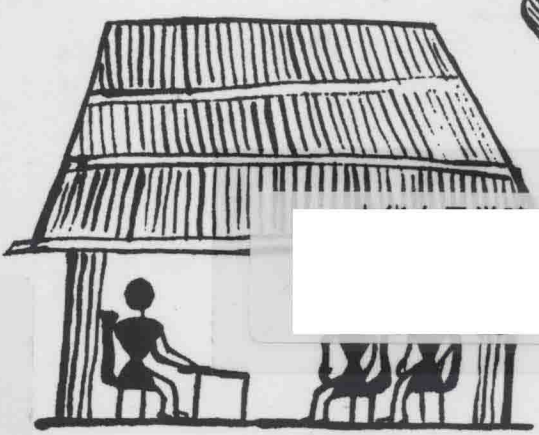
Edited by

Meenakshi Thapan

Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India



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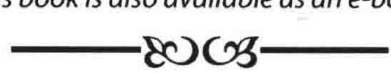

Acknowledgements

This collection of chapters is born out of an enormous need for good quality sociological studies of schooling in India. As a teacher of sociology in the Delhi School of Economics, where I teach courses such as the sociology of education and the sociology of schooling to MA and MPhil sociology students every year, I am dismayed by the absence of this work in a field that is rich with the promise of diverse material based on the experience of the participants in the process of schooling. To put it in a nutshell: the field of the sociology of education in India lacks ethnographies of the large array of schools that exist in the country and of the experience of children in these schools.

A project was undertaken at the Department of Sociology with research funding by the University of Delhi from 2007 onwards to study different kinds of schools in Delhi, Ahmedabad and southern India with a twin focus on student culture and the values of citizenship education as they are promoted through schools and negotiated by students. Graduate students of the Department of Sociology were engaged in these projects on a part-time basis and conducted fieldwork in different secondary schools in Delhi. This was done under my guidance and supervision at the Department of Sociology. Professor Murray Milner, University of Virginia, was a visiting fellow at the Department of Sociology for a few months and provided guidance and feedback to the students. I remain indebted to him for the initial idea to begin this project and for his comments on students' work. Subsequently, the authors presented their work at in-house workshops in Delhi University and have been working on their papers which they have now finalised on the basis of detailed commentary and suggestions provided by the editor. These chapters form an important part of this volume. In addition to the chapters, all the authors have written brief accounts of their own school experience which have been included in Chapter 8. This collection of essays (except the editor's contribution) is an effort by next generation

scholars who have spent research time on fieldwork in schools and writing even though it is not necessarily their main research interest. I am thankful to them for their contribution and for their continuing friendship and intellectual support.

Students at the sociology department in the Delhi School of Economics have helped me to think things through better by their earnest quest for understanding and persistent questioning. I thank all of them for enriching my understanding of schools and schooling. I am forever indebted to that doyen of sociology in India, who supervised my own PhD dissertation on the study of a school as a socio-cultural system, Professor T.N. Madan, to whom this book is dedicated. He allowed me to follow my dreams and research questions with complete immersion in a field that was relatively unknown to him. His unobtrusive presence and friendship have been a continuous support in my intellectual life, and I am grateful to him for his comments on a chapter in this volume. I must also thank the anonymous reviewers at SAGE Publications for their thoughtful feedback and Professor Amman Madan and Dr Anuradha Sharma for their insightful comments on some chapters. I spent nine months on a Robert Schuman fellowship at the European University Institute at Florence (2012–2013) where I completed the writing and finalisation of my contributions and this volume as a whole. I thank Professor Philippe Fargues of the Migration Policy Centre for hosting me and providing an excellent environment for intellectual engagement and some quiet time for writing. This situation was sustained by the affectionate care and tender environs for our mother Aruna Thapan provided by Arjun Thapan and Mai Flor in the Philippines. Many thanks to them and to George for being there at all times, ever supportive, providing comfort, warmth and endless sustenance.

The schools I have inhabited as a researcher are my other 'life-worlds' that give me food for thought and life as a sociologist. I thank them all for allowing me entry and tolerating my presence as an ethnographer in their midst. Above all, it is my interaction with students at these schools that has helped me the most to understand what schooling is all about and I am ever grateful to them for allowing me to engage with them and share their lives at school.

Meenakshi Thapan
University of Delhi, August 2013

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Introduction: Understanding School Experience

Meenakshi Thapan

Studying Schools: An Agenda for Research

In India, sociologists have paid scant attention to what goes on inside schools and classrooms in everyday life contexts. In their effort, rightly stated, to establish the failure of the state in providing equal education for all and the presence of prevalent inequalities that constrain the spread of, and equal access to, good quality education, sociologists have tended to neglect the processes of schooling, in their minutiae, where children and youth engage with one another and their teachers and other school personnel to live out their young lives as participants in a process called education. Understanding this world of everyday life in particular contexts brings into focus what is known as 'ethnography' as a 'deliberate inquiry process guided by a point of view, rather than a reporting process guided by a standard technique or set of techniques, or a totally intuitive process that does not involve reflection' (Erickson 1984: 51). Ethnography or the ethnographic method is therefore a finely nuanced method of inquiry and of writing about the social in ways that

remain uncaptured by the recording and analysis of mere empirical information.

Essential to the sociology of education in India is an understanding of what constitutes 'the field' in contemporary studies of education, especially educational institutions. In a recent survey of the field, Karuna Chanana (2011) emphasises the lack of interest in the sociology of education among Indian sociologists. She reflects on an essay by Professor Damle who lamented that even in the 1960s, research in sociology had 'still not accepted education as a legitimate concern' (1967, as cited by Chanana 2011). Although sociology no longer rejects education as a significant research agenda, its practitioners remain few and far between. All departments of sociology in the country still do not have sociology of education as a taught course at either the Masters' or the MPhil level. This would surely prevent or discourage research in the subject at the doctoral level, and if students do express a research interest in the field of the sociology of education, it is an outcome of their own experience and inclinations.[1]

Conventionally, there has been a research interest in understanding the factors that disable students to equitably access education, or drop out of school, the gender dynamics in this context, the social backgrounds of teachers, teacher education, the quality of education per se, inequalities of different kinds, the textbooks that are in use and other indicators of the educational process.[2] These are all essential aspects of education and need to be understood in the context of schooling in India in order to establish a profile of educational processes in multiple settings.[3] Schooling in India is set in vastly different contexts that are dependent on a particular school's history and setting, institutional goals, location, available infrastructure, linguistic medium of instruction, the relevant school board to which the school is affiliated, the social class of students and the teachers, caste identities and a host of other influencing factors. There are three types of schools in India: government, aided and private (recognised and unrecognised). Those that are run by

[1] At the Department of Sociology, University of Delhi, it has been my experience in recent years that students who are enrolled for MA from the B.El.Ed. stream are the most likely to develop a research interest in the sociology of education.

[2] See, e.g., Chanana (1988), Karlekar (1988), Wazir (2000), Kumar (2001), Vaugier-Chatterjee (2004), Vittachi and Raghavan (2007), Deshkal Society (2010), Miles and Singal (2010), Velaskar (2010), Nambissan (2011) and Majumdar and Mooij (2011).

[3] For a recent understanding of the different approaches to study the school as an organisation, see Chanana (2011).

central, state or local government are referred to as government schools; aided schools are those that are run by private managements but funded by government grant-in-aid; and private schools that receive no aid are referred to as private schools although there is an important subdivision among those that are recognised by the government (i.e., they fulfil certain criteria) or are unrecognised (Kingdon 2005). The most significant distinction between schools is that between the government and private schools. There has been a substantial increase in private schools in recent years as well as a massive growth in the government school system (Desai et al. 2008). This has resulted in a huge heterogeneity in the schooling system in the country as there are vast differences amongst private schools and government schools depending on location, fees charged, availability of resources and infrastructure, teacher qualifications and several other factors.

A recent study has found that in rural India, enrolment into school is at high levels, but this is in no way indicative of the fact that learning levels, are equally high. There are over 96 per cent of children in the age group 6–14 years now enrolled in school with largest numbers taking place in private schools. In fact, the study asserts, 'Since 2009, private school enrolment in rural areas has been rising at an annual rate of about 10 per cent. If this trend continues, by 2018 India will have 50 per cent children in rural areas enrolled in private schools' (ASER 2013: 47). This does not necessarily mean that as a result of being enrolled in private schools, children have access to improved infrastructure, more committed and conscientious teachers, a more creatively designed curriculum with innovative content and teaching methods, and as a result enhanced learning levels. In fact, according to ASER (2013), learning levels are abysmal in rural India: for example, 67.7 per cent of children enrolled in class III in government schools cannot read class I textbooks and arithmetic learning levels have dropped across schools except in some states in southern India. The survey points out that students who have access to private tuition outside schools show superior learning levels than those who do not have such access (ibid.: 48). These facts point us to the alarming state of primary school education in rural India. With an overt emphasis in government policy to get more and more children into school, increasingly higher figures are reported for enrolment across India, but this does in itself prove that more and more children are receiving education as the dropout rate is still very high especially among girls between the age of 11–14 years (ASER 2013). This scenario is further complicated by the prevalence of a curricular framework that

has over the years evolved from being a largely colonialist enterprise to one which, though embedded in a colonialist model, seeks to provide quality education for all.[4]

An important study (Govinda 2011) examines in some depth access to elementary education in India. One chapter in the volume probes the question: 'Access to what?' (Juneja 2011) and examines the diversity of schooling experience available at the primary level to children in this country. The author takes a look at the category of formal schools in which she includes government, private, including aided schools, and quasi-government schools. Within each category, there are undoubtedly hierarchies among schools as, for example, among government schools in Delhi. In addition to the existing schools of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC), the Delhi Cantonment Board and the state run government secondary schools, the Government of Delhi has initiated a new category of the Sarvodya Schools where admission is held through a lottery. Similarly, the Pratibha Vikas Vidyalayas have been added where admission to the schools takes place through admission tests. Both kinds of schools are considered much more prestigious than the MCD, NDMC and other schools mentioned above (ibid.: 223ff). Among government schools in Delhi, such schools would be considered elite institutions, relatively speaking, with access to greater resources, facilities and better teachers thus attracting students in larger numbers. Similarly, the popularity of a private school for parents is often judged by the medium of instruction in the school which is an important contributing factor in the life chances that are opened up for students (Juneja 2011: 227). In any case, the option of exercising choice in admission to private fee paying schooling is not open to all who must rely on government schools alone. There are variations in the quality of education provided in private and in government schools, and there has been considerable debate on whether private schools actually offer a

[4] The colonial influence on the curricular framework rests in the organisation of the school day according to a British perspective prevalent at the time schooling became westernised in India. Missionary-run schools and other schools established a particular way of conducting the school day that continues to the present: by allocating time to different activities in the curriculum, privileging some subject disciplinary areas over others, an overt emphasis on the English language, the mode of evaluation, the examination and certification system. See Viswanathan (1989) for an understanding of how the English language became a tool for colonial domination. See also Advani (2009). Above all, it is in the impact on the framing of educational objectives for school education in India that a colonialist framework is most obvious; see Krishna Kumar (1991) for an analysis of the 'homonymy' between colonialist and nationalist objectives for education in India.

better learning environment and opportunities for students.[5] Although there has been a proliferation of private schools across India, in both rural and urban spaces, there is a need to exercise caution in the assessment of the long-term benefits of private schooling, as opposed to a government school education, as any excessive celebration or denigration of one or the other may result in harmful policy that will affect the educational outcomes of large numbers of students.

Understanding access, quality and equity in school education is paramount in any study of schooling in India. However, an understanding of the *experience* of education in these settings is essential to a broader analysis of the processes in educational systems within which these and other factors work. Life at school, or what goes on within schools, is thus of overriding significance and it is important to understand schools with a focus on the participants in the schooling process: the students, teachers and other participants, and how they engage with the imposed structures in these processes or seek to negotiate, strategise or modify them. The aim is not only to provide thick description of how meaning is produced by a variety of actors in schools, but also to examine the social and political contexts of such meaning-making and the uses of culture by the actors who engage in schooling processes. It is in this sense that Giroux and Simon have argued for understanding 'schools as sites of struggle and for pedagogy as a form of cultural politics' (2000: 1541). They recognise that in schools, 'meaning is produced through the constructions of forms of power, experiences and identities that need to be analyzed for their wider political and cultural significance' (ibid.). As compared to earlier perspectives that approached meaning-making from a more person-centred symbolic interactionist approach that underplayed agency, such a view asserts that meaning-making is a far more fraught and complex process. We, therefore, need to pay particular attention to the social, political and cultural forces as they shape school experience in different social contexts while simultaneously enabling the agency of students and teachers to remain at the forefront of our analysis.

There are diverse ways in which we may pay attention to agency and understand agency in schooling. At one level, agency appears as the obvious effort of students to assert themselves through forms of questioning and rebellion that seek to go against the norms set by the school, challenge school initiatives, school authorities, the curriculum and even

[5] See, e.g., Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffrey (2007), Desai, Dubey, Vanneman and Banerji (2008) and Nambissan (2012).

their own interpersonal relationships. This is, however, only one level at which agency appears and indicates to us the non-conformity amongst students and their efforts to address their constraining circumstances in enclosed spaces in different ways. At another level, students seek to assert their independence in ways that undermine the efforts at ideological inculcation and indoctrination that appears to be a characteristic phenomenon of all schooling processes. Such forms of agency, that are not always directly expressed but are prevalent in the student culture, have far-reaching consequences as they seek to inform attitudes, perspectives, worldviews and forms of understanding among students. Although these may be influenced by the media, popular cinema and the increasing influence of social networking sites on the Internet, among other things, the influence of the student culture and the impact of peers cannot be undermined. This work, therefore, seeks to examine different kinds of agency as well as the efforts of diverse schools to discipline, regularise, constrain and shape students in particular ways. This volume argues that agency is always present as an aspect of human endeavour to be an engaged participant and that schools walk the tightrope between negotiation with students and downright domination.

Understanding Schools: Students as Engaged Participants in the Creation of School Cultures

This book seeks to make a contribution to understand meaning and meaning-making in school processes in India as active aspects of a very vibrant school culture. It is essential to unpack and unravel the rich and engaged world of student culture as it is constructed in school life. The influence of popular culture, the media and aggressive marketing of consumer goods all enter the school arena to compete with the more formal aspects of being at school and contribute to the creation of a unique school culture. At the same time, there are schools where consumerism may not be a driving force due to the lack of economic and social capital among the student body, but the influence of popular culture is nonetheless prevalent. Or that students construct their own idea of what contributory factors create important elements of 'life' at school. Gender relations are constituted within the frame of peer relations and the often contradictory, contested and diverse aspects of these relations need to be

uncovered. Religion plays a dominant role especially in schools that are established within a religious framework such as the ubiquitous 'convent' schools, *madrassa*s and other such institutions.[6] We can see that political and social forces influence not just schools and their functioning but also the lives of teachers and students within schools.[7] Thus, for example, the socio-political context of a school's location in a city like Ahmedabad that experienced severe violence against the Muslim community in 2002 would undoubtedly shape the school's constitution of itself as specifically focused on the education of Muslim girls. It would also shape the students' constructions of themselves as young Muslim women and citizens in a changing India. Schools that seek to work with an 'alternative' frame do not cater to society as a whole but perhaps, only to particular sections of the society. Nonetheless, their significance as educational institutions where students are captive for even larger parts of the day and night need to be understood not only in terms of their contribution to the creation of a particular 'person' and an idea of modernity.[8] We need to unravel the processes within such schools that make up the school culture embedded as they are in particular kinds of ethos and heterogeneity of experience.[9]

This work also asserts the primacy of students' voices in the meaning-making processes within schools. We, therefore, are unable to accept the view that children are passive or mute participants in schools that seek to crush their personalities, dreams and aspirations. Froerer (2007), for example, has examined the relationship between Hindu nationalist ideology and the disciplinary practices of the Saraswati Shishu Mandir Primary School in Chhattisgarh in central India. Her work emphasises the overriding aspirations of children who value educational success and a career *over* creating a Hindu *rashtra*. Students, even young children, are not silent or passive participants in the process of being moulded into good citizens. In the end, to be schooled is to be good and thereby capable of attracting the right kind of attention for educational accomplishment and upward mobility. It is therefore important to let students speak for themselves and ethnographers need to listen to these voices carefully in order to distinguish students' aspirations and perspectives from what

[6] See the work of Winkelmann (2005), in this context.

[7] The works of Velaskar (2010) and Nambissan (2011) have provided an in-depth understanding of the social contexts of inequality that prevail in schools.

[8] See the work of Srivastava (1998) for example.

[9] See Thapan (1991/2006) and MacDougall (1997/2000, 2004/2005, 2005, 2005/2007, 2008).

might appear to the observer to be the 'right' observation to make or the 'obvious' conclusion to arrive at. In other words, the ethnographer's ability to listen, to observe and to faithfully record, without prejudice, is crucial to the process of school ethnographies. Studying schools is therefore not an easy task, where untrained ethnographers provide detailed summaries of activities and may conclude they are providing an 'ethnography'. They are in fact providing reportage in some detail. Good ethnography requires more than mere qualitative descriptions; it 'demands analyses that are methodic and self-conscious enough to reveal the hidden systematics of daily demands and desires' (McDermott and Raley 2011). It is to be continually present as an ethnographer, even in your absence, to be aware of the nuances of each interaction, of the inflections that underlie all conversations, said and unsaid, between different stakeholders in schooling processes, of the embodied gestures, gaze and expressions of all participants, the multiplicity of opinions and undercurrents of unequal relations, of the stark poverty, both material and intellectual, that stare you in the face and also of your own role as an ethnographer in their midst.[10]

Schools are spaces where identities are fluid, made and unmade over innumerable times. The formal aspects of schooling no doubt influence these informal and fluid kind of relationships, but they are constituted essentially in the peer group which is one of the most significant aspects of all encounters in school. Students feel at home in school if they are accepted members of the peer group, comprehend the peer culture and are able to engage with one another on what appears to be equal terms. They quickly learn to master the art of inclusion and 'fit in' to appropriate an acceptable way of being. Being at the heart of the student culture is most effective way of knowing for a student that he/she is not out of place.

At the same time, the focus of this book is not on student culture alone. There is an effort to understand the significant role of teachers and their perspectives in the construction of the school world, as it were. The extent to which teachers are constrained by the official curriculum, school rules and the ways in which they seek to liberate themselves from these constraints and arrive at a more liberal and less disciplinary attitude, is reflected in these studies of very different kinds of schools. Teachers' somewhat dismissive and openly casteist and derogatory

[10] The fascinating and delicately nuanced work of David MacDougall (1997/2000, 2004/2005, 2005, 2005/2007, 2008) immediately comes to mind for its creativity, attention to detail and complete immersion in the field as an ethnographer.