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Accessing Education:
Reconfiguring Family and
Neighbourhood Networks

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Recalling the process of education involves remembering not only the classroom and its challenges but interactions and negotiations of various kinds well beyond the school. Scholars have therefore used different approaches to understand the importance and consequence of classroom and family, or community roles via regional case studies focusing on different social groups and their journey to get educated.¹ These experienced processes must be placed alongside state-led efforts aimed at encouraging education.² There have been studies on the success or failure of such measures and factors that were responsible for it.³ What needs further investigation is the way the relationships were formed between the social and economic identities and pedagogical experiences of individuals.

This paper uses the life stories⁴ in which people talked about and remembered their experiences at school and their achievements or struggles in life in this process. The interviews are with people below the income group of 10,000 per month. They were taken from the two regions of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, with those who have passed through elementary education

¹ For example, Nita Kumar, *The Politics of Gender, Community, and Modernity: Essays on Education in India*, Oxford University Press: India, 2007. Jyotsna Jha and Dhir Jhingran, *Elementary Education for the Poorest and Other Deprived Groups: The Real Challenge of Universalization*, Manohar: New Delhi, 2005.

² Faith in education is embodied in the legislation, ‘...Right to Education (RTE) contains the promised of a future within the liberal certitudes of equality, opportunity, freedom and social justice. As the postcolonial nation state’s first legislation to include all children within its domain, it reiterates the enlightenment belief in education as integral to the full expression of human potential and essential to the creation of a modern selfhood realizable through individuated agency.’ Sarada Balagopalan, in *Inhabiting 'Childhood': Children, Labour and Schooling in Postcolonial India*, Macmillan: New York, 2014: 155.

³ See Geetha B. Nambissan and Ramya Subrahmanian, *Child Labour and the Right to Education in South Asia: Needs versus Rights?*, Malavika Karlekar ed., *Paradigms of Learning: The Total Literacy Campaign in India*, Sage: New Delhi, 2004.

⁴ These interviews were taken as a Life History project of the Transnational Research Group, based at the German Historical Institute London.

of varying quality. Most of these interviewees were first generation school goers and belonged to reserved or scheduled caste communities.⁵ All of the interviewees attended government school, and five of them underwent the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP).⁶ The nature, and content, of the responses were influenced by the dynamics between the interviewer and interviewee, which could create a space for thoughtful recollection. At the same time, there were pauses, corrections and forms of “self-censorship” which are equally important to the life stories. For instance, the interviewees could and did speak comfortably about their relationships at home and how that affected their experiences. These initial conversations formed the basis on which interviewees could speak about their decisions and choices in life. These narrations were not simple recollections but were a window on how they made sense, later in life, of these experiences.⁷

The interviewees chose the sites for the interviews; they were usually conducted at their homes. These people were eager to share their life stories. For some interviewees, education helped them in achieving a better future. For others, there were perceived failures or struggles without any benefits of consequence. Interviews were structured around a set of themes rather than a questionnaire and interviewees were encouraged to speak freely about their memories.

⁵ Identifying the problem in dealing with the first generation school goers, Vimala Ramachandran argues that ‘...even if a child from socially deprived community did somehow remain in a ‘regular’ government school, even if she attended school regularly, and even if the teacher also taught regularly, there was little possibility that the teaching and learning process would actually help her learn meaningfully’ in Vimala Ramachandran and Rashmi Sharma eds. *The Elementary Education System in India: Exploring Institutional Structures, Processes and Dynamics*, Routledge: New Delhi, 2009: 282.

⁶ ‘One of the most significant initiatives making forays into alternative education was by the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP), begun in 1972 in Madhya Pradesh by two voluntary organisations—Friends Rural Centre, Rasulia and Kishore Bharati, Bankheri. This programme, focusing on improving science teaching in schools, was developed in government schools, with the collaboration of school teachers, university professors and researchers, administrators and the local people. The programme involved learning science ‘by discovery’, through activities and from the environment.’ *Alternative Schooling in India* ed., Sarojini Vittachi, and Neerja Raghavan with Kiran Raj, Sage: New Delhi, 2007: 35. On the idea of alternate education it said that ‘In summary, alternative education philosophy endeavours to fit the process of learning to the child’s inclinations, interests and abilities.’ Sarojini, *Alternative Schooling in India* Ibid: 15.

⁷ Geetha B. Nambissan speaks of the factors influencing the experiences at school, ‘The hierarchical nature of Indian social structure, sharp economic disparities, as well as the social and cultural diversities that characterize the lives of children across the country suggest that learning experiences are likely to vary,’ ‘Opening Up the Black Box? Sociologists and the Study of Schooling in India,’ in Geetha B. Nambissan and S. Srinivasa Rao, *Sociology of Education in India: Changing Contours and Emerging*, Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2013, p. 83.

Interviews were sometimes spread out over days, which gave them a chance to reflect and remember their school life. The total duration of the interviews ranged from 4 to 6 hours.

Why an Education?

There was general consensus on the need to be educated across all the interviewees, but the family and the social setting determined what could actually be achieved. A variety of factors made it possible for a child to attend school,⁸ which have been identified below:

the three dimensions of school, family, and society act in isolation and in combination, and help in building parental views and a commitment towards education, which in turn translates itself into a revealed demand for schooling. The nature of the combination varies and so does the impact on the demand for schooling.⁹

A discussion on these factors begins by placing the experiences of the children within the context of their family and social setting. There was the familiar story of how caste inequalities can be challenged through education.¹⁰ Getting educated was linked to the hope of getting better jobs. What needs further discussion is how the community identities were both challenged and reinforced in this process. The individual case study of the respondents helps to highlight the variety of factors that aided both the start of schooling and its continuation. A close questioning of educational experiences thus yielded strong memories not only of classroom challenges and

⁸ 'Once children reach school a variety of factors determine whether they will continue or drop out, whether and how much they will learn and whether they will acquire the interest and the skills to pursue formal education', in ed., Vimala Ramachandran, *Getting Children Back to School: Case Studies in Primary Education*, Sage: New Delhi, 2003: 4. Nandini Manjrekar also contextualizes children's experiences, by arguing that 'the structural contexts of children's lives in which these [class, caste and gender] hierarchies and inequalities operate are those from which they draw meaning to make sense of what they learn in classrooms about themselves, the social world, and the nation. 'Gender, Childhood and Work in the Nation.' in ed., Geetha B. Nambissian and S. Srinivasa Rao, *Sociology Education in India: Changing Contours and Emerging Concerns*: 178.

⁹ Jyotsna Jha and Dhir Jhingran, *Elementary Education for the Poorest and Other Deprived Groups: The Real Challenge of Universalization*, Manohar: New Delhi, 2005: 296.

¹⁰ In an article, on education among Dalits, Bhalchandra Mungekar gives a social and economic profile of the SCs and STs to argue that '...level of education alone could help them cross the boundaries of caste-based occupations/jobs and secure socio-economic enlistment in their lives otherwise suffering from all sorts of deprivations. Education is thus not only a means of livelihood but also an effective instrument for social transformation. It is only the access to better education that would enable the Dalits to exercise their human rights in more effective and meaningful manner' in 'Education: the only key to Dalit progress'. ambedkar.org/Worldwide_Dalits/education_and_dalits. [accessed on 14.12.2014].

successes or examination anxieties, but also familial encouragement, community control, and sometimes just the inability to remember specifics of learning.

This paper discusses the complex and co-constitutive factors that encouraged or motivated children to enter the formal school system. My aim in doing this is not only to discuss the factors responsible for formal enrollment in schools but more importantly, how the interviewees voiced different concerns about the need or urgency of education in their lives, as well as evaluations of what they have achieved.

Enrolment in School

How are decisions made among the labouring poor regarding education of children? And what does the process tell us about the place of individual motivation in entering a school? The decision to go to school was taken independently and voluntarily in some cases. This is in sharp contrast to those cases where the education of a child was a family decision. These choices were also linked to what the individuals or families hoped to achieve through schooling. In the cases where the family decided to send the children to school, the meaning of education was different. In these cases, the dropout rates were also higher among the students. A commitment to schooling was evident in the cases where students enrolled on their own. And they continued their studies after finishing schooling. My aim here is not to ascertain the reasons for failure and success of the respondents but rather to study the individual trajectories for what they yield about education. What were their motivations and how did they triumph over the everyday difficulties to attend school? How did they sustain themselves to remain in school over the years?

I begin the discussion with a testimonial by a scheduled caste student from Uttar Pradesh. He belonged to the Kohli community and his family occupation was weaving. They stayed in the Kannuj district of Uttar Pradesh. His schooling was from the Prempur district of Uttar Pradesh where he attended government school. His family tried different businesses but mostly survived through agricultural labour. Shyam Shanker said that his father wanted ‘That my children should get proper education, should study properly, that’s all.’¹¹ His father’s belief in educating his

¹¹ Interview with Shyam Shanker on 4 November, 2013 in Delhi. The interview was conducted at an electronics shop where he used to work. Now he works as an electrician independently in Delhi. He completed his diploma from ITI. And he has enrolled both his children in private school.

children reflected the economic use/relevance education had in their lives.¹² ‘I had a good mind. I already told you that our financial condition was not good so we were always subjugated by these people [Thakurs]. So I thought that if the situation remains the same then our life will be spoiled.’¹³ The everyday instances of caste discrimination were an underlying reason for the reliance and faith in education by the young man himself. ‘Yes, he [my father] was not educated but his [my father’s] major concern was that children should study as much as they want. So, after seeing them, [Thakurs] I understood that this won’t work like this, so I did a lot of hard work.’¹⁴ Shyam said that he had realized very early in his life that the only solution to his problem of both status and economic prospects was to get an education.

Devika Mansuria’s life story¹⁵ brings this out very well. Devika was the first in her family to attend school. None of her older siblings had done so. Her father was a fisherman and they belonged to the Kevat community, in Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh. She spoke about how she had to fight with her family members to get admitted to a school. Initially she had help from her sister-in-law, who helped her to complete her schooling till 8th standard. Later, she did not get support from anyone: she explained that ‘I took admission secretly. Everybody had a problem. My sister-in-law, her mother, brothers and sisters as well used to look at me as I am not going to school but to steal something.’¹⁶ Her brothers created problems for her as they did not allow a girl to go out of the house to study. ‘My mother and father wanted to cooperate with me. Secretly, my mother used to support me. My father also did so. But they could not say anything because of my brother.’¹⁷ She fought with her family to go to school, ‘I used to study a lot,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ ‘Most of the SCs are first-generation learners and find it difficult to cope with rising educational standards and the negative educational climate. They are also challenged by their parents’ lack of experience with formal education because of their own limited educational levels’, G.G. Wankhede, ‘Caste and social discrimination Nature, Forms, and Consequences in Education’, in *Sociology of Education*: 191.

¹⁵ She lives in Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh and works as an accountant at a local bakery. She did her Masters in Arts from Hoshangabad.

¹⁶ Interview with Devika Mansuria taken on 17 and 18 December, 2013 on Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh. The interview was conducted at her house.

¹⁷ Ibid.

because the more these people tried to forbid me, the more I used to study.’¹⁸ In these fights, she recalls that she had to constantly deal with the question, ‘Am I wrong for going to school.’¹⁹ It is in reference to this that she said,

so when I used to lead the prayers from school assembly grounds, I saw that there are almost 2000 girls in the school. So all the girls who are coming to school, are they wrong? Are their family members wrong? Then I realized that my family members are wrong as those girls also come to study. And yes, I wanted to study.²⁰

She explained this situation by saying that ‘Our [Kevat] caste is backward that is why our people were not educated and how would they let others study, or let them succeed. Yes, the people from my caste in the locality used to ask what am I doing?’²¹ These everyday struggles to access schooling where there was no value or hope attached to schooling became the background against which she understood the significance of education in her life. The initial difficulties she faced were in justifying her decision to her family but more importantly to herself. Devika got encouragement from her friend who advised that ‘if they marry you we don’t know where they would give you. So you do one thing, you study. Then you will be able to do something for yourself.’²² In her case, the journey till school was marked by the internal dilemma of stepping outside her home to access school. With education, she hoped to equip herself better to face the family pressures. Also, her commitment to education enabled her to convince her elder sister to start her education. She home schooled her sister, which led to discomfort in their relationship, and led Devika to arrange a tutor to ensure that her sister did not discontinue her studies. Her commitment to education was then reflective of her conception of a better life after schooling, especially within the space of the family.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. ‘The question that remains to be asked alongside is about how children reappropriate space, and what their tactics are, overt and clandestine, to escape the nets of disciplining. How do they themselves participate in their socialization?’ Nita Kumar, *The Politics of Gender Community, and Modernity: Essays on Education in India*: 246.

²¹ Interview with Devika taken on 17 December, 2013. From the same school, there is also an example of a girl student, who did not want to study but was forced to do so. Ketaki Verma talks about the absence of a brother in her family. Because of this, she had to work and study further, she said that ‘But that time [when I studied and worked] I felt that if my brother would have been there I wouldn’t have to go out of the house like this.’ Interview with Ketaki taken on 14 December, 2013 in Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh. The interview was conducted at Eklavya [Learning centre at Hoshangabad] centre where her mother works.

²² Interview with Devika Mansuria taken on 18 December, 2013.

Schooling for Devika was a result of these struggles at home which made it possible for her to envision a different future for herself. In this context, I use an example of another student, who, in the initial years of schooling, also managed the household.²³ He was the first in his family to go to school. Kabir Lal Mehra said, ‘No I am the only one who has studied in my house no one has studied. They [neighbours] use to give us books and copies, whatever they could give. The villagers also helped us little bit. We were very poor.’²⁴ Schooling starts with a functional and practical role in his family, with the aim to send a member to school. Others in his family could not study because,

no, they [my brothers] did not. My eldest brother and middle brother studied in the village school but it was closed. And after some years when it started again, they were grown up and started working. They used to take care of the Patels’ animals. Then they did not study and I kept on studying. Since I was younger they said, “You study.”²⁵

Kabir Lal Mehra was part of the HSTP at his school. He initially attended school in his village [Gadarwala, Madhya Pradesh]. He spoke of his initial difficulties at schools, because of his family’s economic position. He then compares this experience with the differences he felt within the HSTP programme where the focus was on understanding rather than memorizing facts and that gave a new sense of education to the students.²⁶ It also encouraged among them a sense of belonging, by promoting the classroom as an interactive space. In a description of a class science experiment, Kabir Lal said ‘everyone used to bring something, all of us used to wait in the class, for sir to start the experiment.’²⁷ For their alternative teaching methods, it is argued that ‘While

²³ ‘All the children helped out with domestic work in the home. The children saw their work as crucial to the survival of the family and household,’ Geetha, *Sociology of Education*: 165.

²⁴ Interview with Kabir Lal taken on 14 and 15 December, 2013, Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh. The interview was conducted at the Eklavya centre, where his wife works as a cook. He also sends his two children to use the library at the centre.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Even though HSTP was not an alternate school it used alternate syllabus and teaching methods; I use an example of alternate schools, to better understand the aims of such efforts. Alternate schools, aimed that ‘**Respect** is accorded to the student, parent and teacher irrespective of socio-economic status and (special) abilities. Integration of children of mixed abilities and/or different socio-economic groups, and sometimes even of mixed ages, is a key element.’ Sarojini Vittachi, Neeraja Raghavan, Kiran Raj, *Alternative Schooling in India*, Sage: New Delhi, 2007: 19.

²⁷ Interview with Kabir Lal taken on 14 and 15 December, 2013. ‘The experiences at school in terms of teachers’ attitude are crucial for children coming from socially and economically marginalized backgrounds. Positive and encouraging experiences help in building confidence in children and inspire parents to continue schooling. The nature of peer interaction is also important in this respect and so are the teachers’ attitudes to parents.’ Jyotsna Jha

mainstream schools generally socialise children to fit into status quo structures, alternative education is a pathway to alternative visions and possibilities.’²⁸

The process of getting educated starts with entering the school; the experiences of each of these interviewees were influenced by the family’s social and economic composition. The individual struggle of the students gave meaning to and helps in understating their commitment to education. In the next section, I will look at their years at school, how they remember those days. The factors that were active in their everyday engagement at school.

Classroom Spaces and Community Relations

As we have seen so far, both social and economic conditions were instrumental in deciding the nature of events at school. In the discussions on economic conditions, focus should move away from financial support. It needs to include the daily labour²⁹ that a child would undergo to manage and support studies at school. In this section, I will use three case studies, of students from three different regions, communities and schools. The reason for doing this is not to compare these experiences, but instead to bring out the different variables. In each of these cases, varied combinations of social and economic aspects affected their learning at schools which need to be separated out and dealt with individually. In their conversation about experiences at school, the students try to explain their success and failures in coping with the academic work. In their explanations, they draw from different factors, contexts and conditions to rationalize the reasons

and Dhir Jhingran, *Elementary Education for the Poorest and Other Deprived Groups: The Real Challenge of Universalization*, Manohar: New Delhi, 2005: 294.

²⁸ Sarojini Vittachi *Alternative Schooling in India*: 25. To the question, ‘*What Makes Alternative Schooling, in Your Opinion, Special and Different?*’ a teacher at an alternate school in South India said that ‘The possibility of allowing children to learn without fear, to really explore whatever it is that draws them without feeling slotted, judged or measured (I stress the use of the word “possibility” here, as I avoid making blanket statements!). For this to happen, I would say that exposure is not as critical (at least until Class VI or so), as is the atmosphere in which this exposure takes place. There is joy and exploration in the right kind of atmosphere, but we must remember that I am talking of the ideal here.’ Ibid:89.

²⁹ The complexity of the everyday struggles in managing school and house work are brought forth from other states as well. Vimala Ramachandran writes that ‘Discussions with children in class vi revealed that they woke up early and put in a few hours of work at home before going school. In both the states [Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh], boys especially from the SC community, cleaned the cattle shed, fed the cows or took them out grazing and helped their parents in the field during the peak of agricultural season. Girls cooked and cleaned, worked on the family land and took care of a range of domestic chores. In both states the children told us that they often missed school during the peak agricultural season’ in *The Elementary Education System in India*, ed. Vimala Ramachandran and Rashmi Sharma: 259.

for their performance. In these explanations, their experiences both at school and at home remain central. They all speak about their identity both at an individual level and the level of community. It was responsible for shaping their experiences and in turn was shaped by it. At the same time it was also responsible for the everyday struggles they faced at school as a consequence of their identities.

In the first example, a student of a government school in Hoshangabad, Kabir Lal³⁰, said ‘I stayed with her [my sister] and passed 8th class. Then I passed 9th class ... no I did not pass class 9th because we did not get any books and we were poor . If government books were given then we could manage. I did all the studies with one set of clothes and naked feet.’³¹ As he did not stay with his parents he managed both housework and studies.

The kind of labour that can be easily combined with school was housework. Geetha Nambissan shows how domestic work and responsibilities interferes with performance at schools.³² Kabir Lal refers in his responses to how challenging it was to continue with school, and alongside perform domestic chores. He, while managing domestic work, also had to financially support his studies, he said ‘Yes I was interested in studies but since I had no books I had problems.’³³ These practical concerns were compounded by lack of support or help from any of the family members. Mohammad Talib engages with the experiences of child workers/labourers and their access to education. He talks of the hardships for first generation students in a family, ‘there hardly existed a pedagogic space in their homes wherein symbolic and experiential engagements in the school

³⁰ Kabir Lal Mehra lives in Hoshangabad and works as a contractual painter. His children are studying in private schools as he did not trust the government school system.

³¹ Geetha Nambissan talks of inadequacy of government efforts, ‘incentives such as free books and uniforms are inadequate and poorly implemented and cover only a very small proportion of children belonging to these communities [dalit and adivasi], ‘Social Exclusion, Children’s Work and Education: A view from the Margins’, in Naila Kabeer, Geetha B. Nambissan and Ramya Subrahmanian, *Child Labour and the Right to Education in South Asia: Needs versus Rights?* Sage: New Delhi, 2003: 119.

³² ‘Part time, seasonal work as well and domestic tasks may allow for enrolment of children in school. Children may be able to initially combine work with schooling. However, irregularity of attendance and long periods of absence, which may often result because of the nature of such work, as well as the sheer burden of housework, are likely to adversely affect children’s ability to cope with school-work and their interest in studies.’ Ibid: 123.

³³ Interview with Kabir Lal taken on 14 and 15 December, 2013.

could be shared and sorted out.³⁴ Kabir Lal received help from his teachers, although after being categorized as a weak student in the class: ‘Yes that teacher I mean the government school’s teacher use to call the weak children at home. They said, “come home for an hour or two I will help you.” So, I went to them.’³⁵ It is interesting to note here, Talib argues that ‘Their [working class students’] experience of education that was supposed to ameliorate the lives of working class children became, in reality a means of training children to internalise their labouring status in society.’³⁶ He places the responsibility for his failures on his inability to perform well in school and on his ability to cope with studies, ‘Yes, they [other students] were very good in studies. They went ahead. I was not smart, I was weak so I stayed here [Hoshangabad].’³⁷

Kabir Lal feels there was a distinction between his experiences at both the schools.³⁸ At this stage of the interview, a teacher at HSTP sat with us. In their conversations he talks about the difference in the teaching methods at the two schools. In the course of their discussion he was able to clearly express the reasons for his performance at school. He comments on teachers’ inability to teach or take any interest in teaching the students; the focus then shifts from his incompetence to problems in teaching methods at first school. ‘But nobody taught us there, only one teacher was there. In the village in Gadarwala. They [teachers] made us sit where everybody else was sitting. And they would say take out your books after that whether we study or not, they did not care.’³⁹ He attended the science programme only for one year and there was

³⁴ Mohammad Talib, ‘Modes of Learning-Labour Relations: Educational Strategies and Child Labour’, in Naila Kabeer, Geetha B. Nambissan and Ramya Subrahmanian, *Child Labour and the Right to Education in South Asia: Needs versus Rights?* Sage: New Delhi, 2003: 146. Kabir Lal recalls ‘Yes, like after coming from school if I again sat and study then like that I would have understood more.’

³⁵ Interview with Kabir Lal taken on 14 and 15 December, 2013. Mohammad Talib, ‘Thus, they came to learn and accept their position within social hierarchy, to regard the attendant privileges, advantages and disadvantages as legitimate, and to accept the right of the successful to control and organize the unsuccessful (just as they accepted their teachers’ right to run the place and their authority to order).’ ‘Modes of Learning’, Ibid: 147.

³⁶ Ibid: 155.

³⁷ Interview with Kabir Lal taken on 14 and 15 December, 2013.

³⁸ He had been to two schools, one at his village in Gadarwala and the second one in Hoshangabad, where he attended the HSTP programme.

³⁹ Interview with Kabir Lal taken on 14 and 15 December, 2013.

disappointment over a missed opportunity.⁴⁰ He said that ‘If I would have studied, passed 10th class I could have taken admission in the Police. Yes, if I would have passed 10th class I would have definitely done something.’⁴¹ When he compares the two schools he said that,

the teachers who used to teach were fine [at Hoshangabad]. (I) mean it would have been better if it would have been followed from the beginning. There [in the village] no body studied. There were no manners and etiquette. If you want to study, study, and if you don’t want to study don’t study.⁴²

Both the teaching methods and teachers were different at the schools; the difference in teaching methods was reflected in his self-perception. This scope or possibility of change through a teacher’s intervention was absent in the first school. The methods and staff at the new school, though helpful were not able to make up for the loss in the initial years. Schooling only brought their shortcomings or disabilities to the forefront. The failure to engage with these aspects of their lives within the system only increased the distance from peers in school and their community.⁴³ How they begin to think of themselves is closely tied to the initial classroom interactions where there is a clear demarcation between the good students and weak students.⁴⁴ These perceptions then carried outside the class determine his self-perception in society.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Scholars expressed their disappointment with discontinuance of the HSTP programme. ‘Since it did not see the changes it hoped would have come about, the government closed down Eklavya’s programme,’ Sarada Balagopalan in ‘Understanding Educational Innovation in India: The Case of Eklavya Interviews with Staff and Teachers’ *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 1: Issue 1, 2003: 101.

⁴¹ Interview with Kabir Lal taken on 14 and 15 December, 2013. He passed ninth standard in a government school at Hoshangabad. He appeared for the tenth class examination but was not able to pass it. After two attempts he gave up schooling and started working as a cook in Bhopal. He chose this profession because his sister and her husband were already working as cooks.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Using children’s interviews and their experiences at school, Rekha Pappu and D. Vasanta argue how economic inequality alone cannot explain the problems with schooling. It is ‘lack of cultural capital and supportive mediating facilities that are among the major causes for the children remaining educationally backward.’ Rekha Pappu and D. Vasanta, ‘Educational Quality and Social Inequality: Reflecting on the Link’ *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 7: Issue 1, 2010: 112.

⁴⁴ The inability to move beyond binaries of good and weak students then tied up to teachers’ understanding of the problem, ‘Importantly, officers, resources persons and teachers tended to see the problem of poor achievement and learning in terms of children’s backgrounds and their personal characteristics such as IQ, rather than in terms of curricula and teaching strategies.’ Vimala Ramachandran and Rashmi Sharma *The Elementary Education System in India: Exploring Institutional Structures, Processes and Dynamics*, Routledge: New Delhi, 2009: 281

⁴⁵ In his interview he repeatedly emphasized that he cannot interact with others as his language is not well developed. He also complained that he does not know English and cannot interact in this language. Even though

Kabir Lal makes no direct references to his community in his narrative, apart from one instance where he mentions that a teacher from his community offered to coach him for free.⁴⁶ What remains consistent in his narrative is the gap between him and other students as a consequence of his inability to cope with academic pressures. He mentions that no peer or any friendship could have helped because, he says, ‘we were very poor; there was no support to study.’⁴⁷

In the case of Shyam, he worked on the fields of Thakur to assist his father and support his family. The pressures that the Thakur community could exert on them included forced labour, ‘(They) [Thakurs] used to scare us...scare us. In a way (I) mean used abusive language too. So, if one wants to keep their dignity or doesn’t want to listen to abusive language then (we) had to go.’⁴⁸ These discriminations were not restricted to fields, but were significant in everyday responses at school as well. When he talked about his experiences with Thakur children, he said ‘we were not capable of getting good education or going to a good place, doing a good business and gaining some knowledge, we couldn’t reach there.’⁴⁹ In the interactions with other students, he said that

Thakur students could argue with teachers, I could not speak but the boys who were of [Thakur] (I) mean those who were capable or from extremely rich family, they could. We could not speak. If we would speak then our names were cut and our guardian would have been called and our name would have been struck off. They (teacher) used to say that ‘he has become very naughty, take him away from school.’⁵⁰

In contrast, to village interactions, the space of school for him marked a space absent of any discrimination. ‘Everything was alright there [school]. In class everybody is in the same way.’⁵¹

when I asked him ‘is English used anywhere in your village or in Hoshangabad’, he said ‘no it is not.’ These complexes were not limited to the level of ideas. This binary of educated and uneducated that he uses was used to justify his decisions in everyday life. For instance, he did not allow his wife to work outside because she was not educated and could not decide what would be good or bad for her. This was a convenient tactic to control and assert his authority in the domestic space.

⁴⁶ Kabir Lal mentions in his interview, that he belongs to schedule caste but does not refer to his community within this caste.

⁴⁷ Interview with Kabir Lal on 14 and 15 December, 2013.

⁴⁸ Interview with Shyam Shanker on 4 November, 2013.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Even though in his narrative Shyam recounts various instances of discrimination, later in the interview he narrates an incident where when he claims his scholarship, he recalls ‘They [teachers] threw the form towards me and said, sign on this. They threw the paper, they threw the form and very rudely said, “from where do these people come, these Government Brahmin and threw the newspaper.”’⁵² In response to this, he said ‘I did not say anything but I prayed to god that no one should face this day in their life.’⁵³

The inability to change these situations reinforced the need to get educated. With these instances, there were also examples where he resisted discriminatory behaviour. When Shyam was asked to change his name, to get admission in school, he refused, ‘I said that I will not change (name)... so they [administrators] said, “you will not get admission.” I told them that I am not Rajeev, why should I change my name, so then I came back.’⁵⁴ He understood the discrimination, which he states in his comment, ‘So I got admission there with my hard work, and then my friends also got admission in same class, those are Thakur’s children. They had recommendation, so they got admission.’⁵⁵ The instances, at school, the problems with school staff and teachers made his caste identity the central point, ‘Then I kept this in mind that, no matter how much one studies, it’s their position that determines how much one can succeed.’⁵⁶ In the businesses that his father tried to run, he made sure to avoid any form of public dealing. When his father started a business, he forced him to close it down, ‘I understood that the shop won’t be successful, whatever money is invested all will go waste, we will be also stuck and we won’t be able to do any work.’⁵⁷ The reason for this was,

he [Thakurs] had also taken [cloth] and at times, the zamindars were also there, they had taken. Whenever they needed like my child needs this much of cloth for stitching a shirt.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

We could not say no to them and used to give cloth. After that they would give money according to their wish and said that “you take your money next time.”⁵⁸

These instances made his caste identity central in interactions at school and in the village. His caste identity became the primary motivation to study. This was possible by moving beyond and resisting the discriminations resulting from his community identity in society.

In the interview with a person from general caste, the focus still remains caste although, for him, it was the gap from people of his community that allowed him to pursue studies.⁵⁹ Ganpat⁶⁰ said, ‘Here I got children of mixed culture. All of them were not Brahmins. Some of them were Brahmins and some of them were mixed [caste].’⁶¹ The difference that he felt in a mixed classroom was in the way he could study with Brahmin children. He tried through his life to socialize with Brahmins. ‘As I spent maximum time with Brahmins so I adopted their culture as well. Now my culture and my education both were like Brahmins.’⁶² This was in contrast to his experience in classes where students from all castes were there, ‘We were together [friends from his locality]. Again in 10th class I was lost. No studies, just play, roaming here and there. I even bunked school 2-3 times. They also failed as we all didn’t study.’⁶³ Throughout his interview Ganpat mentions and reinforces that he had to stay away from his community in order to

⁵⁸ Ibid. ‘For the socially excluded, education played an ideological and functional role, Caste system made them socially outcaste, economically dependable, and politically powerless. This, according to me, can be attributed to several factors; but to my mind, the single most important factor to which their appalling miseries can be attributed is the denial to the untouchables (i.e., Dalits) the right to education,’ Bhalchandra Mungekar, ‘Education: the only key to Dalit progress.’ ambedkar.org/Worldwide_Dalits/education_and_dalits. [accessed on 14.12.2014].

⁵⁹ ‘Schooling thus tends to reinforce social inequalities—class, gender and caste. Seldom does it encourage students to ask questions about the status quo or pursue a concern for social justice. The parallel school system perpetuates hierarchies of access: affluent children go to privately run schools, while the poor attend schools run by the State.’ Sarojini Vittachi, *Alternative Schooling in India*: 28.

⁶⁰ Ganpat belonged to the Vaniyar caste from Tamil Nadu. He was born in Delhi and his father worked in a government office. He enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts but he could not complete it. He is now working as an administrative assistant at a company in Delhi.

⁶¹ Interview with Ganpat taken on 1 December, 2013 in Delhi.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid. A possible explanation for his faith in the competence of Brahmin students could be classroom comparison. In this context, G. Gautama raises some questions about how these classroom comparisons influence a child’s personality, ‘The question really is whether a young person can learn that comparison is limited. Can a non-comparative space, in interactions with teachers, and possibly at home, leave a taste of another way of relating? Should the role of schools be to help students ‘fit’ into society? Or should it be to grow discriminating, sensitive people?’ G.Gautama, ‘Living without Comparison, Learning without Competing’, in Sarojini Vittachi, *Alternative Schooling in India*: 69.

progress in school.⁶⁴ Rather than taking responsibility for his failures, however, he argued that his friends were responsible for his problems at school.⁶⁵

A possible explanation for this could be the alien culture of the teaching, to which he was not socialized at the start. Ganpat stresses that students were made to recite Sanskrit slokas at which Brahmin students were more adept. This was because ‘the Brahmin children had to follow certain rules since morning, like chanting of slokas in Sanskrit. Actually they already know their routine from their home. And this was a part of their habits.’⁶⁶ By saying this, he was acknowledging the cultural capital with which upper caste students were endowed on their entry into the classroom. Yet he also went on to assert that ‘we [his caste vaniyer] are higher than Brahmins and we offer Pongals, that white colour thread and we do not eat onion, garlic.’⁶⁷ Ganpat did say, defensively, that ‘Things have changed now, all the Brahmins eat non veg. They eat secretly with friends.’⁶⁸ These ambiguous statements about caste and its effects in the classroom were among the obstacles to learning, though not something he could fully articulate such as when he added that ‘In my opinion there is nothing about caste, we all are human beings, caste is nothing.’⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Ganpat could not clear 8th and 10th standard and dropped out of school. Later, with the help of his employer he filled out the forms and cleared 10th standard.

⁶⁵ This response can be seen in other interviews as well, for instance with Rachit Sharma from Uttar Pradesh, who completed 10th class and left his village to come to Delhi. For his children he wants that, ‘We have stayed in small colonies where all kind of children are there. By studying in their company, (I) mean my children would also speak in bad way. This makes a lot of difference and if they stay in an educated environment it will make a difference.’ Interview was taken in Delhi on 14 November and 15 November, 2013.

⁶⁶ Interview with Ganpat taken on 1 December, 2013.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Interview with Ganpat. ‘Equally important to situations of poverty are the mechanisms and processes that enable the building of economic and cultural resources, social capital and networks that lead to advantage, privilege and power.’ Geetha B Nambissan, in ‘Poverty, Markets and Elementary Education in India’, *TRG Poverty and Education Working Paper Series* 3: 2.

Perceptions and Positions: Education in Family Lives

In this last section, I will look at the interviewee's account of their achievements and failures as a consequence of their schooling. In their responses they reflect on the past not just to recall it, but the memories of those years were an achievement in itself, made possible through education. They speak about the use or relevance of education which extended beyond material benefits to include social and moral values. I start with example of Kabir Lal, who now is an ice cream vendor. He dropped out of school after class 8. He was disillusioned with school education, 'There was no use. The conditions were such at our house. If the base is weak from the beginning then one would slip while moving ahead.'⁷⁰ In his year at school, he internalized certain forms of teaching, which he also saw as a natural consequence of his condition. To the question, was there any beating in your schools? He responded that 'Actually what happens when the teacher beats up the students then everything enters their mind. No, no it surely makes a difference. Because if you keep on beating every day then something, you will be able to remember something, a little bit at least.'⁷¹ Even when prompted about other ways of teaching that he experienced at his school he emphasized how in his condition, beating up was the only way possible. Kabir Lal's experiences at school influenced his perception of how education should be practiced.⁷² These concerns were then justified by being linked to skepticism about the value of education in their lives. 'I was weak in studies, so it had no meaning. I could not pass after 8th class'.⁷³ In another interview, a respondent said, 'Yes in those days [when he was studying] everyone used to study to pass, no one had any interest.'⁷⁴ He said that when he was younger then children could cheat and pass the examinations easily. He commented on this that 'this type of education is worthless.'⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Interview with Kabir Lal taken on 14 and 15 December, 2013.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² The programme also started conducting open book examinations; Kabir Lal, 'If our books was there then what was the meaning of giving examination.' Ibid.

⁷³ Interview Kabir Lal taken on 14 and 15 December, 2013.

⁷⁴ Interview with Rachit Sharma taken on 14 and 15 November, 2013.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Despite many disappointments and a long history of discouraging failures, people were convinced that, as Kabir Lal put it, ‘Like if you study today then you will become something. You will get some job. If you will study then life will be easier for you. Otherwise you will have to do farming and all. You will have to plough the field.’⁷⁶ Education becomes a process, as seen in this statement, ‘... education as a tension between “being” and “ought to be,” in the past as well as in the present, as a sign of transforming society, caste, household and individual.’⁷⁷ In this process, ‘Education is used as an idiom to express social divisions brought about by processes of upward mobility.’⁷⁸ Here there is an assumption that through education people hoped that they could achieve higher social economic status for their families in society. This was true for some, but at the same time there was an attempt to reconfigure family and community status by claiming a new sense of self through education. An interviewee said that ‘I am not the same Devika I am educated now. The way I was treated before [by her family and community] was wrong, now that cannot happen, forget that now.’⁷⁹ She further said that she could choose what to wear now that she is educated and independent. Equally important was Devika’s dream of owning a house, ‘a day would come when I would have my own household. I would buy a nice bed. Will put a nice mattress. I would sleep peacefully.’⁸⁰ This is one of her satisfactions now that she lives in a house where she has her own bed and household.

While reflecting on what one could or did achieve through education. Devika, who attended the HSTP, speaks of how the happiest memories of her life were of the years in school. She

⁷⁶ Interview with Kabir Lal taken on 14 and 15 December, 2013. The aspiration for education was fraught with the daily struggle for survival, which in many cases explained the early drop outs. Sarada Balagopalan brings out the dilemmas for students working as labour: ‘by dropping out, they were not legitimizing a counterculture of *Khatni* [hard labour] but were expressing their disappointment with schooling’s failure to actualize what they imagined as a life devoted to becoming a *manush*. They desired to emulate such devotion in a school space which they hoped would secure a reversal of their lives as lived thus far. But his future gradually exhausted itself in the boredom of daily routines’ in *Inhabiting 'Childhood': Children, Labour and Schooling in Postcolonial India*: 119.

⁷⁷ Manuela Ciotti, ‘In the Past We Were a Bit "Chamar"’: Education as a Self- and Community Engineering Process in Northern India’, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2006: 913.

⁷⁸ Scholars argue that differences between educated and uneducated could be seen in many contexts. ‘These divisions are often reinforced by different socio-economic status through different consumption patterns and access to a different social milieu amongst those households who have made it into government salaried jobs.’ Manuela Ciotti, ‘In the Past We Were a Bit "Chamar"’: Education as a Self- and Community Engineering Process in Northern India’: 911.

⁷⁹ Interview with Devika Mansuria taken on 17 and 18 December, 2013.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

remembers her classroom experiences as something which involved both games and studies, ‘She [science teacher] used to teach through games and she explained [lessons] well. She used to speak sweetly with students and taught well.’⁸¹ Of her classroom Devika said, ‘They [teachers] used to explain really well. People say that in Government school teaching is not good but I would say that it is very good.’⁸² This sentiment of happiness and satisfaction with classroom studies can be found in other interviewees from the HSTP as well. A respondent Ketaki Verma, who also went through this programme, said ‘She [her social science teacher] taught us well. Social Studies was good at our place. We liked it.’⁸³ Lata Chaudhari, former student of this HSTP, said ‘I liked it. In this subject, in science. In science we never used to forget. It was like, what I have seen and understood, I have not forgotten it. I planted trees and I don’t forget this. Isn’t it.’⁸⁴ As a part of their science class, ‘they [teachers] used to take all the students to the place where lots of fruits and flowers would be there. We used to plant trees and flowers and then we would get flowers back to the class and write about it in the science period.’⁸⁵ The relevance or the significance these classes had for her went beyond the space of the classroom. She belonged to a family in which girls were not allowed to leave their homes. Lata remembers that

yes an entire group used to go, we all used to walk down. It used to feel nice for instance someone is left behind then they would say that “Lata is left behind.” I was alone from my area. Then they would call me if I was left behind. They called me.⁸⁶

For someone who was not allowed to go out of the house, schooling took on a specific relevance in Lata’s life. For these interviewees, it was the journey made possible through the space of

⁸¹ Ibid. Such examples are an alternative to the usual student- teacher relationship. Gautama said, ‘The school and the teacher were never meant to validate and accept all that society is. They have no choice about examining and questioning what happens, and all that happens. This is the only way by which a thinking, reflective and discerning mind can be produced from our schools.’ Gautama, in Vittachi, *Alternative Schooling in India*: 69.

⁸² Interview with Devika taken on 17 and 18 December, 2013.

⁸³ Interview with Ketaki Verma taken on 14 December, 2013 on Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh.

⁸⁴ Interview with Lata Chaudhari taken on 15 and 16 December, 2013, Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh. The interview was conducted at her house where she lives with two children, husband and her mother- in -law.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

school that was the achievement in their lives. The daily interactions with peers, the freedom to go out of the house were among the good memories of her time at the school.

An interviewee played on the idea of past and present, to talk of what are the developments that were made possible and a consequence of education. Towards the end of his interview Shyam Shanker said that education brought him the courage to interact equally with other caste people. He also associated certain habits and manners as markers of education, such as being well spoken, eloquent, and possessing good manners.

Conclusion

‘A dialectical relationship between education and society lends itself to a dual dynamic of change so that, on one hand, education is invoked to transform social values, while simultaneous social action is needed to transform the values of education itself.’⁸⁷ In these discussions two aspects which dominated were economic and social identities; both mostly work in tandem to produce the space through which the child experiences education,

intersecting disadvantages from structures of deprivation and devalued identities of caste, ethnicity, minority status, gender and regional backwardness are likely to adversely affect children’s access to education and participation in schools as well as their sense of self worth and dignity, which are critical to learning.⁸⁸

Does education enhance capability?⁸⁹ Expectations and desires for quick social mobility are rarely fulfilled. As Devika Manusira notes, ‘Uneducated people impose their wish on others leading to permanent displeasure. Nobody should impose one’s wish.’⁹⁰ Other interviewees also spoke of how their status has improved in their villages. Shyam Shanker, after he completed his

⁸⁷ Anita Rampal, ‘Revaluing Education’ in Radika Chopra and Patricia Jeffery, eds., *Education Regimes in Contemporary India*, Sage: Delhi, 2005: 250

⁸⁸ Nambissan, ‘*Poverty, Markets, and Elementary Education in India*: 25.

⁸⁹ ‘Sometimes I remember their words, if I would have listened to them then I would have done something today. Now, I remember whatever they have said and whatever they have taught me that if you will study you can do something. So, now, I repent when I have problem at my work. When I get exhausted then I feel that if I would have listened to them and did what they said then I would not have to do this today.’ Interview with Kabir Lal taken on 14 and 15 December, 2013.

⁹⁰ Interview with Devika Mansuria taken on 17 and 18 December, 2013.

ITI course, said that ‘yes, I got a lot of respect.’⁹¹ Although, this has improved his social position, he still feels that he cannot go back to his village because he will not get the kind of respect that he gets in the city.

Is school then a mere continuation of oppression or does it offer the resources for new forms of escaping the constraints of caste? Their case studies offer some clues about what was new and what was relatively unchangeable in terms of life opportunities. It also suggests a view from below, as it were, from those who look back on their childhood and on the structures of learning, from which they had been largely excluded.

⁹¹ Interview with Shyam Shanker taken on 4 November, 2013 in Delhi.

M. Sharma: Accessing Education: Reconfiguring Family and Neighbourhood Networks
In: Working Papers of the Max Weber Foundation's Transnational Research Group India
"Poverty Reduction and Policy for the Poor between the State and Private Actors: Education
Policy in India since the Nineteenth Century"
Year of Publication: 2017