

## 1 Introduction

This research project is temporally located at a particular juncture in Indian schooling history, when government primary schools have begun to see an influx of *dalit*<sup>1</sup> and *adivasi*<sup>2</sup> students, a majority of whom are first-generation learners. This has shaped the research focus on the dynamics of education inclusion, particularly aimed at assessing the impact of the entry of large numbers of traditionally excluded social groups into institutions to which they have been in the past systematically denied access. In particular, the research project has been interested to explore how the school as an institution located at a crucial interface of changing state society dynamics and interlinkages, can and does respond to these newly included groups. Drawing on fieldwork in three sites,<sup>3</sup> this article serves as a *preliminary* report on research findings about aspects of the processes that are in evidence in schools and the societies in which they are located in the context of the relatively recent insertion of *dalit* and *adivasi* children into formal schools.

The idea of this article is not to serve as a checklist of what has changed and what remains as is, but more to underscore some interesting trends, transformations and discontinuities that we see emerge in the research data thus far. The most uniform finding of this research project has been the widespread nature of verbal abuse that *dalit* and *adivasi* children suffer at the hands of their upper-caste teachers in primary schools, which has a critical impact on the ways in which these first-generation school attendees view themselves as learners. While this is clearly an issue that is of concern, we see the abuse as a manifestation of more systemic disjunctures associated with the entry of traditionally excluded groups into spaces that were hitherto the preserve of caste and class elites. In particular, the kinds of social and economic mobility associated with educational inclusion (even if not taking place in reality) has created a complex set of responses both on the part of the newly included children and their families as well as the wider communities within which they function.

Constraints of space do not allow for the multiple experiences that the ethnographic data reveals to be presented here. We have, therefore, chosen to focus this analysis on three dimensions of the

# Dalit and Adivasi Children in Schools:

## Some Preliminary Research Themes and Findings

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experience of *dalit* children's insertion into formal schools: (1) perceptions of what constitutes school effectiveness on the part of parents and teachers; (2) how teachers articulate and understand these children's presence in the school as well as how 'illiterate' parents work with, and around, the authoritative presence that formal schools signify; and (3) the ways in which parents and children construct the wider opportunity set that is associated with educational participation. What the research reveals, and to some extent confirms, is the dynamic interchange between the formal ideologies that underpin schooling, on the one hand, and the diverse trajectories of social and economic mobility of different groups in India today, on the other. These dynamic forces raise questions for the shape that educational policy can take, grounded as it is within wider constitutional and policy discourses on the importance of social inclusion for groups entrenched in disadvantage and located at the bottom of the Indian socio-economic hierarchy. In the final section of the article, we 'rethink reform', particularly emphasising the importance of moving beyond these formal discourses to looking at ways in which different actors can collaborate to challenge educational exclusion and promote meaningful inclusion.

## 2 Background to the research and sites

The research started by looking at experiences of newly included children within the school and then traced these children back to their homes and their communities. Methods included the use of surveys and interviews with students, parents and school staff. More specifically, each district focused on four schools which included two Lower Primary Schools (LPS), one middle or Upper Primary School (UPS) and a high school (HS). In each of these schools, the research focused on particular cohorts, namely Grades 3, 6 and 9, respectively. All of the schools were specifically chosen keeping in mind the project's focus on *dalit* and *adivasi* children and their experiences as first-generation learners within formal schools. The expansion of schooling provision, particularly of government primary schools, over a significant coverage of rural and urban communities, has meant, however, that the schools where *dalit* children were concentrated had

an almost complete absence of upper-caste children. They also tended to be dominated by one particular *dalit jati*.<sup>4</sup> This reflects both patterns of social habitation, where different caste groups live to some degree of geographical segregation, as well as the fact that primary government schools are increasingly being abandoned by better-off (and higher caste) families in favour of proliferating private schools. This was certainly true of all of the sites that were studied in this project. However, in middle and high schools the population became more mixed, both in terms of various *dalit* populations as well as non-*dalit* children. This reflects both the relative lack of middle and high schools, as well as the high cost of private schooling at this level, which forces many children who study in private primary schools to return to the public sector. However, it was also the experience in this project that the numbers of *dalit* children at these levels of schooling declines sharply, relative to their presence in the primary school.

In deciding to research *dalit* experiences through a qualitative methodology, the project sought to study inclusion, not as the quantitative prevalence of 'incidents', but through using ethnographies to understand how children perceive their experience of schooling; how it resonates with home life; how others perceive and deal with their inclusion; how this affects their perceptions of new opportunities; and how they negotiate the new relationships that inclusion into schooling brings. This research project contends that the insertion of marginal children into spaces that reflect dominant axes of power and authority does entail some amount of adjustment both on the parts of children – as they learn to negotiate this new experience – as well as on the parts of their families and the wider societies in which they are located. It is these experiences that the project has sought to understand and unravel.

### Case studies

The following case studies provide a brief background of the specific communities and schools in three of the four districts on which the research has focused. Constraints of space prevent elaboration beyond the minimum, but the snapshots below represent an attempt to map out some different facets of these communities, which are pertinent to the analysis that follows.

## 2.1 Harda district, Madhya Pradesh

Located between two important towns in the district, the village studied, though predominantly Korku (*adivasi*), is far from remote. The main road cuts through the middle of the village and thus it serves as the market town for the 30 smaller *adivasi* villages in its vicinity. The district has a population that is 21 per cent *adivasi* with the literacy rates among this *adivasi* population being 11 per cent for males and only 2 per cent for females. The Korku tribe form about 90 per cent of the population of the village. Although the Korkus do own land, a significant percentage of it is not irrigated forcing them to migrate twice a year during the harvest.<sup>5</sup> Beside the Korkus, the village also has a small percentage of Gond (*adivasis*) whose lands are better irrigated, as well as *brahmins*, Muslims and Kahars (who belong to the caste category OBC<sup>6</sup>) who between themselves control most of the shops and therefore are the main traders (*mahajans*) in the village. The non-*adivasi* communities share the best agricultural land in the village and are engaged in some amount of mechanised farming through the use of tractors they own. While the Gonds and the Korkus do interact with each other, the *brahmin*, Kahar and Muslim non-*adivasi* communities have no social relationships with the *adivasis* and tend to perceive the Gonds as the far more 'civilised' tribe. This might have to do with the fact that the Gonds are economically better off than the Korkus and have a longer history of being formally educated (while most of the Korkus are first-generation learners), and are therefore less susceptible to exploitation by the *mahajans*.

These constructions of the Korkus spill over into the primary and middle schools, both of which have a large share of Korku students with predominantly upper-caste teachers. The non-*adivasi* students, though in a minority, also attend these schools as there exist no private schools in the vicinity of the village. The LPS, estimated to have begun in 1947 (although the official records only date back to 1961), has two small buildings that are located separately, one on the main street and the second next to the middle school. Not only are the school's infrastructural facilities very minimal but the school has only three staff, two teachers and one principal to 235 students (of whom only 166 students attend school on a regular basis).

The third grade has 42 students of whom 24 are *adivasi*, including six girls. A young *brahmin* teacher, who has been in the school since 1999, teaches both the third and the fifth grade and herself admits that she spends much more time with the latter class to prepare them for the state exams at the end of the year. Her interactions with the third grade is limited to appointing a child, who is not *adivasi*, to read aloud from the text as well as mind the class with the rest of the students spending most of their day copying out questions and answers from the blackboard into their notebooks. The Korku children's lack of Hindi (the medium of instruction) language skills is a big impediment to their being able to cope with class work, as well as homework, often resulting in their notebooks being flung on the floor by the teacher and their being subject to excessive corporal punishment.

The UPS staff is dominated by three *brahmins* (upper castes) and one *gujar* (OBC). As is true for the LPS the children in the UPS are subject to similar targeting, ridicule and adverse treatment in the hands of these upper-caste teachers (see Balagopalan, this volume). Teachers from both schools live outside the village and their daily 23 km bus commute often means that they arrive about an hour late and often have to leave about an hour early because of the unreliability of transportation. The UPS school has 187 students and four staff and is better resourced than the LPS, as it serves as a cluster centre for other schools in the area. This, however, means that teachers even when present in school are often absorbed in keeping records rather than teaching in the classroom. The school has a library of 125 books, which stay locked in a cupboard, as teachers are afraid to let the students take them home because they might spoil them and the teachers will be held accountable. The sixth grade has 51 *adivasi* students, only two *adivasi* girls, of a total of 66 students in class. In the village across all castes and incomes, the situation regarding girls' schooling tends to be grim with a majority of girls dropping out of school after the fifth grade. The reasons for this, similar to those pointed out in the PROBE (1999) report, range from the young girl being viewed as ideal for household tasks to the parents believing that the amount of schooling is inversely proportional to her finding a husband from her own caste.

## 2.2 Ujjain city, Ujjain district, Madhya Pradesh

With a population equalling a quarter of that of the entire district, Ujjain city contains the paradox of serving as a prominent pilgrimage centre for Hindus while containing a sizeably significant *dalit* population. Since 1989, a *dalit* BJP leader has been continually winning the Lok Sabha<sup>7</sup> seat in Ujjain city and is currently a cabinet minister. Beside the religious economy of the city in which the *dalits* do not play any significant part, the cotton mills, the first of which was set up in 1891, were crucial both to the city's as well as the *dalit* economy until the 1980s when they began to close down. For this research project we decided to focus the first phase on the Bairwa and Valmiki *jatis*, as the Bairwas are considered one of the most organised, identity-conscious, progressive *dalit* groups in the city, while the Valmikis are viewed as being at the bottom of the scale. However, paradoxically, while the Valmikis are assured a steady income from the city's municipal corporation, the Bairwas this study focused upon had earlier been working in the mills and had been out of steady employment since 1981.

The primary school (LPS), located in the midst of a settlement of about 300 Valmiki houses has a majority of children from this community as its students. The school begun in 1952 was, until recently, a boy's school that became co-educational due to falling enrolments. The school is housed in a well-kept old building with adequate space and staff (five) for the 152 students. All of the staff except for the principal (Bairwa) are upper caste and even though many of them have had a long history of being at the school (one teacher has worked here since 1961), they do not interact with any of the members of the Valmiki community. They neither share the same source of drinking water with the students nor with the principal. The Valmikis, or the '*bhangis*' as they are derogatorily known, continue in their traditional occupation as sweepers, but now within the formal economy of the city's municipal corporation. Although parents say that they do not want their educated children to formally take up the work they currently do, most *valmiki* adolescents are engaged in similar work.<sup>8</sup>

The high school (HS) in Ujjain has traditionally been a *dalit* school having been started by the manager of one of the textile mills in 1960 to benefit the children

of the *dalits* who worked for him. The school had a majority of *dalit* children until 1975 when this mill manager handed over the school to the government who opened up admission to children of all caste backgrounds. The school has an excellent reputation among high schools in the city as its upper-caste principal is considered an excellent educator and the school's alumni have easily made it to the ranks of the army. The Bairwas, whose traditional occupation included working with leather, migrated to Ujjain from Rajasthan in 1925 because of a famine there and easily got work in the textile mills. A formal job with a steady source of income allowed the Bairwa community as a whole in Ujjain to make an unparalleled social ascendance and gain greater social and cultural acceptability than any other *dalit* group in the city. While Bairwas in the city have jobs in both the government and the business sector, the particular group the research focused on were former mill employees who had lost their jobs and now worked daily-wage jobs, while their wives assembled incense sticks at home for some additional family income. At least one of the parents, mostly the fathers, had had some formal schooling and the greatest difficulty their children experienced in school was that they needed to combine this with some income earning activity in order to help with household expenses.

## 2.3 Sriganganagar, Ganganagar district, Rajasthan

Sriganganagar, the district headquarters for Ganganagar district is on the north-western border of the state of Rajasthan. The district has the highest concentration of *dalit* in the state (29.6 per cent), many of whom are migrants to the area, and settled in the context of the agricultural opportunities that have expanded as a result of the irrigation that has transformed the landscape from a desert area to a fertile extension of Punjab's Green Revolution. In the rural areas, *dalit* families work predominantly as agricultural labourers.

The school studied is a government high school, located in the middle of a mill colony. Most of the *dalit* population in the town is employed in sugar and cloth mills, and children from three housing estates built around the mills attend the school. It is a co-educational school, started in the 1960s, and serves in the mornings Grades 6–10 and in the afternoons Grades 1–5. Sixty-two per cent of the

student population in the LPS is *dalit*, of whom 62 per cent are boys and 38 per cent girls.

The school attracts a large number of children largely on account of its reputation as being a good school. This reputation is particularly drawn from its upper grades, where teaching oriented towards public board exams is particularly better focused on getting children through the system. Teachers take middle school children more seriously as they are seen to have a stronger commitment to education, having made it thus far. This contrasts sharply with the LPS where the teaching quality has been observed to be particularly poor, and levels of abuse, both corporal and verbal, and the neglect of teaching, appears to be high.

The stability of employment across all ranks of the mill's labour force has meant that this colony is considered to house relatively well-off households even though the hierarchy of the labour force reflects the hierarchy of the caste structure, with *dalit* households working in the factory, and the higher castes serving as the managerial class. Many of the children in this colony study outside of the mill school, largely in private schools. Those who can afford private schools, particularly at primary level, opt for the town's private schools, citing their better discipline and better teaching quality as factors influencing their choice. Children from the working class families within the mill attend this school. They are joined by children from neighbouring *bastis* or slums, where households are largely *dalit*, dominated by Dhanak and Valmiki *jatis*.

In one neighbouring *basti*, 90 per cent of the population is *dalit*. While about 25 per cent of the *dalit* population has gained access to some form of government employment or self-employment, and are thus considered to be economically stable, the remaining 75 per cent engage in casual work, including cleaning and domestic work. While pig-rearing was once a relatively lucrative way of earning money for the Valmiki community, through the sale of pork, this income-earning strategy has been disrupted by the local municipal authority, which has begun rounding up pigs and taking them out of the urban area. Formal sector employment opportunities are particularly associated with the public sector, including jobs in the army, the municipality, the electricity board, and in the District Collectorate.

There are 13 teachers in total employed within this school, representing the full complement of posts authorised, and reflecting the attractiveness of teaching jobs in urban environments. Teachers attested to this in interviews, and the headmaster in particular noted that many teachers who were transferred out were instrumental in manoeuvring the system to ensure that they got transferred back to these posts. All the teachers in this school were from the upper castes. The only *dalit* employee was the Class IV employee who was charged with cleaning the school, fetching water and making tea for the staff.

### 3 Dimensions of educational inclusion

The analysis that follows is structured around broad themes within which communities articulate their self-constructions in relation to schooling, whether as teachers, parents or students. The attempt is to cull out the interconnected and negotiated nature of these communities' experiences, though we realise that certain ambiguities as well as generalities may prevail despite our best efforts.

#### 3.1 Perspectives on the effective functioning of schools: students, parents and teachers

Multiple reasons account for increased enrolment in government primary schools, including a rise in parental awareness and interest in educating their children, the easing of admission policies, government provision of academic and extra-academic incentives to students as well as staff drives to enrol children from the school's neighbourhoods. However, this increased enrolment does not easily translate into the improved academic functioning of these schools, particularly primary schools. Therefore, we would like to focus on the ways in which 'illiterate' parents articulate the academic functioning of the school. What is of interest in terms of further expanding our existing understanding of social inclusion, is that these articulations do not necessarily mean that parents are in a position to act upon their perceived ineffectiveness of government schooling. Yet, however, their voices help point to a growing awareness among parents of first generation learners around quality of schooling issues.

The research revealed that while urban primary school parents focus discourses of school effectiveness around the academic standards of primary schools, in the high schools these discourses revolve around future job openings that the school makes possible. The large-scale prevalence of private schooling in urban areas has made available to parents a certain language of comparison within which the LPS is found lacking. In Ujjain, although only a few of the Valmiki children attended private school, the entire community had not only imbibed the culturally hegemonic language around the failure of government schools, but used this to criticise the lack of academic rigour in the local LPS. What their narratives reveal is that the academic mobility that private schooling is imagined as achieving acts as the yardstick with which government schools come to be measured as failing in these communities.

In Ujjain, for instance, the larger politics of teacher transfers and the non-hiring of permanent teachers had helped ensure that this coveted city posting had teachers who were all close to retirement and did not possess the inclination nor the ability to match the agility and energy of young children. Moreover, the prolific rise of private schools has also meant that LPS teachers are under increasing pressure to 'double enrol' children who already studied in private or denominational schools, and let these children leave early to attend these schools. The pressure that the teacher feels is a result of state policy that requires government primary schools to maintain a ratio of 50 students to one teacher, to avoid being transferred.<sup>9</sup> The Valmiki parents spoke of teachers who 'knit rather than teach' and who refused to take responsibility for their children's academic results. Therefore, for Valmiki parents, the teachers' inability to teach, combined with the compromises that teachers made in double enrolling children, made most parents construct this school only as a temporary space for their children, until they could put them into private school.

In the city's high schools, however, *dalit* parents often measured effectiveness in terms of the potential careers that these schools offered and not solely around the school's academic credentials as most of their children supplemented school learning with extra tuition after school.<sup>10</sup> The parent's lack of focus on academic skills is also a reflection of the fact that the high school's majority

non-*dalit* composition helped ensure that certain academic standards were maintained at the school. In Ujjain, since most of the Bairwa parents did not expect their children to attend college, the school's reputation in hockey – which had helped former students gain jobs in the army, the police and the National Cadet Corps – was viewed as an inherently attractive reason to enrol their children at this school. Similarly, the Ganganagar school was attractive to parents and children because of the school's reputation in football (in turn enabled by having a large playing ground in front of it), allowing children to develop skills that would stand them in good stead when applying for the army.

Teachers' discourses around school effectiveness, on the other hand, centred around student performance in examinations. They often used the fear of falling standards to screen applicants to the high school and prevent those who they thought would bring down the overall academic performance of schools. Invoking academic merit was often a ruse that disguised complaints embedded in discriminatory attitudes. In Ganganagar, for instance, teachers often complained that the influx of *dalit* students with no history of education reduced the overall performance of the school in terms of examination results.

High school teachers felt more accountable to students than LPS teachers, even if this took the form of ensuring that the students took private tuition after school to boost their performance. Students in Ganganagar attested to the improved treatment they received from their teachers if they also took extra tuition from them. The market for English and maths tuition in particular was lucrative for teachers, with most students and parents saying that this tended to be the most difficult subjects to do well in. The relatively lower numbers of *dalit* and *adivasi* children in higher grades also could be a factor that minimises the need for teachers to negotiate social difference within the classroom. This contrasted sharply with the LPS in the same school block, where teachers routinely talked about the characteristics of *dalit* children in terms of stereotypes of 'inappropriateness for educational participation', as elaborated below.

Teacher effectiveness therefore could be seen to be largely a reflection of their own individual views and biases, but also linked to the scale of the 'management of social difference' that they perceived

their job to entail. LPS teachers clearly have a larger number of newly included populations to teach, whose insertion into the formalised world of schooling is seen to require adjustment given the disjunctures it represents between their lifeworlds and the constructed modernity of the schooling process. These disjunctures are both real, and 'imagined' by the teachers, as Balagopalan argues (this volume), and as we point out later in the discussion of constructions of 'educability'. What has been a striking finding of this research is the total lack of any 'system' or institutionalised mechanisms to deal with social difference, that can help teachers to navigate, mediate or address forms of discrimination that they encounter, even if between children, between other school staff, or other teachers and their students. One teacher in Ganganagar talked about her frustration about the derisive attitudes of her peers towards *dalit* students, and said she 'gave up' after some attempts to engage in discussion.

On the whole, teachers' accountability is framed partially in terms of *ad hoc* responses to parents who take up individual issues with them, and partially in terms of their own individual ethical positions. For instance, it was found that one individual staff member at the school often worked to salvage an entire school's reputation among these *dalit* communities. Usually these were exceptional teachers and principals who took an interest in their children's learning and who used less corporal punishment in the classroom. In the four primary schools researched thus far, neither the parents nor the students spoke of any exceptional individual, although two of these LPS had *dalit* principals. These exceptional individuals were usually in the middle and high school as in Ujjain, where the reputation of the principal as an eminent educator in the city was often cited by parents as the main reason for the school's efficient functioning, and in Ganganagar, where one teacher was singled out by parents and students alike as a sterling example of a committed teacher.

### 3.2 Negotiating authority

Understanding inclusion beyond enrolment would require that we look at the ways in which children and parents are both able, and not able, to feel a degree of comfort in the school space. Three principal themes are identified here: (1) that the

'educability' of the *dalit* child at the primary school level is largely influenced by the ascribed potential that teachers believe these *dalit* and *adivasi* students possess; (2) that for *dalit* children this frames not only their self-constructions as students, but also influences their relationships with their non-*dalit* peers; and (3) that the symbolic authority of the school and its staff are mediated by parents not through formal institutions set in place, but rather through understandings formed from everyday relationships that go beyond the confines of the school.

Given its focus on *dalits* and their inclusion in formal schools, this research anticipated finding instances of overt discrimination against these children. But what was found, particularly in primary schools, was the systemic nature of this discrimination and its damaging impact on teachers' constructions of the 'educability' of particular *dalit jatis*. In all of the primary schools researched, there was one dominant *dalit jati* of first-generation learners who comprised the majority population at the school and almost all the teachers were upper caste. This research recorded little effort, if any, on the part of these teachers to make classroom learning for these first-generation learners more interesting. They continued to teach through traditional methods and their inordinate reliance on homework contributed to these children (particularly in the *adivasi* village where the children's home language is different from the medium of instruction) being unable to keep up with classroom learning and therefore remaining quiet and unresponsive in class. The primary school teachers used similar discourses within which to understand the non-performance of these children. They seldom said that the child was intrinsically unable to study but described the difficulties involved in teaching them in language that blamed parents for their lack of interest, their 'drunkenness', their failure to create a more conducive 'home' environment and their continued reliance on traditional occupations.

At the same time, however, it must be noted that in urban areas competition from private schools has meant that teachers, while criticising these *dalit* populations, need to retain them in school as well. Teachers in Ujjain thus often paid the school fees of students who were unable to pay, bought them pencils and notebooks and allowed for double enrolment. Teacher behaviour needs to be

interpreted in a far more complex way, particularly within a wider set of policy and institutional incentives, as the final section of this article argues.

This research also highlights the role of peer friendships in helping children negotiate authority. Friendships were found to be subject to greater context specific negotiations than assumed caste-based distinctions. Only in the *adivasi* village did the relations between students fall within intransigent dichotomies of *adivasi* and non-*adivasi*, with these being largely influenced by the attitudes of teachers and validated by the larger cultural space of adult relations in the village. In Ujjain peer friendships were more based on where the students lived, with those in the high school being roughly divided between those who lived in urban areas and their rural counterparts who were viewed as lower in the social hierarchy. While upper caste teachers in most primary schools avoided sharing food and water when travelling with their students on school outings, the students mostly ate and drank together while in school. After school, however, visits to each other's homes when across castes were less widespread when compared with their friendships and sharing in school. In Ganganagar too, friendships cut across caste, and geography rather than strict rules of commensality dictated the extent to which children across caste groups visited each other. Within the classroom, these peer friendships were important resources that enabled students to cope with abuse or victimisation by teachers.

The formal mechanisms set up to promote parent teacher interactions like the village education and school committees, were found to be quite ineffective in most schools and communities researched. Only in the *adivasi* community studied did the Kahar (OBC) and *brahmin* parents petition the village *panchayat* to complain against the teachers arriving late at school on a regular basis. For most parents, the school space was not one that made them feel welcome for a variety of reasons including language for the Korku parents, and in Ujjain the derision with which teachers looked upon the Valmiki community. Moreover, the existing work schedules of the parents made it difficult for them to conceptualise taking time out to visit a space that they already felt culturally unwelcome in because of its upper-caste dominance. However, this did not prevent individual parents from taking up issues with teachers where

they felt their children were being unfairly treated. Much in turn depended on what the children reported back to their parents – some evidence did emerge of children preferring not to share their experiences with parents so they would not upset them or cause them to create a scene at school.

### 3.3 Constructing mobility and aspirations

The link between schooling and life after schooling is sought to be disrupted by current Universal Elementary Education policy efforts in India, where parents of hitherto out-of-school or dropout children are urged not to invest in schooling purely with an eye to its potential economic returns (see Subrahmanian 2000, for a discussion). The exhortation that 'education is for life, not for a job' (Subrahmanian 2000) is aimed at persuading poor families of the wider social benefits of education. However, as our research in various sites uncovers, parental expectations around the futures of their schooled children are not only gendered, but also mediated by realistic assessments of opportunities available.

Changes in the patterns of access of *dalit* children to schools are influenced by a wide range of reasons as noted earlier. In this research, we were particularly interested to uncover the extent to which access to 'reserved' jobs, particularly in the formal government sector, had an influence on *dalit* and *adivasi* parents' aspirations for their children. As the following narratives reveal, however, the communities researched in large part fall *outside* normative discourses of *dalit* social mobility as framed in terms of affirmative action policies in higher education institutions and government jobs. While formal sector jobs, particularly in government, remain a primary articulation of aspiration, in general parents and children had a clear secondary list of vocations and occupations that they thought to be more realistic for them to gain access.

The aspirations and economic mobility of families as they engage with changing and often increasingly insecure economic environments reveals complex and often group-specific patterns. Most aspirations expressed had a dual edge – an initial canvas of new and desirable opportunities, followed by fairly rapid reverting to the 'fallback' or secure options that were usually tied to traditional 'caste-specific' occupations. The articulations of



mobility – while being obviously linked to the economic and educational background of parents – reveal a tempered recognition of reality among both rural and urban parents. Parents interpret and deal with their children's eventual dropping out of school and/or with their inability to find formal work after graduating, through moderating their aspirations in a language that contains less the dream of imagined middle-class mobility and more the realities of their everyday lives.

For instance, aspirations articulated by Korku parents and children in Madhya Pradesh were largely interconnected with their community's history of lack of success in being able to achieve particular vocations. Their local history of not having gained formal employment in substantial numbers made both parents and children frame their ideal future in terms of graduating from the eighth grade (the highest grade in the village school) and learning the 'machine' required to become a tailor. Meanwhile, the economically better off non-*adivasi* parents in the village also moulded career expectations around their histories of serving as traders, and desired for their children to carry on the family business. While we could interpret the chosen framings as reflecting a lack of information in rural areas in particular, about the job market or about their entitlements through state policy to reserved jobs in the formal sector, evidence from the urban areas reveals a similar pattern. As the case of urban Valmiki children reveals below this lack is not to do with information, but is more fundamentally tied to the community's past history of an absence of social and economic mobility.

For urban Bairwa parents, while the particular community's immediate past history of working in the textile mills had transformed into daily wage labour, their children's futures were informed by the history of social mobility of the larger Bairwa community in the city. Parents interviewed spoke of a wide range of potential career options including, *inter alia* computers, the army, setting up a grocery shop. Therefore it is within the articulation of futures for high school urban *dalit* children that we find futures that are not dependant on higher education degrees as is often assumed, but those that reflect awareness of and willingness to try out new emerging avenues for economic mobility. The differences between the

Valmikis and the Bairwas reveal that it is not urban access to information but more importantly community's perceptions of social mobility that have an effect on the aspirations they construct.

However, across both the urban and rural communities researched, future aspirations for girls largely centred on their becoming wives and mothers and this was viewed as not requiring more than a middle-school education. However, the reasons that parents gave for not allowing their children to study further focused around issues of 'safety' given the distance of the middle or the high school in the urban context, and around the difficulties of finding an educated groom in the rural context. The insertion of girls into schools is an important aspect of the wider story of inclusion, especially within co-educational schools, where issues around sexuality start to emerge through the interaction of boys and girls.

Most of the urban and rural girls spoke of wanting to study further, but said that decisions were being made by their parents about their dropping out of school. Parents viewed the schooling of the daughters within discourses around their impending marriage and future lives spent performing household chores. The performance of household chores was not just about their appropriate training to be housewives and mothers, but also a wider reflection of the job opportunities available to girls from *dalit* households. While most of the Valmiki mothers worked for a wage, it was largely in the domestic sector, as cleaners. The relative neglect of the schooling of girls beyond primary school is part of a wider concern that the gender gap within the wider caste gap is becoming larger (see Subrahmanian, this volume).

#### 4 Rethinking reform

These research findings, though linked to individual schools and communities, are reflective of larger systemic processes related to educational policy making. In this section, we factor the above into an analysis of two important areas of potential reform and critical reflection that the research project has flagged thus far. The first of these relates to the important role the teacher plays in influencing marginal children's self-constructions as learners and in transforming the school into an 'inclusive' space. However, given that Indian education policy already

instructs teachers to behave within constitutional dictates of ensuring equality and fairness to all, how do we understand existing teacher behaviour? Can we begin to discuss this outside of narratives of individual pathology and 'upper-caste' hegemony, towards a more complex understanding of their role within an excessively bureaucratised state apparatus? The second area of reflection connects state attempts to make primary schools more accessible to larger discourses around the failure of these schools to perform academically. How do we read recent state efforts to expand opportunities through basic education in light of its sanctioning of one-room schools for marginal children, while implicitly encouraging the growth of private primary schooling?

Existing research on education in India has largely blamed the teacher for the marginal child's poor academic performance, and the above research findings attest to this, as well as make known these teachers' discriminatory practices and lack of effort in making the school an inclusive space. There are several ways in which teacher behaviour can be analysed. First, as this research has made explicit, upper-caste teachers are the dominant majority in primary schools. Their behaviour typifies larger culturally hegemonic narratives towards *dalits* and *adivasis* particularly in the sphere of commensal relations and in their understandings of the menial work performed by these marginalised communities. Many primary school teachers spoke of *dalit* parents being more interested in the monthly grain instalments that they received and the scholarships that their children brought home rather than in their children's academic performance.

While this latter point can again quite easily be read as reflecting their 'upper casteness', it is also a reflection of the important extra-academic role that teachers have played in the post-independence developmental state. As important local functionaries of the government bureaucracy, particularly in rural areas, teachers have aided state efforts in gathering data about these populations and have been key agents in relaying information on government schemes to the local poor.<sup>11</sup> Existing educational research in India widely recognises the burden this extra-academic work places on classroom teaching, as do teachers themselves (as interviewed in this project). The reason we highlight this is to point to the nature of teachers'

previous engagement with these communities. This engagement has inserted teachers within certain power networks of the state *vis-à-vis* these communities, within which teachers controlled and mediated the access of these communities to information and development funds. Therefore the attitudes that teachers have towards these communities should also be analysed through an understanding of the role that they have historically played within a developmental state which has sanctioned this upper-caste hegemony.

This extra-academic role that teachers play is also significant when one realises that the educational bureaucracy in India is excessively centralised, providing teachers with very little independence to influence the curriculum, change school timings, evaluate students' performance (outside of marking examination articles) and make choices on what incentives might work locally to bring particular populations into school. This understanding of the teacher's role as just another functionary of state, while being linked to colonial bureaucratic structures,<sup>12</sup> has been uncritically adopted by the post-independence state thereby framing teachers' loyalty through reward structures that have largely focused on their administrative efficiency rather than their skills in transacting curriculum. Thus teachers, as this research documents, continue to take time out of their classroom teaching to make sure that their registers and other accounts books are in order because it is these that get inspected within centralised inspection systems that have historically not concerned themselves with evaluating classroom teaching practices.

In addition to this, formal schooling in India, with its emphasis on homework and rote-learning for examinations implicitly assumes that the child has access to academic help at home. This research documents that teaching practices in primary school classrooms continue to reflect this dependence on home-based learning to supplement the work of the school, leading to children being excessively punished for non-completion of homework. However, given the large influx of first-generation learners into primary schools, teachers are unable to cope with this absence of support on the home front. They are incapable of factoring it into their teaching practices, and thus their existing upper-caste cultural assumptions are both

confirmed and exacerbated by formal schooling's dependence on a literate home environment.

Ironically, now, within the neo-liberal state's discourses on educational efficiency, primary school teachers are dependent on these very same marginalised communities to save their jobs by maintaining adequate pupil:teacher ratios. Given this, can we begin to understand teachers' behaviour outside of normative discourses that blame the pathology of individual teachers? Existing critiques of primary schooling, including those of the state, have categorically blamed teachers for their non-performance. Yet, measures are urgently required to move teachers out of a bureaucratised job description as foot soldiers of the state, into a more professionalised discourse as educators.

This re-thinking of the role of teachers is significant when we realise that existing discourses on teachers' non-performance also advocate the recruitment of temporary, under-qualified teachers for poor children, while framing these recruitments within a language of 'community participation'. Temporary contracts for new teachers recruited are justified as a way of ensuring accountability<sup>13</sup> and rationalised through its 'local' representation. This 'upper-caste' hegemony has been redressed in policy reform processes through lowering of educational qualifications (an eighth grade pass) in order to hire primary school teachers that are more representative of *dalit* populations. This, however, is a perverse interpretation of the 'caste gap' in education when we realise that what this is putting in place is a quick-fix solution that in its very conceptualisation rationalises a compromised learning environment for *dalit* children<sup>14</sup> (see also Vasavi, this volume).

It is within efforts to ensure poor children's access to schooling that efforts to expand schooling – through providing reduced facilities like the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) in Madhya Pradesh and its adoption by several states in the country – get their energy. But as existing research highlights, and this research reconfirms, access to schooling does not necessarily transform schools into inclusive spaces for marginal children. While the EGS might have been conceptualised as an idea to have schooling reach habitations that were formerly outside the reach of schooling, it is increasingly being adopted as an ideal strategy to educate marginal children in

urban cities – Calcutta for example – as well as in rural pockets where increased enrolment in formal schools is being taken care of through the provision of these reduced schooling facilities.

In urban areas, as this research has made clear, the cultural hegemony of private schooling frames poor parents' interactions with the government primary school. The growth rate of private aided and unaided schools in urban areas has been phenomenal in the past decade (De *et al.* 2002) and the state has implicitly encouraged this growth through its absence of efforts to improve the image of local government primary schools. Primary school teachers as well as senior educational bureaucrats interviewed as part of this research spoke of state efforts to reduce its fiscal and bureaucratic commitment to primary schooling. The idealisation of the EGS model of schools as well as the castigation of permanent teachers need to be viewed in this light. This is particularly insidious when one considers that the type of private schooling that these *dalit* parents can afford, as seen in Ujjain, have barely adequate facilities and very poorly paid and unqualified teachers as well. But the lure of private schooling amongst these *dalit* parents is, as a principal in Ujjain aptly summed up, 'because children wear uniforms and speak a few words of English'.

This cultural hegemony of private schooling will have to be factored into state decision making about primary education, not as a way of easing out of their commitment through pointing to this parental 'demand' for private choice, but through recognising that private schooling continues to be outside the reach of most poor parents. Also, given the increasing loss of stable livelihoods of these poor *dalit* parents, it is increasingly unlikely that these parents will be able to afford quality private schooling. Further, and paradoxically, the state will be injecting funds into a so-called public sector in education, the quality of which is likely to be derided and devalued by the very groups at whom it is targeted. Moreover, families make a choice to send one child to private school and this choice is usually gendered with the male sibling being preferred for private schooling. Given all of the above, if the state means to seriously transform government primary schools into inclusive spaces it would need to improve the quality of schools within a framework that takes seriously this threat of private schools and the cultural power they wield over these communities.

## Notes

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1. We use the term '*dalit*' in this article to refer to groups classified within the category of Scheduled Castes.
2. '*Adivasi*' is the indigenous term for 'tribal' populations.
3. The fieldwork sites are in the states of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, where a total of 16 schools/cohorts have been selected across two districts in each state. In this article we will report on three sites out of the four in which work has taken place, owing to constraints of space.
4. *Jatis* are the numerous subcastes, which vary by region. Rules of interaction and occupational and social mobility operate at the level of the *jati*, rather than the wider bureaucratic caste classifications.
5. *Korkus* supplement their subsistence farming through migrating twice a year to work for larger landowners in harvesting the wheat and soybean crop. This usually includes the school-going child, either in the harvesting or requires him/her to remain at home to look after younger siblings. The migration in April coincides with the year-end exams in school, thereby forcing a lot of *korku* children to miss the exam and therefore fail the grade. Repeated failing in addition to extensive corporal punishment are the most frequent reasons cited by *korku* children for discontinuing school.
6. The category OBC or 'Other Backward Castes' refers to the official categorisation of castes.
7. The Lower House of Parliament in India's federal bicameral political structure.
8. Working as permanent and/or contractual employees, these *valmiki* parents are viewed by the teachers at the school as drinking excessively, which members

## References

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of the community say they do in order to keep the stench at bay while cleaning latrines.

9. In Ujjain, the LPS teachers also enrolled in the third grade children who had studied until the fifth grade in private school. These were children who had not been permitted to write the fifth grade state examinations in these private schools, as they could not pay the required fees.
10. Moreover, given that state board exams in the tenth grade have been largely reduced to the fine art of memorising a 'guide' that contains questions and answers on a particular subject, parents could rest assured that either the tuition or the 'guide' would come to the aid of their child even if the school's academic standards were lacking.
11. In post-independence, India teachers play a major role in the collection of various census data, help with government literacy drives, provide information of various housing and livelihood loans, etc. Teachers interviewed as part of this research also complained about the load of extra academic work, particularly the keeping of records tied to school-based government incentives to ensure the sustained enrolment of poor children.
12. Krishna Kumar (1991) records how the colonial bureaucracy reduced the previous independent functioning of teachers within indigenous schools through introducing teacher-training, linking aid to the use of government textbooks and a predetermined syllabus, and through introducing a centralised examination system to determine scholarships for students.
13. In several states in India (including MP) there is a temporary freeze on hiring permanent teachers and discourses around fiscal constraints to universalise elementary education have legitimated the hiring of unqualified teachers on a temporary basis.
14. Given that neither the educational qualifications required, nor the temporary employment and low wages are going to attract adequately qualified persons into government primary schools.

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