education for Social Transformation, n.d., para. 1) would assert that caste-disparity is non-existent in Kerala. Sreejith's claim, though, is in many ways emblematic of the broader tension between Kerala and the myth of Kerala constructed through state and expert narratives.

Long heralded as an oasis of caste-consciousness and political mobilization against the formalized caste system (Devika, 2010; Steur, 2009), structural inequality arranged across caste- and non-/scheduled lines persists in Kerala (Isac, 2011; Mosse, 2010; Nampoothiri, 2009). Dr. Susamma Isac (2011), a project officer at CREST, asserts that in Kerala "the gap in literacy and education between non-tribal and tribal people… is striking" (p. 7). D.D. Nampoothiri (2009), the centre's executive director, argues that in the context of economic liberalization, neoliberal trends, including the privatization of education, have "tended to reproduce the weak access of *Dalit/Adivasi* candidates to higher education opportunities… reflected in their relegation to largely uneconomic occupations such as agriculture/allied labour and unskilled work" (pp. 258-9). So, why would a student at CREST deny the existence of caste-disparity?

Sreejiths's seemingly contradictory claim became a point of departure in my research and one that I will return to at the conclusion of the article. In fact, this moment remained a defining one throughout my investigation, emblematic of the broader tensions and inconsistencies that exist in and between CREST and the social, political and economic background within which it is situated. Here I refer to the incongruity of a government

funded institution committed to the advancement of graduates from underserved 'tribal' and 'lower-caste' communities (i.e., an apparatus of India's welfare state) operating in the context of an emerging neoliberal Kerala and the institutional logics this emergence entails (e.g., an increasingly deregulated and globalized economy, proliferation of 'responsibilizing' meritocratic individualist rhetoric, scaling back and restructuring of government support social services, etc.) (Wacquant, 2009). The ultimate irony is that CREST has adapted its pedagogical approach to the new rigours of Kerala's job market through the adoption of a meritocratic lexicon and curricula compatible with the dominant neoliberal paradigm, potentially at the cost of mystifying caste-disparity and other mechanics of social stratification and its reproduction in Kerala and India more broadly.

Situating Research in a Theoretical Framework

I explore the overarching tensions mentioned above through their intersections with the narratives of students enrolled at the centre that I collected during the time of my fieldwork. Each of my interlocutors' unique life histories informed distinctly personal beliefs about the role that caste and/or social exclusion played in their lives and determined their potential for upward social mobility. To demonstrate how non-/scheduled designation informs the social reproduction of inequality in Kerala (and why CREST's programming is successful in destabilizing this system of reproduction) I employ Bourdieu's conceptual framework of the non-economic forms of capital. This theoretical lens provides the groundwork for understanding how the cultural, social and symbolic capital that are borne out of and reproduce the stratification of a given society are (re)distributed and accumulated unequally in Kerala according to one's caste, tribal, and/or scheduled status. Bourdieu's concepts serve to bring the centre's curricular approach into sharp relief, illustrating how the program undertakes the

task of ameliorating the social and/or economic statuses of its students and succeeds.

Capital (economic or otherwise) is the expression of accumulated labour in its tangible, "material or incorporated form" (Häuberer, 2011, p. 35). Its unequal distribution at a given time constitutes the "immanent structure of the social world" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 83), that is, the established, deterministic arrangement of opportunity or capacity for success of a given individual within their society. I provide a cursory definition of cultural, social, and symbolic capital here to demonstrate their relevance as theoretical concepts with respect to my analysis of CREST's pedagogical approach.

Cultural capital, as described by Bourdieu (1986), exists in three states: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. The embodied state refers to those "long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 84) (some of which may be cultivated in — or adopted by — individuals) that index social, intellectual and economic status (e.g., language proficiency, conversational style, confidence, appearance, style of dress, etc.). The objectified state describes those conspicuous material possessions that, when owned, purportedly convey the degree of cultural capital their ownership enables and/or requires in order to consume (e.g., a bookshelf filled with classic literature, a Basquiat painting, a musical instrument, a telescope etc.). Finally, the institutionalized state denotes that cultural capital which is ostensibly guaranteed by academic certifications.

To be sure, the distribution of cultural capital in a given society is unequal, inheritance being its primary mechanism of transmission. A child's endowment with cultural capital in its embodied state is proportionate to that which is possessed by the family and community in which they are raised: "children from culturally wealthy backgrounds inherit that wealth, in the form of embodied dispositions" (Crossley, 2008, p. 95). It

follows that the embodiment of these dispositions, "recognized and valued both by teachers and by the institutional procedures of the educational field" (Crossley, 2008, p. 95), determines that child's capacity for academic success and, accordingly, their further accrual of cultural capital in its institutionalized state (i.e., degrees and certifications). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) sought to demonstrate this in their study of disparate educational outcomes of French schoolchildren in *Reproduction in education, society and culture*, originally published in 1970. Because the embodied dispositions that are paramount to ensuring students' success within educational systems are learned in the home (and the community surrounding it) the credentials granted by these institutions in the form of degrees

> contribute to ensuring the reproduction of social inequality by safeguarding the preservation of the structure of the distribution of powers through a constant re-distribution of people and titles characterized, behind the impeccable appearance of equity and meritocracy, by a systematic bias in favour of the possessors of inherited cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. xi).

Social capital, on the other hand, refers to those resources which are conferred upon an individual on the basis of their membership in a given social network (e.g., family, political party, fraternity/sorority, labour union, caste, etc.). Social networks provide "members with the backing of… [a] collectively-owned capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 88). The amount of social capital possessed by an individual, then, depends both on the size of the social network in which they are embedded and on the sum of the capital (i.e., economic, cultural, and symbolic) that is possessed by the remaining individuals that constitute that network (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 88).

With respect to social inequality in contemporary Kerala, social and cultural capital dovetail with the concept of symbolic capital. It is useful to understand symbolic capital as being roughly equivalent to prestige (e.g., standing, honour, repute, influence, etc.), specifically prestige that is misrecognised as legitimate competence. Symbolic capital is afforded those with high social status or rank (e.g., upper-caste, non-tribal, non-scheduled, etc.) as well as those possessing the institutionalized cultural capital (i.e., degrees and certifications) disproportionately granted to members of the dominant social strata who possess a wealth of cultural, social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 86; Crossley, 2008, p. 96) Unsurprisingly, the volume of cultural, social, and ultimately symbolic capital an individual possesses plays a significant role in determining their capacity for socioeconomic mobility.

When employing this theoretical framework, the centre's focus on students from scheduled communities can be interpreted as a targeting of communities that are limited in their possession as well as potential to cultivate and transmit social, cultural, and symbolic capital. The program endeavours to promote the social and economic mobility of its graduates and the enrichment of their social networks through programming that cultivates and facilitates their accumulation of cultural and social capital (and, thus, symbolic capital). Through providing these students with the tools necessary to succeed in a job market that has and continues to grow more competitive in the midst of the deregulation of India's economy (i.e., the growth of a private multinational sector that does not provide employment reservation for scheduled communities), CREST engages in the destabilization of unequal, socially structured distribution of capital in all of its forms.

Along with the deconstruction of the centre's pedagogical approach, I bring the narratives of my interlocutors (their experiences both in and outside of the program) into focus, placing each in dialogue with Bourdieu's conceptual framework. Students' experiences of navigating academic institutions, the job market, and family obligations

as well as their efforts to ameliorate their social and economic standing provide a crucial understanding of how the twin processes of geographic isolation and social exclusion are experienced and confronted by Kerala's scheduled communities. These narratives provide further insight into the ways that the centre's programming successfully facilitates the accumulation and development of cultural, social, and symbolic capital among its students (and their communities) in order to promote their advancement in spite of the social reproduction of their disenfranchisement. Finally, the incongruity of disparate ethnographic accounts exposes the tension upon which I base a critique of CREST's prioritization of students' success over the development of their critical understandings of the social reproduction of inequality that affects their communities.

Placing Empirical Findings in Dialogue with Theory

Ajay is a 25-year-old with a Bachelor of Technology and is a recent graduate of CREST's professional development program. Born to a Scheduled Tribe family of agricultural labourers in a remote village in Kerala's Idukki district, he was eight when his father abandoned them. Ajay's mother placed him and his siblings in separate residential institutions throughout Kerala that would provide them food, board, and education. In the wake of this family crisis Ajay fostered the ambition to become a doctor, a career he believed would allow him to support his family while helping others: "I am passionate about the social works… we must all see a doctor if we get some physical problem or health problem… because after my father left us we have trouble, lots of trouble in my family. So I thought, maybe that profession help us." Ajay studied at residential institutions in Ernakulum and Kannur before matriculating from 10th grade[7] with distinction. Bolstered by his exceptional academic performance, he resolved to realize his ambition of becoming a doctor.

Ajay pursued his higher secondary education (roughly equivalent to grades 11-12) in Palakkad, Kerala, specializing in engineering while living at a hostel reserved for students from scheduled backgrounds subsidized by Kerala's government. In his second year, Ajay and his roommates faced constant humiliation at the hands of a prejudiced teacher, leading him to lose interest in his studies and underperform academically: "that teacher used to embarrass us always hostel students: 'They should not be there they are useless boys'… in the class she always asked us to stand up: 'Are you not studied?'… I knew the answer but I decided… I will not answer it." Despite being an excellent student, Ajay, like other students from scheduled backgrounds, was targeted and subjected to heightened scrutiny.

The quota system that reserves admissions for students from scheduled communities, while ostensibly an effort to counterbalance the significant impediments they face, contributes to a system of recognition for which the consequences are inconsistent with the purported objectives. Government assistance rendered Ajay and his roommates highly visible to their academic institution, its faculty, and their peers. Here, discrimination on the basis of caste is manifested in the contestation of the legitimacy of students whose accommodations are subsidized by the government and who, regardless of their academic merit, are enrolled under the reserved admission category[8]. By alienating Ajay and his roommates this professor contributed to the reinforcement of myths alleging the intellectual or academic deficiency of students from scheduled communities, reifying social divisions and disparity in the context of the higher-secondary academic institution.

Ajay's poor academic performance in his final year notwithstanding, he graduated from this higher-secondary institution. Determined to pursue his dream of becoming a medical doctor, he continued his education, enrolling in the

mechanical engineering program at a government university in Thrissur. At this point, Ajay's network of friends assisted him by securing funds and other necessities in support of his academic progress: "they formed monies and some other things for me. They always help me. For some years my friends arranged all the things what I need at that college." Ajay obtained his Bachelor of Technology in mechanical engineering with distinction. However, in order to gain admission to a college providing the Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery program he needed to write an exam: "I had no money to study for that. You had to spend 50,000 bucks or something to study for that… to join a private college is almost 50 lakh rupees." Without the funds necessary to study for the admissions test (or to pay tuition if he had been accepted), Ajay responded to pressure from his mother to seek employment to support his family in the present and immediate future: "my mom said 'you don't have to waste years. You can do things with your engineering degree.'" Ajay ceded to his mother's petitions, applying to a number of posts in the mechanical engineering field. However, he failed to secure employment in the industry as a result of insufficient practical experience and, as he was told, a lack of "character, like initiative." Discouraged by his rejection, Ajay returned to his home in Idukki to help his mother with cultivation on their farm.

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital is useful in analyzing Ajay's experiences of discrimination and lack of social, economic, and academic mobility. Like many of CREST's students, Ajay has been affected by the erosion of Bachelor degrees' scarcity value as a result of the saturation of degreed candidates in Kerala's job market. His possession of a degree failed to secure him employment "because the material and symbolic profits which the academic qualification guarantees also depend on its scarcity" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 88). As explained above, academic accreditation is an example of cultural capital in its institutionalized state. It is "cultural capital

academically sanctioned by legally guaranteed qualifications… a certificate of cultural competence confer[ring] on its holder a conventional… legally guaranteed value with respect to culture" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 88). As the scarcity value of post-secondary degrees depreciates, employers increasingly judge the eligibility of candidates on their dispositions (i.e., embodied cultural capital). This phenomenon has resulted in the popularization of group interviews for positions in both Kerala's private and public sectors. Therein, applicants are required, and judged on their capacity, to engage in English conversations in a group and to exhibit confidence, comprehension, and 'personality.' CREST dedicates a significant portion of its curriculum to developing the skills relevant to these interviews, holding a number of group interview workshops throughout the semester and a 'mock group interview' examination during finals. A number of students expressed their fear of prospective employers, citing their lack of communication skills, English proficiency, and even style of dress as factors inhibiting their employability. In the midst of Kerala's neoliberalization and with it the influx of a multinational corporate sector, a premium has been placed on candidates' performance of a cosmopolitan selfhood possible only with the cultivation of embodied cultural capital.

Individuals from scheduled communities are systematically deprived of cultural capital and the ability to accumulate it for a number of reasons, not least of which is their social and/or geo-graphic alienation. Ajay expressed feeling as though he was sequestered from the 'outside' world both when growing up in a remote village in Idukki and when living in residential academic institutions (emphasis mine): "where I lived it was like four walls, it's surrounded by hills. When I was there I couldn't see anything *outside*"; "at the orphanage we are in four walls we cannot move *outside*"; "[in Kannur,] those days I am used to stay in the hostel. I did not spend much time *outside*." He remarks, insightfully, that individuals

growing up in cities have the advantages of greater opportunities to socialize and exposure to media: "they get to know others … they have help from the internet, social media… I am a first class student in my home, in the big city I feel like I am the big zero. I can feel that *distance* from people in the city and people in the village" (emphasis mine). Ajay relies on spatial metaphors to express his feelings of alienation and exclusion, corresponding with the dichotomies of rural/urban, non-/tribal, 'upward'/ 'backward,' non-/scheduled, etc. The personal socio-spatial seclusion he experienced at the residential institutions is mirrored by the more general social, political and economic exclusion of scheduled communities in Kerala. This exclusion begets a lack of access to the material and social resources necessary to accumulate capital in all of its forms.

The dearth of economic capital, that is, the inordinate impoverishment of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala, is perhaps the most significant factor inhibiting their acquisition and transmission of cultural capital. Prior to land reforms enacted in the early 1970s, Scheduled Tribes "remained tied to extremely exploitative and poverty-ridden structures… dominated by the landed upper castes of Kerala" (Nampoothiri, 2009, p. 258). This poverty, which continues to be socially structured across non-/tribal lines, remains concentrated and unremitting (Mosse, 2010, p. 1171).

The accumulation of cultural capital necessitates the possession and expenditure of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 86). The process by which economic capital is converted into cultural capital is as follows: an individual or individual's family network amasses sufficient economic capital to afford that individual time free from the necessity of labour to be allocated instead to the pursuit and acquisition of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 86). As a result of the lack of free time Ajay's family could afford to yield, he was unable to pursue his dream of becoming a doctor and denied the ability to amass cultural capital in its embodied and institutionalized forms

through further education. Ajay's mother could not continue to delay Ajay's "entry into the labor market through prolonged schooling" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 92). However, despite his family's lack of economic means, Ajay was given another chance to accumulate cultural capital. He was contacted by a friend who recommended he apply to CREST: "he told me... 'It will help you prepare for the PO exams[9] … a lot of job opportunities.' That's why I joined it."

The increase of students from scheduled communities' cultural capital is what CREST's programs seem particularly interested in and well suited to undertake. The professional development program emphasizes the development of 'soft skills' such as communication, confidence, English proficiency (the curriculum includes traditional language instruction, vocal exercises, and drama workshops), style of dress (uniform responsibilities include organizing and managing the acquisition of workplace-appropriate uniforms in a timely fashion and within a budget as well as mandatory 'contemporary' dress one day of the week), education on current affairs (daily discussions about local, national, and global news), and exposure to foreigners (e.g., international interns). For the 40 students that gain admission each semester, the material cost needed to support the accumulation of cultural capital is shouldered by the state.

Since graduating, Ajay feels more confident, extroverted, and comfortable speaking in English: "CREST made such a huge change in my mind… my friends are saying you are extremely changing a lot… before that we never talked in English." These remarks are a testament to the program's success in facilitating its students' accumulation of embodied cultural capital. Nevertheless, at the time of our second interview Ajay had returned home again to help his mother. No longer pursuing his ambition to become a doctor, Ajay plans to continue assisting his family with agricultural labour for "a few months" before seeking a position related to his mechanical

engineering degree, now a more competitive candidate than before his studies at the centre.

An individual's possession of social capital is equally critical to their achievement of social, economic, academic, and professional mobility. Unfortunately, social capital may prove more difficult to secure than its cultural counterpart. Ajay experienced both the facilitation and impediment of his mobility as a result of "social obligations ('connections')… convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 84). On one hand, the absence of his father precipitated the economic strain that first separated him from his family and community network as a child. Now, he is faced with a social obligation to support his family alone. On the other hand, Ajay benefited from financial support provided by his network of friends and teachers during his post-secondary education. Without this network, he would have had no knowledge of CREST. Nevertheless, the amount of social capital at a given individual's disposal, especially those settled in remote or isolated areas, is overwhelmingly determined by the family, community, and population into which they are born.

The value of social capital derived from membership in a community corresponds, in part, to the strength of that community's sense of the institutionalized processes or pathways to achievement and success (Appadurai, 2004) (e.g., the knowledge that to secure employment in the engineering industry one requires at minimum a Bachelor's degree in a field of engineering). Scheduled communities have historically been and continue to be underserved in their access to quality education (Isac, 2011; Nampoothiri, 2009). While Kerala boasts universal literacy and near-universal enrolment in primary and secondary education, "inequality in education has deepened and broadened substantially…. [A] child's caste/community, gender and class now determine which school is to be attended" (Nampoothiri, 2009, pp. 258-260). This hierarchy

of access is evidenced by the fact that many of CREST's students are some of the first members of their communities to attain or pursue higher education. Rasheed, a 26-year-old graduate, notes: "I am the first person from my hamlet to pursue schooling past [higher-secondary]." Lower rates of higher- and post-secondary education in scheduled communities culminate in a lack of awareness of the mechanics of the institutional structures that must be navigated to realize individuals' ambitions. The collusion of unequal access to quality education and a paucity of social actors that have attended higher- and post-secondary education constitutes a disproportionate lack of social capital endemic to these communities.

The most obvious way CREST's programming develops social capital in systematically marginalized communities is through targeted admission of students from scheduled backgrounds. Through establishing and strengthening scheduled individuals' awareness of the pathways to mobility and success the centre is effectively enriching those individuals' social networks. The centre also undertakes this task directly through outreach programming specifically designed to engage with youth from scheduled communities. This outreach consists of students relating their personal histories and experiences with education to youth as well as encouraging them to think concretely about their ambitions and the steps needed to achieve them. Sreejith explains: "we give them a hope that they can go to school too and do something." CREST also operates satellite programs in various districts of Kerala, two of which I was fortunate enough to participate in. These extracurricular programs target students from scheduled communities enrolled at residential institutions at the secondary and higher-secondary levels. These satellite programs are essentially a scaled down version of the professional development program, focusing on the development of 'soft skills' and employability enhancement as well as providing students the opportunity to travel, to be exposed

to, and to learn in different districts of their home state.

In addition to its own programming, CREST has supported students' independent efforts in the development of their communities' social capital. Rasheed, mentioned above, is a fellow at the Kerala Institute for Research Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (KIRTADS). Although his community development project is conducted through this institution, he received guidance from members of CREST's faculty in support of his work developing education awareness in the population of his home community. Rasheed was born in a Muthuvan (Scheduled Tribe) hamlet in Idukki district. He pursued a Bachelor of Horticulture, initially aspiring to a career in the field of agricultural science in Idukki. While studying, though, Rasheed became increasingly conscious of and concerned about the barriers faced by his community in the attainment of higher- and post-secondary education. Upon obtaining his degree, Rasheed enrolled at the Rajagiri College of Social Sciences' School of Social Work where he is currently pursuing a Master's of Social Work with a specialization in community development. His Master's dissertation asserts the importance of education in bringing about the social and economic development of the Muthuvan and other Scheduled Tribe populations. Rasheed argues that these communities are often unfamiliar with the mechanics of higher education and lack awareness of the government assistance that may be provided to members of scheduled communities in its pursuit: "the tribal community is not aware of the scope of education and government policies."

Rasheed's work with Idukki's Muthuvan population was ongoing throughout his studies at CREST and he was granted considerable flexibility to allow him to continue this work while pursuing the program (at one point leaving for 10 days to visit Idukki). The centre's dedication to the enrichment of scheduled communities' social networks and, thus, their social capital, through its own programming and the support of independent projects, is a testament to their commitment and success in developing social capital in scheduled communities throughout Kerala.

Kala is a 23-year-old graduate of the program who holds a Bachelor of Arts in English. She invited another intern and me to stay with her family in Kannur while we attended her performance at a festival held at a local Shiva temple. Following her performance, Kala gave us a tour of the temple during which I inquired about the logistics of setting up the shrines' candles: "If no one is allowed in the shrine how do they light the candles surrounding the statues?"[10] Kala answered brusquely: "only the *Brahmin* are allowed!" My naïve question prompted her to launch into a surprisingly frank monologue about her experiences of discrimination on the basis of caste in the religious, public, and professional domains of her life. Kala discussed what she sees as a shift in the nature but not necessarily the conspicuousness of caste discrimination in Kerala during the last half century. Fifty years ago, she explains, her family and others belonging to Scheduled Castes were barred from the temple grounds to worship: "they would have to stand all the way outside [the] walls to pray, even the dogs they allowed in here but not lower-caste." Kala maintains, though, that caste membership continues to be of considerable importance in contemporary Kerala: "today, in Kerala, caste is the main issue. You go look for apartment they ask your caste 'Oh, sorry no' they want upper-caste. You go to government jobs they say you get reservations, but no." As explained by Kala, discrimination on the basis of caste stems from the religious domain yet persists in the social and professional spheres. In Kala's understanding, the (lack of) symbolic capital afforded her through caste membership determines her capacity for social and professional mobility.

Caste and community membership provides, or fails to provide, "material profits, such as… services accruing from useful relationships and symbolic profits, such as those derived from association with a rare prestigious group" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 89). In the context of India's system of social stratification, social networks emerging from and mirroring the divisions between non-/scheduled communities impart benefits unequally to their members (e.g., a Muthuvan individual growing up in a hamlet in Idukki is likely to have a less substantial and socially, economically, and politically 'upward' network of relations to draw on than a Nair (i.e., 'upper-caste') individual growing up in Kochi, Kerala's largest city and economic centre). In the case of contemporary Kerala, and with relevance to social stratification in India more broadly, inequality is maintained through classification and, accordingly, asymmetrical access to social, cultural, symbolic and economic forms of capital. Members of the dominant non-scheduled strata are awarded disproportionate access to that which their society values and the tools needed to succeed. This context of systemic unequal access is precisely what CREST is poised to respond to.

Unsurprisingly, many of its students, Ajay, Rasheed and Kala included, express an awareness of the role that social classification and exclusion play in shaping their and others' capacity for upward mobility. This belief is not shared by all of CREST's students, however, as evidenced by Sreejith's contention that caste no longer has any bearing in contemporary Kerala. Sreejith is by no means alone in maintaining this position. This became clear to me when I had the opportunity to lead a seminar with a small group of students from the program's 26th class. I began by asking each student to discuss their ambition and what barriers they felt they faced in its realization. Of the seven students present, none cited economic considerations, the region or family they were raised in, or their scheduled status as factors they felt might hinder them. Instead, students listed what they saw as

individual failings or personality flaws that had or would have potential to hold them back from achieving their goals. I pressed the issue: "some barriers are beyond our control; they might be something we are born with or something that we cannot change. Even though this *thing* isn't our fault it makes it harder for us to achieve what might be easier for someone else. Does anyone feel like they have experienced this kind of barrier?" Finally, Bibin, a 23-year-old with a Bachelor of Technology in Mechanical Engineering spoke up: "laziness?" Dumbfounded, I considered how seven students at a school expressly targeting scheduled communities had not made a single (or even vague) reference to socially reproduced inequality in any form. To be sure, this is a topic considered highly political and sensitive in Kerala; too much, perhaps, to expect students to broach with an outsider. Still, this inconsistency was one that resonated throughout the duration of my fieldwork. Is it possible that the program's focus on students' successful navigation of socially reproduced disenfranchisement comes at the expense of the development of their critical consciousness of this same structural inequality?

Discussion and Conclusion

During the months I spent at CREST I witnessed a number of speeches given by faculty and administration exalting hard work and admonishing laziness. I saw a guest lecturer, M.N. Karaserry, a prominent Malayalam writer, political activist, and outspoken opponent of the caste system invited to discuss the history of Malayalam but not to reflect on social issues relevant to the students. I saw, and participated in, innumerable activities requiring students to list their individual strengths and weaknesses: the things they could rely on or had to improve if they wanted to achieve their goals. Over and over, I listened as students were told that if they worked 'hard enough' they could succeed. To my knowledge, though, not a single discussion of the consequences of social-discrimination or

inequality took place in a formal class setting throughout the duration of my internship. Instead, in the midst of India's economic liberalization and in response to the demands of Kerala's globalizing job market, CREST has adopted a meritocratic lexicon compatible with the dominant neoliberal paradigm. This approach, while clearly effective in galvanizing students to strive their hardest to succeed, may have the unintended effect of mystifying the reality and structure of socio-economic disparity and stratification in contemporary Kerala.

Students of the program are being taught how to succeed in an economically liberalizing Kerala and India. They are taught to refashion their dispositions through the development of 'soft skills' to adapt to the changing standards of a competitive, globalizing job market. They are taught the importance of developing their social networks. They are taught that they alone, through hard work and dedication, have the power to decide whether or not they will succeed. From what I observed, they are not taught, however, to discuss and engage with the reality of the socially structured inequality that disproportionately disadvantages them in the pursuit of their ambitions. This approach helps to account for Sreejith's denial of the relevance of caste and the seemingly paradoxical lack of awareness (or perhaps unwillingness to disclose awareness) of socially reproduced inequality among a significant portion of the centre's students.

CREST's professional development program has and continues to make tangible successes possible. Examples I encountered directly include the offers of competitive positions at both Cisco Systems, Inc. (a prestigious multinational technology corporation) and Amazon to graduates of the 25th class and the astonishing transformations of shy and self-conscious students into extroverted and self-possessed graduates that I witnessed firsthand. As a result of its incredibly devoted faculty and administration, as well as programming informed by practical and

innovative approaches to education, CREST will undoubtedly continue to play an indispensable role in contributing to its graduates' successes. These victories are evidence of the centre's ability to prepare its students to adapt to the demands and values of the society in which they live.

Nonetheless, in the context of a contemporary Kerala wherein the legacy of caste-, tribal- and scheduled-discrimination and disparity persist, I argue that a student's assertion that "in Kerala nobody cares about caste" indicates that CREST's approach to individual empowerment may come at a price. It seems unlikely that the achievements of graduates, as they realize their social, economic, professional, or academic ambitions despite having faced considerable obstacles, will culminate in the subversion of the system that produces those obstacles, especially if they themselves are unaware of or apathetic towards that system. Not working to develop a critical consciousness of the systemic disenfranchisement of scheduled communities in Kerala may have the unintended consequence of leaving the socially repressive structures that continue to subjugate them unchallenged and intact. If individuals belonging to scheduled communities learn to frame their success as a result of their ability to perform a certain 'valued' personhood, yet do not critically reflect on or problematize the dominant structure of meaning through which 'un-valued' personhood is defined, that dominant structure could be further cemented.

In its current incarnation, CREST's programming is engaged in the extremely sophisticated and effective management of the symptoms of socially reproduced inequality. The centre facilitates the accumulation and transmission of cultural and social capital among its students and their communities that are historically disadvantaged in this pursuit. The importance of this accomplishment cannot be overemphasized. The experiences of Ajay and Rasheed alone demonstrated the significant contributions that CREST has made for young people in Kerala struggling to improve

their social and economic situation against formidable odds.

Still, a question lingers for me. Could CREST not — at the same time — encourage the mobilization of socio-politically informed resistance among its trainees? Are the two types of pedagogy incompatible, or could they be combined? Perhaps if the centre devoted time in its curriculum to the development of analytical perspectives on social disparity in Kerala it could provide its students with the tools necessary to discuss, critique and challenge the dominant ideologies and structures that inform socially reproduced inequality. In doing so, CREST might expand its potential even further, from managing the symptoms of entrenched social stratification to cultivating generations of informed graduates that have the aptitude and tools necessary to effect meaningful structural change and subvert the system by which this disparity is maintained in their home state.

Acknowledgements

[1] Approximately $23.10 CAD and $28.75 CAD at the time of my fieldwork.

[2] This stipend is provided by Kerala's government. The monthly amount awarded to each student corresponds with their attendance record for that month, the maximum being 5,000 INR (approximately $100 CAD at the time of my fieldwork) (Centre for Research and Education for Social Transformation, 2015).

[3] The official language of the state of Kerala.

[4] All interlocutors' names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

[5] "Out of the 40 seats available for the course, 28 are reserved for SCs, 8 for STs, and 4 for OEC/OBC [Other Eligible Communities/Other Backward Classes]" (Centre for Research and Education for Social Transformation, n.d., para. 1).

[6] A commission established under Prime Minister Morarji Desai with the goal of "identifying socially or educationally 'backward' communities to inform the policy of reservations and quotas aimed at combating caste discrimination" (Manoram, 2011, p. 77).

[7] Known as 10th standard in India.

[8] Reservation is a form of quota-based affirmative action. The University Grants Commission provides financial assistance to universities to implement the reservation policy in student admission (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 2010).

[9] Recruitment exams.

[10] *Murti* are sacred images of deities: "*murti* may be considered to be God or the specific deity it represents. Some Hindu groups consider the *murti* a form of *avatar*" (The Heart of Hinduism, 2004).

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