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## Un/Common Schooling : Alternative Education in the Time of Democracy

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## **Un/Common Schooling: Alternative Education in the Time of Democracy<sup>1)</sup>**

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### **1. Introduction**

In 1975, Non-Formal Education (NFE) was seen as “the best hope for providing educational assistance to the mass of our people,” though even this was recognized as requiring vast resources that only the government could provide (Indian Adult Education Association 1975: 18). The 2009 enactment of the Right to Education (RTE) Act (guaranteeing free and compulsory education to all children aged between 6 and 14) came more than six decades after India secured independence; in the intervening period, millions of youngsters had never entered a school, been “failed” out of the system and channeled into the fields and factories, or condemned to a period of fruitless waiting (Vasavi, 2014; see also Jeffrey 2010). Clearly, no longer is the “handout” of NFE an acceptable alternative for the “unschooled.” Not only are there are growing and increasingly diverse systems of schooling (Vasavi forthcoming) but there is also a large and flourishing “shadow” “tuition” industry, which has sustained a unique division of labor between the credentialing aspects of school systems and actual “learning.”

That RTE itself, as a justiciable right, has been granted when the massive privatization of school education has already taken place skews expectations of education’s transformative capacity. This is paradoxically matched by the growing belief that only profoundly individuated effort (exemplified by the tuition industry) will combat systemic failures (Majumdar, 2014).

It is too early to assess the true effects of legislating to guarantee compulsory education, since changes in policy are usually far more abrupt than the human lives they purport to change.<sup>2)</sup> With what frames, however, do we evaluate the relatively important effects of the *neglect* of schooling/education for well over 60 years? How do we emplace the current perception of the lack of education as a perceptible drag on economic development? How do we, in short, account for the innumerable and intractable paradoxes of our times?

### ***Is Schooling Any Longer for Education?***

We are clearly entering a domain that is, as Louis Althusser famously remarked, both very familiar and uniquely ignored. However, unlike the subject of Althusser’s

analysis – late 20<sup>th</sup> century France, with its long-established systems of compulsory schooling – we are analyzing a very different zone of unequal and incomplete access, with devastatingly different consequences, even for the life chances of those who have been schooled. Althusser’s assumption was that schooling in advanced capitalist societies, as an Ideological State Apparatus *par excellence*, had found uses for each level of students that it ejects.<sup>3)</sup> This may be too reductive, even for France, and entirely inappropriate in a setting like India, where caste and gender, to name just two indices, intersect with economic interests to produce a densely cross-hatched system of opportunities and inequalities.

Two haunting newspaper images from March 2015 offer an optic on the unique achievements and contradictions of schooling in contemporary India. The first, which went “viral,” showed groups of young men desperately scaling several stories of an unplastered brick building, endeavoring to assist the female students within to complete a school-leaving exam.<sup>4)</sup> The second depicted a father locked up overnight for tying his reluctant six-year-old daughter to his pillion, seeking to transport her to a maths exam.<sup>5)</sup>

Both images portrayed the desperation of families, particularly among the poor, lower caste, and underprivileged, in clinging to what they perceive as the only “exit” from their current predicaments, i.e., education, or, more accurately, the vast system of credentialing to which we give the name “schooling” in India. Yet the second also conveyed a poignant and pervasive reaction to the deadening routines of study, producing revulsion and disgust, rather than excitement and eagerness. The problems of access to schooling and the eventual “prize” of certification, the usual preoccupations of policy-makers and scholars alike, have obscured very real problems with the quality of schooling itself (regimentation, learning by rote, stifled creativity, rigid exam-oriented systems, etc.), which call for creative alternatives (encouraging cooperation, not competition; learning skills for life, not just livelihoods; and preserving, rather than replacing, indigenous knowledge). Education, in any meaningful sense of the term, can by no means be taken for granted.

However, an education may not be what families want from schooling in contemporary India. Some aspects of the reasons behind these newsworthy “aberrations” demand our preliminary attention. Both of the cited cases concerned girls. In the second, recorded in Mathura, Uttar Pradesh (UP), the girl was one of five for whom the father, a security guard, hoped private schooling could unlock a better life than his: “I only wanted her to appear for the exam... I don’t want her to end up like me.” In the first case, recorded in Vaishali, Bihar, the families of the girls taking the exam were desperate to add matriculation to the school leavers’ marriageability index: “Our boys are not happy with merely seeing the photographs of the girl they want to marry; they want better biodatas and their girls to have passed matriculation.”

Sanjay Seth, who has noted the vast expansion of higher education in India today, says that education “signifies something in excess of the material benefits expected, and it signifies this ‘something’ even where its instrumental benefits are not, in fact, realized.”<sup>6)</sup> This has been described with particular insight by Manuela Ciotti, with reference to the Chamars of Manupur, UP: who “shows how the workings of literacy and

education are tightly linked to the widening of the overall democratic project in northern Indian society, which specifically appeals to the Chamar and other Dalit communities” (Ciotti 2006: 902). Ciotti points to an important paradox, which is less pessimistic than Seth’s:

With regard to the ‘symbolic present,’ local ideas of education – a shared substance affecting caste qualities – are used by the Chamars when talking about themselves *vis-à-vis* others. In this respect, claiming a unified (and positive) substance on the basis of education serves a political and social necessity. (Ciotti 2006: 911)

These uses of schooling would not have come to Althusser’s attention: to meet the new and ever-changing demands of the marriage market; to escape the dangerous boredom and tedium of unskilled work; or as a route that leads “to the acquisition of a substance, often of a moral nature,” which, though only acquired by a minority, is seen as collectively shared and acting on an inherited Chamar identity (Ciotti 2006). The instances speak not only of systemic failures, but of systematic responses to systemic failures (e.g., tuition or industrial scale cheating, as in the recent Vyapam scam [Kumar 2015]) despite desperate individual efforts (e.g., private schooling) to beat, or at least cope with, the system. However, in the interstices of such pessimism is the glimmering of new and, one might add, non-academic possibilities enabled by democracy.<sup>7)</sup>

We are at a time when the disenchantments with Indian education are pronounced with fervor, and denunciations of the system are the starting point of most scholarly exercises, only for inequality and its effects to also be the chief “discovery.” I start, instead, at the opposite end, returning to two moments already passing into the archives of educational history. I refer to the 1970s and 1980s, when small scale shifts occurred from below, in one case facilitated by the state’s *indifference* and, in the other, directly *enabled* by it. The first refers to the small, alternative/non-formal schools<sup>8)</sup> that were founded in some parts of India, partly inspired by ideas of education that were drifting in from as far afield as Italy, Brazil, and the UK, or from Indian experiments with alternatives to schools. . Engendered by discontent over compulsory education systems (as in UK and Italy) or massive state failures (as in Brazil), these ideas focused on learning methods as a way of ensuring students went to school, stayed there, and benefited from the experience. A.S. Neill’s Summerhill experience (Neill 1992; see also Hemmings 1972), the efforts of the priest in Barbiana, Italy (Children of Barbiana 1970), and Paulo Friere’s in Brazil (Friere 1970) inspired some novel experiments in education, largely in places (e.g., villages, slums, and forests) with no viable schooling and, more properly, no viable *demand for schooling* among marginalized communities.<sup>9)</sup> Non-formal schooling or “alternative education” – the only kind of schooling accessible to the poor – may not have achieved the philosophical breadth or systematic anti-colonial alternatives of a Gandhi or Tagore,<sup>10)</sup> but it nevertheless opened up new possibilities and produced unexpected results.<sup>11)</sup>

The second moment refers to the unexpected opportunities that emerged within the interstices of the Government school system itself for those of oppressed castes and

classes. I access their experiences largely via the “dossiers” of Dalit writings and autobiographies. These sources testify to a “moment of arrival,” when a new Dalit language was forged, in part enabled by systems of reservation and partly a consequence of the Dalit political movement. Arvind Malagatti’s autobiography, entitled *Government Brahmana*, is a self-deprecatory reference to the state’s largesse in providing this opportunity. Memories of this “coming of age” in the 1960s provide unique historical insights into experiences of classroom “democracy” in the Indian republic’s early days. Such possibilities were largely generated by government schools’ more heterogeneous profile before private schooling became the norm, turning these schools into ghettos of the underprivileged. Taken together, these two very disparate sites are united in representing the paradoxes thrown up by democracy.

Can a methodological focus on small-scale, relatively minor experiments and experiences provide more than another means to measure the failures of education as a whole, especially against Indian democracy’s success in offering ever higher levels of expectation?<sup>12</sup> Can life stories or autobiographies be the grid of intelligibility for large structural changes, transformations, and problems? Not, perhaps, as instances of a greater truth, but potentially as fragments suitable for prising open the system: an “interpretive device,” to recall Carolyn Steedman’s apt term. Two different ways of “narrating the self” are brought together here, each attesting to the vastly altered life-chances offered by new modes of access to the classroom: one via an opportunity to speak and reflect; the other via the sense of self produced among those politically and socially empowered by education.

Though they were fleeting possibilities, they allow us to think anew: to what extent were new life chances for the poor enabled by innovative pedagogies of the classroom? To what extent by wider transformations in society? Was education, whether alternative or through regular government schools, perceived as an opportunity or a socializing force? Deliberate focus on the historical miniature – the life story – not only allows us to review the “politics of presence” of the less privileged in the classroom: we can also ask how an even smaller minority put their literacy to unexpected uses to generate a new intellectual life.<sup>13</sup> Finally, as the demand for credentials is now ubiquitous, are such opportunities receding *despite* the guarantee of education for all?

## 2. “Where there is no textbook”: The rise of alternative education.

Krishna Kumar has traced the moment, during the colonial period, when the teacher was turned into a “meek dictator,” both disempowered and curiously retaining the worst of his pre-colonial inheritance. The new and excessive reliance on the textbook, which not only stood between teacher and student but also dominated the classroom and learning, continued into the post-independence period (Kumar 1991: 91–93).<sup>14</sup> However, in the late 1960s and the 1970s, a period of great political and social ferment in India, there were two distinct responses to the very vivid failures of mass education: the more ambitious attempt was the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme of Madhya Pradesh, followed later by the Eklavya Project, which comprised working with teachers

in government schools and rewriting textbooks (Paliwal 2017).<sup>15)</sup>

There were also some creative experiments with meaningful learning, which introduced first-generation learners to innovative classroom methods (I draw extensively on Sahi 2017; Shirly 2017; Margaret 2017; Malathi 2017). Although the teacher, and her moral authority, were not entirely displaced, the deadening centrality of the textbook was consciously replaced with hands-on activities, strengthened observation, and the active use of craft, music, dance, and reading, in small, intensely developed, classroom situations. Students of the alternative schools were, thereby, introduced to the pleasures of learning, its joys and triumphs, and insulated from the anxieties of passing exams.

Of the series of experiments begun among communities with little or no access to school, I take three examples: a slum school in Bengaluru called Tilaknagar Children's Centre (hereafter TNCC); a daytime school in Silvepura called Sita School, on the outskirts of Bengaluru; and a school for Adivasi children in Cheengode, Nadavayal village, Wayanad, Kerala called Kanavu. Some inspired individuals were able to channel their skills and interests, as well as their cultural capital, into run schools without government support. They were outsiders to the communities they served, were relatively clear about the community needs they perceived, and were able to sustain their efforts largely through external financial aid and support. Let us admit at the outset, then, the impossibility of replicability on any large scale.

But replicability was not the interest of K.T. Margaret, who began the TNCC in 1978 (medium of instruction: Tamil, with English and Kannada as additional languages) Jane Sahi, who started Sita School in 1975 (medium of instruction: Kannada, with English and Hindi as additional languages); and K.J. Baby, an activist and writer who established the Kanavu in the mid-1990s (medium of instruction: Malayalam) (Augustine and Brahme, 2014). These were multi-age and mixed-ability schools, usually with no more than one classroom, and not exceeding 40–50 students. An assortment of thinkers and writers inspired each of the founders: M.K. Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, Paulo Friere and Sigmund Freud, Rudolph Steiner, and A.S. Neill, as well as more local heroes such as Gijubhai Badekha or David Horsburgh. The desire to preserve communities by nurturing indigenous talents, rather than replacing them with “national” or state-ordained skills, was another motive.

These experiments were amply aided by the state's neglect, which the growth of private education and, now, the RTE have seriously challenged. For instance, schooling was not offered to the Dalit Christians (of *Madiga* (leather worker) origin) or even some Hindus and Muslims in Silvepura village, as Jane Sahi (2002) recalls:

Twenty-five years ago, when the school was started, most people ...were still working within the village either as agricultural labourers or as construction workers. *Many children at that time were not going to school. The school was started in part as a response to remedy that...* The causes seemed clear – firstly there were economic factors that meant that children were needed to support the family ... Further, the local schools were not appealing to parents as there was a rather tenuous link between home and school and ... formal schooling seemed an unlikely route to improved possibilities of work. Thirdly, the

[government] school itself was a rather joyless affair and had nothing to attract the children themselves. In addition there was a history of discrimination against Dalit children and the community in at least one village felt alienated from the management of the local Convent school. (Sahi 2002<sup>16</sup>); emphasis added)

Things were not very different in Tilaknagar, a slum in the heart of Bengaluru, where K.T. Margaret opened her school: the children had long chosen play on the streets and pavements over any kind of schooling, and had no use for literacy, except to read posters announcing the new releases of Tamil films each Friday (Margaret 1999: 53):

From my experience when I started work in Tilaknagar slum in 1978, the community did not value school education of any kind, including alternative schools. The parents were not very keen on sending children to school as they felt it is a waste of time. They would rather send their children as apprentices to learn carpentry, masonry and earn a living [with] in a short period. When children expressed interest in attending the school, parents finally agreed and that is how the school was accepted by the community. (K. T. Margaret, personal communication, November 24, 2015).

In their formative phase, these alternative schools – or rather their middle class, well-educated founders – were reacting, like those in many movements worldwide, to the problems of compulsory schooling. An early statement of the Alternative School Education Group, formed in the early 1970s, proclaimed:

We have come together as a group of people who are concerned about the present system of school education and about the prevalent methods of teaching...in many schools the children seem to be motivated chiefly by the fear of failure in tests, marks, promotions etc. ...Formal standards and a rigid timetable will probably need to be replaced by flexible age-and-ability groupings in which children can work at their own speed and according to their own interests...we would like to reduce the usual heavy emphasis on book work and memorizing...We feel that there is a growing concern about school education but very little experimentation or discussion about possible improvements and alternatives.

However, was it fair to assume that children with no opportunity to attend any school would benefit from an “alternative”? What is remembered of these remarkable experiments in education by those offered a new life through schooling?

### **3. “It was a beautiful life”**

Is the joy of learning a laudable goal of education? Most who passed through the alternative schools remembered them as a space of freedom and joyful learning, with enabling, rather than suffocating, teachers. The allure of the well-endowed classroom was abundantly clear to those from impoverished backgrounds: the schools offered books, paint, crayons, and playthings, but also space, song, dance, and yoga classes. The freshly

cooked meals at Sita School were an additional attraction. Few of the interviewees spoke much of the content of their schooling, except in the broadest of terms (some exceptions being Ruth's remembrance of the project on water, and Shaji Bose on the life of the butterfly), but all shared a warm, if fuzzy, memory of the method. As Balachandra observed, "It was a kind of non-formal school: no books, no syllabus, I did not 'by-heart' anything."<sup>17)</sup> In government schools, on the contrary, "they have to pass, that's all." Recalling that "it was a beautiful life," he remembered a time of relative freedom from scolding, punishment, judgment, and fear of failing – all hallmarks of the regular schools – which the students cherished most.

Remembered joy is also associated with the time-consuming activities through which all subjects were taught, via experiential learning and without the necessity of "passing" examinations. As Pochamma (TNCC) recalled: "I really had no interest in studies. But for us, craft and craft class are very dear to the heart. Oh! We should attend and learn something new."<sup>18)</sup> Vanya Mari (Sita School) learned her passion for dance, Mumtaz (Sita School) her interest in Kannada, and Shaji Bose (Kanavu) the exuberant spirit of *kalaripayatta* and dance.

Margaret made the cathartic work of play central to her ideas of education. In this regard, her method resembled most strongly the "childhood is playhood" method of the Summerhill experiment. "I distinguish," said A.S. Neill, "between games and play. To me, football, hockey, rugby, and baseball are not real play; they lack the imagination of play. When children are free they tend to bypass team games, in favour of, for want of a better name, fantasy play" (Neill 1992: 32) In a sprawling slum like Tilaknagar, children used play to deal with the coiled violence of the home,<sup>19)</sup> their blossoming sexuality, the stresses of ambiguous morality in their community,<sup>20)</sup> the constant economic pressures of parents, and overtly misogynist talk and behavior, of which they were fully a part. Margaret discusses these issues with rare candor, but students' related memories are far more muted. In the words of a TNCC student: "Those days I used to get up and come to school for nothing else but to play with dolls. I felt it was a very important job for me. If I missed that play, I would feel sad the whole day, as if I hadn't done anything, as if I had lost something. I think that play has given me the strength to face life today" (Margaret 1999: 70).

Three distinct types of activities were nurtured in Margaret's school: those geared to pressing emotional needs, those catering to the desire for creative work, and the more conventional learning activities. Kannan is among those who readily recall the therapeutic value of play, explaining that the school was a refuge from home: "Play was relief. I wanted some *security*. I wanted to relieve pent up *feelings*. I wanted a place which would *accept me*"<sup>21)</sup> (all italicized words were originally spoken in English).

Shaji Bose<sup>22)</sup> describes the slow iterative work of learning through play, which he adopted as a teacher at Kanavu. In this passage, the memory of his own experience is fused with his methods as a teacher; in this shuttling-between, the freedoms from time and discipline constraints predominate:

Each kid had a mind of their own, so there was no compulsion... We were compelled to



do only very few things. So, each did what they liked to do. That is, when asked to draw, kids who are a bit elder and ones who know [how] to write are given dictation by us. Then, the others who are younger would also be sitting next to them. So, the little ones are given crayons and paper. Initially, they would tear it all away, but gradually... We do not mind any of those.... We just give writing assignments and do the corrections of the elder ones. We take their classes in Malayalam, Mathematics and such basics. In the end, the little kids are given crayons, pencils and paper which they initially tear [up] but later, try drawing something. Then, gradually they may feel like writing. When they begin to get interested, we give them one letter to learn. At first, they do not write the letters but later on, they do start to write.

Learning languages, science, and maths by doing was valued; thus, as Vanya Mari recalls: “In other schools, students learn from what teacher writes on board...But here we have to feel.... Like we have to see how the tree is.... We have to touch that...We have to see how the leaf is. Like this, we had to do for each and every tree... if they wanted to explain about that, they used to make us sit around the tree and then tell story about that. ...If they wanted to teach us something then, whatever that might be, they used to ask us to draw first...”<sup>23)</sup>

School was, thus, an enchanting space, and Balachandra recalled that he “never missed a single day at school, from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on all weekdays.” This enchantment with learning was consciously nurtured by Jane Sahi, through insistence on what is arguably the real medium of instruction in these alternative schools: the use of song, dance, drawing and painting, or creative writing to teach subjects as varied as maths, history, and science. This enabled Balachandra to make the breakthrough as a professional artist (supported by the considerable interest and assistance of Jyoti Sahi, himself a professional artist, and other outsiders who recognized his talent). In families who knew no leisure, even traditions of storytelling were unknown: Balachandra explained that “neither parents nor grandparents had that [kind of] contact with children.”<sup>24)</sup>

For most others, the enchantments of learning through play ended with elementary school: after the brief interregnum, most children were confronted by the economic constraints that defined and, indeed, denied opportunities to pursue non-encashable skills. Although Vanya Mari acknowledged the value of her education at Sita School, where “they used to teach us in such a way that we were not afraid of exams,” many did not pass the Secondary School Leaving Certificate examination, despite their best efforts.<sup>25)</sup> The very circumstances in which not only schooling but also childhood itself were snatched, at a great price, could sometimes prove insurmountable. The family, therefore, could both enable and end the promise of education.

#### **4. Enabling/Ending Education: Pain and Regret**

Many women and some men recalled their past with pain and regret: pain over adversities they faced, and regret over their curtailed education, in most cases due to

family constraints. For girls, a constant element of secrecy was involved, given the lack of social approval: many female interviewees discussed the extent of their efforts to continue their schooling. Murali Krishna recounts, repeatedly, the massive *collective* effort required for the opportunities of free schooling to be grasped by even one child:

Families work very hard to keep their children in school – often at great cost. There is the economic burden of schooling, but there is also the physical and emotional stress.... the real support comes from the family and from the community. Families struggle hard over many years and in difficult circumstances to keep children in school, just as children struggle hard to stay in school. When children have to leave – because there is not enough money to keep them in school or because they cannot survive the hostility, or because they “fail,” it is a matter of great sadness for everybody. A great opportunity, a huge investment of scarce money, and much effort on the part of many people is lost (Krishna 2004: 20–21; see also Valmiki 2003: 14).<sup>26)</sup>

The cold truth of homes that could not afford to continue or keep up education, or desperately needed an earning child, was often met with an unusual pragmatism: Mumtaz (Sita School), who completed her 10<sup>th</sup> standard examination at the second attempt, commented: “Everybody was happy that I passed SSLC, but after that, ‘stay at home’. I was not motivated, more discouraged about studying more. My sister got married, someone had to cook ...I didn’t ask my father about it. I knew they wouldn’t let me study...”<sup>27)</sup> Vanya Mari, who developed a passion for dance in her two years of Bharatanatyam instruction at Sita School, was unable to continue without aid from the professional dance school: “I told my father that I don’t want [to join the course], I lied that I don’t like to study.”<sup>28)</sup>

Pochamma (TNCC) could not complete her 10<sup>th</sup> standard examination due to her brother’s marriage, which became the start of her woes:

Then we had difficulties. At home my parents were doing masonry [work]. They lifted the stones and all that. They had no money to educate us. Then my sister-in-law came as my brother got married. She could not tolerate our growth. (Laughing) She felt that her husband earned and we were enjoying [living off] that. She felt envious about my studies. So I felt that ok, it is fine. So I left studies and started working...I worked there for five years. It was a social work. They liked it.<sup>29)</sup>

Soon, her brother’s child was left in her charge. It was not a sacrifice that faded with time:

There I made a great blunder. I cheated myself. (Laughing) ... I felt very sad. If I recollect it how they [teachers] advised me repeatedly to continue my studies when I was receiving my Transfer Certificate! But I had difficulties at home. We were unable to pay the monthly fees also.

Mumtaz Khanum, a self-confessed tomboy who enjoyed whistling, riding cycles, climbing trees, and playing marbles with the boys, while compelled by family circumstance to collect and chop wood, tend chickens, etc., exemplifies the kinds of nuances to which we must be attentive: “I fell silent after doing everything [in childhood].” At first extremely confident, jovial, and pragmatically resigned to the checks on her abilities imposed by life with her in-laws, her optimism faltered as the interview progressed, and she increasingly adopted a far more wistful tone.<sup>30)</sup> In all these cases, family and community support emerged from the twin hopes of leaving behind low-paid manual and entering an endlessly expanding economy via education. However, in each case, the withdrawal of family support abruptly ended the brief window of opportunity previously opened in their lives.

## 5. An Alternative to What?

Though the life chances of most alternative school students were not discernably improved, alumni nevertheless regard their school years as crucial to their socialization, fostering new confidence with which to look their peers, friends, and structures of authority in the eye. As such, the “alternative” offered by these schools was less to formal schools and education as to existing ways of dealing with structures of authority or forms of domination, ranging from family networks and neighborhoods to castes and religious structures.

The recollections of those who tried the state system and were compelled to leave provide instructive comparisons with the alternative schools. Shaji Bose was admitted to a government middle school in Kerala before coming to Kanavu. Today a managing trustee of the alternative school in which he studied, he recalled:

It was after I came here that I studied writing in Malayalam without any mistakes. Till my 4<sup>th</sup> std. [in the government school], I was a fairly good student. But, once here, when I wrote one sentence, at least half of it had mistakes. That is when that I understood that I did not know [how] to read and write. But there [in the Government school], everyone had simply praised us.<sup>31)</sup>

Most referred to the good *foundation* they received in equipping them to face life confidently, rather than for jobs and careers (the word “foundation” was usually spoken in English). Twenty-eight-year-old Vanya Mari studied at Sita School, Silvepura, where she continues to live. She came from a large and relatively underprivileged rural family, was enabled to see the larger structures at work in society, and has participated, during her time at the NGO Sananda, in performances critical of capitalism, male domination, and education itself. Mari attributes her new sense of self to the school and its teachers, and the “fearless environment” that it created. Today, she practices yoga, dance, and art, which enrich her life in countless ways: “All that came from here only, right? ...had I not got a *foundation*, I could not have [been] involved like that...we will remember that what we learnt then is useful now.”<sup>32)</sup>

For those who shunned the more structured school space, alternative schools provided, especially in the junior years, an environment in which students felt encouraged rather than judged; accepted for their differences, rather than being reminded of them. Shaji Bose, in particular, mentioned the great difference between conventional schools and alternative schools, such as Kanavu, where caste was experienced as a modern stigma rather than a traditional taboo:

**I:** Can you speak of an experience where caste has become an issue?

**SB:** I had the maximum problems when I went to that [government] school. That was the time when I suffered the most [from] casteism. This can be called harassment too. Later on, we had to endure nothing of the sort. Then, after coming to Kanavu, when we used to go to the colonies, we used to endure such talk and behavior. But then, we had lots of courage because we were almost at an advantage of talking back to them.

**I:** Kanavu in itself is confidence, right?

**SB:** Yes, that's there. We don't feel so scared after coming here. By then, we had the scope to talk back to anyone when in need. Otherwise... when I first came to Kanavu, I could not hold a decent conversation with anyone. I was that scared. First issue was that I was scared and second that I don't know how to speak... so we don't speak. We just keep on avoiding. Just imagine a situation when we cannot face someone! That was how we came there. But now, at least, we can speak to people face to face. That itself is much to speak of. We have the confidence. The biggest boost I have from Kanavu is that now I can survive anywhere. I have that confidence. I can live anywhere and at any condition. We all have that confidence....<sup>33)</sup>

To exaggerate the freedom from classroom disciplines is to obscure other aspects of the alternative school experience. The dreads of a normal school were well known, but freedom from timetables, textbooks, and regularity could only be meaningful in places where there were actual alternatives. Particularly in the slum setting, where unpredictability was the norm, some yearned discipline, order, and structure. Kannan (TNCC) recalled that the most important aspect of his school life was the discipline it gave him, given the lack of such discipline in his natal home: a time and place for everything. "Every kind of work, be it bathing or cleaning the vessels or cleaning the plate after dinner, what should be done at what hour...there is a time for everything... getting up, going to sleep, eating, studying...there should be discipline."<sup>34)</sup> It was a discipline that his family could not offer him. Sahi comments on the powerful allure of the Convent school's regularity and uniformity among those who lacked such order:

Some months ago the children were asked to describe the kind of school they would like. It was rather unnerving to find with a few exceptions from the older children that what the children actually dreamt of was something very like the nearby convent school including

the timings, the uniform, the size, the games etc. The fact that many children drop out of the school, are unjustly punished, or quite often humiliated by the teachers at the Convent School seemed irrelevant compared to the advantages of formal schooling... (Sahi 2002)

An important sense of worth was cultivated in the alternative school system, which involved children exclusively of one social/caste background; unlike the marked bitterness found in Dalit autobiographies, memories of humiliation, etc. at school were rarely mentioned by the interviewees.

Here, too, there has been a generational shift, with parents no longer wanting the “alternative” for their children if it reminds them of caste humiliations they earlier escaped. On the reasons for reduced enthusiasm for alternative schools, Sita School teacher Ruth explained: “A few parents object to the work...like they [students] have to clean their vessels, they should serve themselves food, and fill water in the toilets. So they don’t want their children to do it. Just study and come.”<sup>35)</sup> Today, even alternative schooling cannot convince children from the laboring classes about the redeeming virtues of manual labor. Schooling is seen as the principal means of distancing oneself from origins and, in particular, manual work and entrenched stigmatization.<sup>36)</sup> Manual labor must, thus, be avoided at all costs, since the school could become a space for new forms of stigmatization, as attested by many life stories and autobiographies.

## 6. “We were scared to the core of the outside world”

While the process of education – whether in government or alternative schools; whether technical or run by a religious institution – could provide the resources to challenge entrenched social discriminations, schools could also become the sites of new stigmas. Those from dominated castes and tribes recall the humiliations of normal schools, from which they sometimes had no escape. Some were fortunate to benefit from government programs that kept them in school, while others relied on individual teachers to continue their education or, like Balachandra of Sita School, found lucky breaks that elevated their opportunities over the rest of their family. Shaji Bose, of the Kaatunayikar community, recalled the unexpected humiliation and radical estrangement he felt when admitted to a middle school and hostel in Mananthavady: his Malayalam dialect was mocked and parodied, leaving him with a strong desire to return, to the meager comforts of his tribal house. Therefore, his admission to Kanavu opened up enormous opportunities for a new kind of respect; a freedom to leave the family calling and undertake new and meaningful work. By his own admission, Bose left the government school to escape customary humiliations, rather than learning:

The major problem was the change in circumstances [in the government school]. It shook me mentally. Then, we were moving to a wider world than this. There are many students. Almost 2000 students is what I remember! And, there were teachers to match the student strength. It was a huge one. So, we were in a completely new situation. We didn’t sleep at our homes, we spoke Malayalam mostly [as opposed to the dialect of Kaatunayikars,

which is 80 per cent Kannada]... We were a new batch, so when the students there go to school... Most of those students belonged to a different community. All students studied in the school there, but the hostel was for ST students. So, they made fun of them. The Malayalam we speak may not be the same as the Malayalam you speak. There would be a slight difference in the slang because I am an ST. So, they made fun of our Malayalam. *Basically, we were scared to the core of the outside world* (emphasis added). Now, all these put together presented a huge emotional block to staying there. The teachers also made fun of us.

... They used to call us *Adivasis* and make fun of us. As a result of all these, we never understood what was taught in the school. Everyone in the town used to call my younger brother and me *Kannaas* and *Kadalas*.<sup>37)</sup> We both studied in the same class from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup>. Even in 5<sup>th</sup>, both of us were in the same class. So, they made a huge mockery of us. This mockery devastated me emotionally. I felt unsafe and without independence.

...The next week, when mother came to see me, I told her that I would no more study here under any condition. That I am going home. I was not even keen to get my bag and baggage once I saw mother. I went home right from the very road where I met my mother. We did not have an education in mind once we came back.... And not just that, some eight students discontinued along with us in the very same week. Some of them even dared to walk back during the night.

That Shaji Bose's educational experience was positively transformed in Kanavu was a stroke of good fortune, compared with the routine oppressions faced by some in the government school. Thumbadi Ramaiah, a well-known Kannada writer, recalls his brother's travails:

I was the first person, from either side of the family, to have completed high school. But before me, my brother Veeranagappa had also attended high school. He was an attractive and well-built young man, straightforward and outspoken. He always said what he thought and spoke out his mind on anything he felt strongly about, regardless of whom he was addressing. This attitude was considered arrogant and had earned him the antagonism of several teachers. As a result, they failed my brother twice in the eighth class for no reason. My father did not understand all this and kept silent. My brother, who knew this to be the work of some casteist teachers, burnt with resentment inside, but suffered helplessly. He grew dejected and depressed by the day and stopped talking. My father, who couldn't take my brother's suffering, prayed to all the gods possible, made all kinds of offerings and pujas but nothing seemed to work. Finally my father made a mighty effort and enrolled my brother back in high school. He would skip school and spend most of his days sitting on the wall surrounding Tumbadi's new lake...one day my brother did not return home... somebody noticed a dead body floating around in the lake...

School could, thus, be a space of renewed and new discriminations, rather than an

assertion of older taboos. Caste was not always experienced as a remnant of the past so much as a contemporary form of power (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2013: 10–11; see also Krishna 2004). Y.B. Satyanarayana recalls, using the third person narrative in his autobiography:

The children often faced humiliation at school since they were the only children from the untouchable community attending school. They were made to sit separately and were not allowed to take water from the school pots: they had to go to a distant place, into the Harijanwada where the dwellings of the untouchables were to quench their thirst. India had just become independent, but schools in the rural areas were as stubborn as they had always been (Satyanarayana 2011: 83).

The violence of schools, to which many Dalit autobiographies and life stories bear testimony, was as much epistemological, as in the crucial question of the languages lost and gained in the process of schooling.

## 7. “In English, Everything Becomes Different”

Among the most vexed questions concerning schooling in contemporary India are the trials and traumas, as well as the joys and breakthroughs, offered by the languages to which students are introduced. English education has been among colonialism’s most ambivalent gifts. Those exposed to languages other than their mother tongue and/or the enforced standardized languages in school have described a sense of loss not entirely compensated by the new tongues they learned. In some of the alternative schools opened in the 1970s, attempts were made to introduce children to the literary heritage of Indian languages, as well as the power of English in conceptualizing new disciplines.<sup>38</sup> At Neel Bagh in Srinivasapur, Andhra Pradesh, David Horsburgh taught the sciences and mathematics in English, but used Telugu for literature and humanities.<sup>39</sup> However, the demands of learning a new language could place a crippling burden on some, even as the lack of (English) language further curtailed their chances, particularly in higher education institutions.

The contradictory pressures of the imperatives of learning English, particularly in preparation for higher education, are everywhere evident. They could be experienced as loss and estrangement, as the case of Shaji Bose entering the Mananthavady school reveals. The transition to English medium schooling was sometimes too challenging to manage academically: as Ruth recalled, “I requested many sisters to put me into a Kannada medium, but they didn’t listen...So I couldn’t complete SSLC...In two or three subjects, I failed. I think in Maths and Science. ... I passed in Maths. Science and Social I didn’t.”

Suresh, who comes from a Scheduled Tribe called Malaikuravan and currently works as a research assistant in Chennai, remembered his struggles with English:

I: But were you affected by it [the loss of opportunity] – were you upset that you did not

get the job because of your [inadequate] English language skills? Did it make you think that you should improve your skills in English? Did you make any effort towards that goal?

**S:** Yes. I wanted to learn at least a little bit of English somehow. I would tell my people at home that we should learn English. We decided to speak in English at home and tried to improve our skills. My sister and I tried [to speak in English to each other] and I tried [to speak in English at home]. I would ask my acquaintances for meanings [of words]. I would find out from them how to converse in English...

Unlike in the primary school, which consisted largely of fellow Kaatunayikars, Shaji Bose found his entry to middle school, which was mixed caste, a traumatic experience. Later, Bose would reflect on the injustice of it all:

When one goes to 1<sup>st</sup> standard, he would not know the language, he would be put in the back bench. And he would be cut off. And he gets labeled as a dropout. And there ends his future. Due to particular circumstances, we are compelled to learn a new language, for living in this common society. Now, if they call us Adivasis, we would be compelled to call them migrants. We are natives of this place. You are migrants. So, there is a problem. So, the language is Malayalam which is their language. That is not the language of Adivasis. That is not a scheduled language. In that case, ask them to speak our language! That's impossible.

The introduction of languages other than the mother tongue, especially English, was not entirely smooth either. Having recited “Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes” in her schooldays, Vanya Mari only discovered several years later, when her daughter learned the same song, that it describes human anatomy. She recalled, with humor: “Now, my daughter tells me that these are *parts of the body*. Now, I understand. ....”<sup>40)</sup> (italicized words were spoken in English). As also shown by K.B. Siddaiah’s experience of undertaking a BA in English, imbuing that hieroglyph with meaning would take much longer.<sup>41)</sup>

English’s status as an internationally hegemonic language, and – through its connection to computer literacy – a recipe for success and wealth, was recognized even among those who had attended alternative schools. During his long interview, Kannan repeatedly returned to the question of language and its meaning as a form of capital in contemporary India. Speaking not in Tamil (his mother tongue) but in Kannada, which he had mastered at school, he revealed a different anxiety regarding his children. He desperately desired to give his children “an opportunity I never got,” namely English. He repeatedly asserted that his eldest child did not “score” good enough marks to be accepted into a good program in college: “we need a *certificate*, a *degree* in our hands.”<sup>42)</sup> His determination to send his children to an English medium school estranged him from the very person who had nurtured his development: K. T. Margaret. Kannan’s life partner, Pochamma, who is also a student of the Tilaknagar School, made the following



observations:

**P:** All [three children] are in English medium.

**I:** Why? Is it that Kannada medium is not good?

**P:** Not like that. It would be difficult when they go to college. We have seen other children. *In English everything becomes different.*<sup>43)</sup>

Among those who went against the grain in the yearning for English was Mumtaz Khanum. She developed a passion for Kannada in Sita School, only to discover that her skills remained unappreciated, except when other students needed to pass the third language (Kannada) requirement.

As these excerpts show, mastery of English is not that of a language alone. As many recognize, it is, simultaneously, a judicial/legal apparatus, a political system, a semiotics of modernity, and more beyond (see, for instance, Dhareshwar 1993). Yet access to its powers, or indeed to any language's power, was invariably uneven in a system in which completely serendipitous circumstances were allowed to play a formative role in self-definition.

## 8. "Getting on" and "Passing"

In the decades immediately after independence, there was only partial realization of the "nationalized" family, explained by Etienne Balibar as follows: "...as lineal kinship, solidarity between generations and the economic functions of the extended family dissolve, what takes their place is neither a natural micro-society nor a purely 'individualistic' contractual relation but a nationalization of the family..." (Balibar 1991: 101-2). This incomplete absorption of the poor Indian family into the archives of the state allowed, as we shall see, unique opportunities for redefinition. As Satyanarayana recalls:

I was happy that my headmaster was showing such concern for me, and in something as personal as a name. He had always taken a keen interest in his pupils. Sometimes with the parent's approval, he changed the names of students if, in terms of caste, it seemed to represent something contemptible. In my case, the suffix 'aiah' gave away my caste. One of my classmates was called Simhan (meaning lion) and his name was changed to Narasimhan, a Hindu God's name. The headmaster did this while sending our names to the Board of Secondary Schools. I wonder how many heads today look into minute aspects of individual students and take care to make necessary changes. He became an ideal for me to follow in life. It was in the ninth standard then, that I became Satyanarayana. (Satyanarayana 2011: 84)<sup>44)</sup>

At a time when the Dalit movement of Karnataka was taking shape, to be galvanized

by the Boosa moment, the school and university hostel, in particular, became sites for politicization.<sup>45)</sup> Entering school and staying there, despite the humiliations and scarcities of the time, was an additional challenge. Schooling was simultaneously an escape from humiliations and a renewed experience of existing ones. Not only were there separate schools, separate slates and practices, and separate water but also open discrimination against those considered unteachable.

In such a situation, to pass the school leaving examination in one attempt was a rare achievement. Professor of English, KB Siddaiah, also Kannada poet and activist of the Dalit Sangarsh Samiti, recalls: “there were others, from all communities, who had passed but no one got through in the first attempt, including the headman’s son. With this achievement, I became the hero of the village [Kengeri]” (Satyanarayana 2011: 140). Such opportunities were seized with gratitude. In many cases, however, they would not have been possible without the aid of another figure. There were always the enlightened, or not so enlightened, individuals who helped lower castes: a Patel (Satyanarayana 2011: 84), a Brahmin teacher (Satyanarayana 2011: 133), a shanbogue (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2013: 140), or a tuition teacher.<sup>46)</sup> Pratibha Jeyachandran recalls that, in high school, his Tamil teachers were an important influence: “They made us read a lot, including classical Tamil poetry. I was encouraged to participate in oratory competitions” (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2011: 210). Ravikumar went to “hair salons to read the newspapers...on the train travelling to school, he would attach himself to people who had magazines.” Inspired by a brilliant teacher, Dikshitar, he developed an interest in modern Tamil poets such as Bharatidasan, and even practiced writing metrical poetry – *venba* – following this teacher’s instructions (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2011: 255).

In *Uses of Literacy*, Richard Hoggart offered a sobering picture of the lonely scholarship boy: “he has to be more and more alone, if he is going to ‘get on’ ...there is unlikely to be a room of his own...the boy has to cut himself off mentally, so as to do his homework, as well as he can.” It is a bleak and inhospitable world that the scholarship boy encounters: a Trishanku-like status, “between two worlds, one dead the other powerless to be born” (Matthew Arnold, as cited in Hoggart 1960: 244) In India too, for those born in the 1950s and growing up in the 1960s, the government school offered ambiguous opportunities for both escaping or transforming one’s class of origin. Such radical estrangement is evident in the astonishing use of language that emerged in Dalit writing. However, this was more a consequence of the Dalit awakening in a larger setting than in classroom methods. Most who passed through the alternative school network “fitted” into the wider world, usually without question; the new socialization enabled Balachandra to state: “Actually I have forgotten that I am a Dalit,” as he exited not only his village his class status but also, through migration to England and marriage to an Englishwoman, Dalitness itself. The enraged poetry of his youth (as in his volume, *Dhwani Illadavaru*), of which he was justly proud, has transformed into a new pride: “born as a Dalit, I am now a British citizen.”<sup>47)</sup>

Challenges to the alternative schools have been particularly exacerbated by transformations within slum, village, and forest societies, all of which are no longer insulated from market pressures, state agencies, and the operation of democracy. A

government official was so impressed with Kanavu that he invited K.J. Baby to open at least 50 such branches with government aid, an offer that he could not accept. Even imagining an ideal scenario in which this were possible, what hope was there of countering the more powerful pull of private, English education? On Tilaknagar today, where the desire for *schooling* has triumphed over an interest in *education*, Margaret observes:

But today almost all the children who were roaming about the streets in the 70s/80s are sending their children to private schools/ English medium schools. This I find even in the villages of North Karnataka, which was considered backward in literacy. ...Most parents want their child [to] get good [a] education which they didn't get. As a result there is scarcity of skilled labourers like the carpenter.

...

Earlier we had more freedom to start alternative schools. We worked independently from the government system. With RTE the ... word 'alternative' is not relevant anymore. There is need for educational input, but we have to work in another form and not through 'alternative' schools. Now we should not think of alternative or supplementary education, but work on improving the quality of overall education of the system.<sup>48)</sup>

Although Rashmi Paliwal finds that "alternative schools are still flourishing," she too admits "the poor are also reaching to private schools today... and that is different."<sup>49)</sup> What has definitely changed since at least the early 1990s are the options available to the poor and the marginalized. As Jane Sahi comments:

I think at this period [1970s] education was not a commercial venture so the government was least interested in ensuring the economically weak were going to schools of any kind. It is also true that at that time patterns of work and family depended on the contribution of children e.g. care of siblings etc. Also there was no automatic promotion so parents and children anticipated failure and retention...<sup>50)</sup>

Consequently, as Sahi concludes elsewhere:

The [regulated: read convent] school then [today] promises to be and is understood as a place of order, authority and discipline which will enable children as adults to be less vulnerable, less open to exploitation and marginalization. It will in some ways help to counter a history and tradition of being backward... (Sahi 2002)

One should note, here, the relatively shorter life of the experiments of the 1970s. Margaret was active in the TNCC for only seven years, from 1978–1985, and taught about 100 day-schoolers and 24 boarders; she then moved on to run a teacher training program in Raichur, where she continues to live and work. Sita School, which continued under Jane Sahi's guidance, closed recently (April 2016), while Kanavu continues to exist, though in a very attenuated form.<sup>51)</sup> These were the scarcely glimpsed promise of

an alternative, for which such terms as “success” or “failure” would be entirely inappropriate.

## 9. Conclusion

The intense desire for education, described by all who ran the alternative schools of the 1970s, returns us to the contemporary examples with which we began. But what do these historical miniatures tell us about the very different possibilities that were opened up in alternative and government schools in the early decades after independence? As Eugene Weber’s monumental work explains, turning “Peasants into Frenchmen”<sup>52</sup>) was the creation of a “national unity” using roads and railroads, and the cementing “patriotism” of the army. A crucial role was also played by schooling, which “taught hitherto indifferent millions the languages of the dominant culture, and its values as well, among them patriotism” (Weber 1976: 493). From 1881, the French were involved in a process of learning and unlearning, particularly forsaking patois and vernaculars for French, until the lingua franca was quite literally forged through the generous wielding of the stick (Weber 1976: 308–9). The modern schoolroom was less a space to learn the skills required for employment and more “a new patriotism,” which taught its children to honor the fatherland and the mother tongue.

In India, however, the task of welding such a nation, even after independence, has been severely compromised by the continued operation, indeed usefulness, of caste, class, or ethnic and gendered divisions. Having served India’s economy and society so well, they have recently been challenged by the operation of democracy, the demands of a market in credentials, and the desire for the “enabling” opportunities of English. As Krishna Kumar notes, even the high noon of Nehruvian modernity did not build “a credible and lasting base for the expansion of elementary education” (Kumar 1991: 190). As shown by the autobiography of D.C. Pavate, a senior educational administrator of Bombay, there were some early signs of increasing impatience with a perceived “second order” education. Of the education ministers meeting in 1946, at which Gandhi was also present, he writes:

The next day a social worker from Ahmednagar demanded in all seriousness police protection for those responsible for the implementation of Basic Education. Everybody was intrigued by this demand...

Basic education means that the children should look after the cattle or sheep or do agricultural work along with their parents. He will have no use for books or slates or even a Basic craft or a school. The villagers have been irritated by the activities of this kind of social worker. They demand good education for their children, while these social workers in Maharashtra want the children to follow the parents’ occupations instead of going to school. ...Hence the villagers attack them with sticks and there have been cases in Ahmadnagar district where social workers have been seriously injured. (Pavate 1964: 200)<sup>53</sup>)

The possibility of a common schooling system now appears to have been lost; with it, the possibility of combining mixed abilities and backgrounds, reopening the opportunities briefly available to those who attended public schools in the 1960s and 1970s. Our interviews reveal a much more uncertain future for those who had the good fortune of exposure to alternative schooling: a future better described by Hoggart (1960: 256) as an “unformulated feeling of insufficiency.” Undoubtedly, those who passed through these schools were enabled to “fit” into the world around them more ably than those who denied such opportunities; they grasped opportunities they may never have even dreamed of: Balachandra is a renowned artist and sculptor, Kannan is a non-formal education instructor, Pochamma a tailor, Vanya Mari found employment in an NGO (though she now runs her family shop), and Shaji Bose is an administrator in an alternative school. As Balachandra commented: “I wouldn’t have written. It’s all because of Sita School. ...I don’t know what I would have been today had I studied somewhere else.”<sup>54)</sup>

Classroom methods and pursuit of the joy of learning may well be luxuries in a setting already treating education as an object to be obtained at any cost, in which the poor are willing accomplices. If alternative pedagogies are sought at all today, it is by those already possessing the cultural capital that will define and determine their life chances (Vittachi, Raghavan, and Raj 2007; Vasavi 2014).<sup>55)</sup>

Ironically, then, it is the memories of “reservation students” that evoke greater hope, speaking of a time when the school space and larger political awakening intersected to produce a new, critical, and vibrant cultural intervention. Here again, the interviews and autobiographies offer a glimpse of the real workings of democracy, sharply contrasting with the declamatory statements of our national textbooks.

The memories of students, both private alternative school attendees and those who found a foothold in public schools, illustrate how severely the melioristic ideology of individualized hard work can obscure the roots of structural inequalities. As Pochamma put it: “I wish that one is educated properly and come up in life with hard work.” Often, those inequalities were revealed only by the intersections of educational processes and political movements.<sup>56)</sup> Until then, as many Dalit autobiographies relate, only a fortuitous encounter with an enlightened (usually) upper caste teacher and (usually) his interventions could enable a “break” from the grinding structural inequalities. It is a series of conjunctural accidents that enables some Dalits to the structure of a school/college.

At the same time, for Selvam, the true democratic awakening came not from the Student Federation of India’s [SFI’s] classroom activism in Kerala, which he found repulsive, but from more individuated engagement with the newspaper and the book:

If I talk about the manner of gaining knowledge, ...a library near us...there is an Adimalathura library. Public library. So I had had membership there. So I would go there and read books. Another thing (was that) even if it was by hard work, mother would subscribe to the newspaper from the time while I was studying in third standard. She would subscribe the newspaper for me after I learnt to write and read properly. On all days. There were only two houses that had subscribed to the newspaper at that time. My

house and the house of a person called David sir. The newspaper was subscribed only to these two houses at that time. In those times, somehow, mother did that help for me. As far as I was concerned, that is how I got an awareness about things initially.<sup>57)</sup>

For some, though, such as the Karnataka Dalits, the emergence of the Dalit Sangarsh Samiti (now in disarray) was the first flowering of a politics of hope.<sup>58)</sup> Not for nothing does K. Ramaiah refer to the DSS as a “big school, also a university, a real university. The question we need to ask today is what made it a place of real education” (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2013: 13). This was far from being a consequence of individuated struggles within alternative schools, which were achievements of a different order. Rather, the struggles within the space of an enabling state, however flawed, blossomed into a new cultural force, whose effects remain with us today.

## Notes

- 1) Shorter versions of this paper were presented to audiences at the Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan; Azim Premji University, Bengaluru; and South Asia Institute, Columbia University. It draws on some of 48 archived life stories collected, transcribed, and translated with generous help from the Transnational Research Group, based in the German Historical Institute London. The life stories were collected from different locations across India and in five languages (Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, and Kannada). Broadly, the interviews were conducted with poor people, or those who had been poor at the start of their education, between the ages of 20 and 50, including both men and women from some of India’s main religions. They represented four different educational settings: government schools, alternative schools, schools run by religious institutions, and Industrial Training Institutes. All names have been altered. I am grateful for the careful readings of this paper by Neeladri Bhattacharya, Farida Khan, Geetha Nambissan, Kumkum Roy, A.R. Vasavi, and Rupa Vishwanath.
- 2) According to latest reports based on the 2011 census, even after the RTE, 38 million (or approximately 20 percent) of children between the ages of 6 and 13 are still not attending schools: <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/still-too-many-children-out-of-school/article7814794.ece> (accessed October 31, 2015).
- 3) Paul Willis’ classic, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*, was founded on a similar understanding of education’s purpose in advanced capitalist societies.
- 4) *Indian Express*, March 22, 2015: photograph of the Class X examination center, Vaishali, Bihar.
- 5) *Indian Express*, March 20, 2015, photograph of a family in Mathura, UP.
- 6) We have clearly come a long way from the time an educated bridegroom commanded a higher price. As Reverend Holmes observed, “It is a familiar fact that at each stage of his career a Bengali youth commands as bridegroom a price proportionate to the particular rung of the educational ladder on which he has succeeded in placing his foot. Should he have passed the matriculation, his father can command so much as his price ... but if he have [sic] passed the B.A., up goes the price; whilst the M.A., B.L.’s are the prizes of the marriage market” (Holmes 1911: 256) as cited in Seth (2015: 1360).

- 7) A “historian-observer” of the prospects of “provincial” education misses these above-cited non-academic opportunities: Kumar (2006).
- 8) Alternative education may be relatively informal, but in a setting in which structured learning takes place; the founder is usually a person with insights into education and the requisite skills. Non-formal education refers to part-time programs often run by part- or full-time volunteers, usually with adults and with far less systematic study. See Margaret (1999: 122–3).
- 9) Experiments with “free schooling” in the US engaged largely with the children of disenchanted middle-class families, whose social and cultural capital permitted the luxury of unstructured schooling: a passionate plea for free schooling (now called home schooling) in the US is made by Peter Gray (2013), focusing especially on experiences of the Sudbury School.
- 10) See Kumar (2006), especially pp.97–194. On the importance of the “cult of play and adventure” in Tagore, compared to emphasis on manual work, see Acharya (1997: 605). For a breathtaking list of works (and non-formal educational programs) inspired by Nai Taleem or Basic Education, see Saliba (1977). However, see also Zachariah and Hoffman (1985) and Alex Aronson 1961a and b. On Santhiniketan, see Jain (2015) and Datta (2015: 24–8).
- 11) For an unusual fantasy about highly motivated teaching in Gujarat in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Badheka (1989 [1932]).
- 12) I wish to thank Jane Sahi for her probing question that urged me to make this methodological clarification.
- 13) Easily the most influential text in this genre is Richard Hoggart’s (autobiographical) work on the travails of the “scholarship student” in post-war England (Hoggart 1960).
- 14) As Kumar usefully points out, Gandhi and Tagore were the only two thinkers to overcome a fascination for revivalist educational forms to systematically counter the colonial education system.
- 15) The program was designated for closure in 2002; see also Kumar (1992).
- 16) Courtesy of the author. Historically, as Sahi points out, “alternative schools [from Tolstoy to Krishnamurti] have not sprung up “on basis of popular felt need” Sahi (2014: 104).
- 17) Balachandra works as an independent Christian sculptor and artist, currently living in the UK. Balachandra, Sita School, interviewed 11/11/13 and 11/17/13.
- 18) Pochamma, TNCC, interviewed 10/22/13 and 10/23/13.
- 19) This could include, as the children themselves enacted it, the “testing” of women’s fidelity, drunkenness, inter-generational violence, or quarrels over money.
- 20) This could include attitudes towards petty theft.
- 21) Kannan, TNCC, interviewed 10/20/13 and 10/21/13.
- 22) Shaji Bose (29) is now a managing trustee of Kanavu Makkal Trust, Wyanad. Founded in 1996 as Kanavu (Dream), it aims to create a learning space for the children of the Nayika and Paniyar groups, both classified as Scheduled Tribes.
- 23) Vanya Mari, Sita School, interviewed 12/12/13.
- 24) The poor family was seldom a venue for learning: unlike Nita Kumar’s observation of the failure to record or represent indigenous schooling efforts based at home (Kumar 2006: 411), the Dalit/underprivileged urban household was often deprived of even the arts of narration. Omprakash Valmiki (2003) repeatedly cites the resigned aversion of lower caste communities to learning in *Joothan*.

- 25) Vanya Mari, Sita School, interviewed 12/12/13; Ruth, Sita School, interviewed 12/5/13 and 12/6/13; Kannan, TNCC, interviewed 10/20/13 and 10/21/13.
- 26) Kanhaiya Kumar details the kin and community resources that enabled his eventual entry into a PhD program at JNU, after a checkered educational career that was largely completed in government schools (Kumar 2016).
- 27) Mumtaz, Sita School, interviewed 12/12/13.
- 28) Vanya Mari, Sita School, interviewed 12/12/13.
- 29) Pochamma, TNCC, interviewed 10/22/13 and 10/23/13.
- 30) Mumtaz, Sita School, interviewed 12/12/13.
- 31) Shaji Bose, Kanavu, interviewed 04/21/14. Kanhaiya Kumar records, with humor, a similar moment when he was caught out for not knowing his numbers, even though he had topped the class (Kumar 2016: 26–7).
- 32) Vanya Mari, Sita School, interviewed 12/12/13.
- 33) For a similar reference to the self-confidence the Naxalites inspired in Chattisgarh’s tribal communities, see Sundar (2016: 86).
- 34) Kannan, TNCC, interviewed 10/20/13 and 10/21/13.
- 35) Ruth, Sita School, interviewed 12/05/13 and 12/06/13.
- 36) Valmiki (2003: 61) repeatedly recalls that his father saw education as a way of “improving caste.”
- 37) These are the name of characters from the Malayalam movie *Kabooliwala*, and mean “empty can” and “paper” respectively. For a similar experience reported by Sanal Mohan, see Satyanarayana and Tharu (2011: 534). Mohan recalls being called “poocha” (meaning “cat without reason”). Elsewhere, lower caste students in Kerala were referred to as “Ayyankalis” after the legendary 20th century leader of the dominated castes.
- 38) See <http://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/DH3.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2015); <http://www.azimpremjifoundation.org/david-horsburgh> (accessed December 6, 2015); <http://www.alternativeeducationindia.net/articles/david-horsburgh-interviewed> (accessed December 6, 2015).
- 39) This “division of labor” between languages was adapted by the teachers trained by David Horsburgh: see Malathi (2017).
- 40) Vanya Mari, Sita School, interviewed on 12/12/13.
- 41) On undertaking a BA in English, KB Siddaiah recalls: “I would memorise passages from the prescribed texts – Macbeth Hamlet – and recite them, even though I did not understand the meaning” (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2013: 141).
- 42) Kannan, TNCC, interviewed 10/20/13 and 10/21/13.
- 43) Pochamma, TNCC, interviewed 10/22/13 and 10/23/13.
- 44) Valmiki (2003) dwells on the shame about caste names and his own resistance to it.
- 45) For a succinct history, see Satyanarayana and Tharu (2013: 2–13). More particularly, Siddalingaiah (2011).
- 46) Interview with Silva Dass.
- 47) Balachandra, Sita School, interviewed 11/11/13 and 11/17/13.
- 48) K.T. Margaret, Personal communication, 11/26/2015.
- 49) Rashmi Paliwal, Personal communication, 11/26/2015.
- 50) Jane Sahi, Personal communication, 11/24/2015.



- 51) “‘Kanavu’ turns into a nightmare.” *Education Insider*. [http://www.educationinsider.net/detail\\_news.php?id=501](http://www.educationinsider.net/detail_news.php?id=501) (accessed November 22, 2015). A warmer account of Kanavu’s earlier years is presented in George (2005).
- 52) Weber’s book was written when such unreflectively male-gendered titles went relatively unchallenged.
- 53) On the impracticality of the basic education system, Pavate states: “There has never been any doubt in my mind regarding the capacity of a Basic School, as conceived by Mahatmaji, to be both self-sufficient and efficient. This, however, could be achieved only by an exceptionally brilliant and thoughtful teacher. *It is not expected to be achieved on a mass scale in the public sector*” (Pavate 1964: 167, emphasis added).
- 54) Balachandra, Sita School, interviewed 11/11/13 and 11/17/13.
- 55) Cultural capital is used, here, in the sense developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986): “It is impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory.” For an interpretation of caste as cultural capital of the Dalits, see Kapikkad (2011).
- 56) For critical self-reflection on the achievements and failures of Sita School, see Sahi (2014: 105–6).
- 57) Selvam, interviewed 03/25/14.
- 58) A touching story of one man’s efforts to bring about changes in visual perception is presented in Kulkarni (2004).

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