

## 1 Introduction

'My child studies day and night but I don't understand it when he still continues to fail. The reality is that my child is not *able* to learn.' This lack of ability that Kaluram, an *adivasi* (tribal) father, is troubled by here, is an intrinsic absence of skills that might have enabled his child to perform better in school. As educational practitioners and researchers, this internalisation of innate failure by an *adivasi* father would be troubling and we could potentially analyse this lament through two varied though interconnected processes. In India, research on the schooling experiences of poor children have largely focused their analysis on quality of education issues that include costs of 'free' schooling, teacher's ability to transact curriculum and resource equity issues (Banerji 1997; Rampal 2002; Tilak 1998). The disparities in educational quality that these studies have revealed have helped explain why children are 'pushed-out' rather than 'drop out' of school (PROBE 1999). The second lens – less used in the Indian context – to probe Kaluram's lament would be to focus on the processes that affect the creation of schooled identities among marginalised children and utilise this to understand the complexities that underpin this feeling of lack. Given this felt absence of skills, what would 'inclusion', integration into this school space continue to signify for Kaluram's son? To what extent do existing discourses on social exclusion problematise 'inclusion' and its effects on the identity–creation of marginal, formerly 'excluded' individuals and groups?

The effort in the article is to engage discourses of social inclusion and exclusion through experiences from the field that push our present understanding of these concepts out of a convenient dichotomised categorisation, into a complex, more subtle reading of the experiences of marginalised children in school. I utilise the experiences of *adivasi* (tribal) children in government schools in a village in Harda district, Madhya Pradesh (see Balagopalan and Subrahmanian, this volume, for more details on the case study) to discuss the complex and often interrelated factors that affect an *adivasi* first-generation learner's experience in school. The article argues that while some of the overt discrimination that the first-generation learner continues to experience in school can be addressed through certain policy reform processes of the

# 'Neither Suited for the Home nor for the Fields':

## *Inclusion, Formal Schooling and the Adivasi Child*

S a r a d a B a l a g o p a l a n

modern state, there are certain fundamental exclusions that get reinforced for this learner through his/her deeper insertion into formal schooling. These exclusions are intrinsic to the history of Indian modernity and its reliance on the institution of formal schooling to exercise a 'civilising' role among marginalised populations.

This article is divided into two sections. The first section is devoted to highlighting examples of overt discrimination that confront the *adivasi* child once he/she enrolls in school. The larger policy reform – as well as the expanded definition of social inclusion for the south – that this research project aims to influence can quite easily facilitate certain formal changes within the existing functioning of schools, which could potentially address these instances of overt discrimination. This could be done through legal recourse as well as through changing institutional structures that currently enable teachers to carry out as well as condone discrimination against children. However, the second section, while discussing the needs and desires of parents for formal schooling, also highlights the ways in which these parents and children continually internalise constructions of themselves and their *adivasi* community as inherently lacking *vis-à-vis* the demands of formal schooling. The fundamental disjunctions between formal schooling and the everyday lives of *adivasi* children that this section focuses on is an attempt to recognise that processes of exclusion, intrinsically tied to formal schooling, often exceed the state's attempt to redress these through policy reform processes.

## 2 'These children are slow': overt discrimination within formal schooling practices

This article draws on the research reports and field diaries of the two researchers based in the village – Yogesh Malviya and Bal Kishen Sharma – who focused on the primary and middle schools in this village (see Preface as well as Balagopalan and Subrahmanian, this volume, for details of the research). This predominantly tribal village in Harda district of Madhya Pradesh serves as the market hub for the 20–30 smaller tribal villages in its vicinity. In addition to the Korkus, the village has a small percentage of Gonds (another tribe),

Muslims, *brahmins* (upper caste Hindus) and Kahars (an OBC caste). While the tribal populations are mainly engaged in agricultural work, the non-tribal populations own local provision stores and tea shops. Most of the land owned by Korkus is not irrigated, forcing them to migrate twice in a year, thereby disrupting their children's schooling. The primary school in this village was started in 1961 and the middle school in 1984. Most of the teachers in both schools are non-tribal upper-caste Hindus. The primary school does have an *adivasi* principal, but her influence in making the school an 'inclusive' space for these *adivasi* children is minimal if not non-existent (see Balagopalan and Subrahmanian, this volume).

Field reports from both schools discuss the multiple levels at which overt discrimination against *adivasi* populations takes place and affect not only teacher–student relations but also peer interactions. Teachers have particular perceptions about the 'educability' of *adivasi* students that influences their attitudes towards these children and adversely affects the amount of corporal punishment these children receive. In this village, teachers' narratives are unanimous across primary and middle schools about the 'slowness' of the *adivasi* child, on their being 'unclean' and on their parents 'drunkenness'. A teacher discussing *adivasi* children says:

These *adivasi* children do not have the time to bathe nor the ability to learn. Teaching them is not something everyone can do easily. It is not that they cannot learn. If man has to, he can even teach cows but it is just that it takes an immense amount of effort. First we need to stop these children in school from speaking the Korku language they speak at home. The things that we have to explain once or maybe twice to other children we need to explain these same things at least eight to ten times to these *adivasi* students. They are very slow. So even despite trying hard a large number of children still can't understand what is being taught and meanwhile the entire class has been slowed down because of them. Their parents are not able to help them at home, they don't even tell them to study. They just drink too much and send their children to the fields to graze the cows.

These above constructions of *adivasi* students affect the discursive practices that govern the everyday functioning of the school. These students are delegated the responsibility of keeping the school clean, which includes sweeping and swabbing the school on a daily basis. The discrimination underlying the specific tasks being allocated to *adivasi* students becomes apparent when we consider that these students are not allowed (within what is constructed as a privileged task) to serve water and tea to the teachers. Moreover, it is a *brahmin* boy who has the responsibility of locking up the middle school at the end of the day. There have been incidents in which the *adivasi* students have been publicly bathed by force by the teachers at the tube-well adjacent to the school. In addition, teachers very often explicitly deride students when they use the Korku language to communicate among themselves, forcing them to speak in Hindi instead. Within classroom transactions in which the main pedagogic technique utilised is reading aloud from Hindi textbooks, *adivasi* children seldom read in class and their homework often remains incomplete, which leads to excessive corporal punishment in the hands of the teacher.

The non-*adivasi* students at the school mostly eat and play among themselves, in their own endogamous groups, and they quite naturally and very often target *adivasi* children to ridicule with the teacher remaining a silent spectator. One incident observed during the course of the research involved a non-*adivasi* student who threw dirty water on an *adivasi* student saying, 'What does it matter you have not had a bath yet'. This was in the presence of the teacher who did nothing to stop the child. These non-*adivasi* children also clean the mouth of the tube-well after *adivasi* children have drunk water from it. Within the classroom as well these children usually sit in their own groups and seldom help each other across groups with classroom work. The teacher does not lead the class in any activities that would force them to engage outside of their own cohorts and there exists no extra curricular activity in both schools that might have brought about some forced integration amongst students.

Within the above narratives, the teachers come across as discriminatory and insensitive and the

analysis of such behaviour lends itself to devising suitable policy responses to ensure better quality of schooling. These could potentially include making teachers more accountable for their actions as well as responsible for taking certain institutionalised proactive steps to make students feel included. However, we need to recognise that previous research has already made known the prevalence of teacher bias (Nambissan 2002; Sujatha 2002) and that educational policy documents do contain language in which teachers as state functionaries are made conscious of their responsibilities to ensure equal rights and equal respect for all its citizens. Given this, are these research findings just a case of non-implementation of particular state policies? Or are these discriminatory practices intrinsically tied to ideologies that are constitutive of modern schooling? By this is meant that schools have historically functioned, and continue to do so, as spaces within which the state carries out its modernisation functions to make citizens out of its 'populations' (Foucault 1991). And in doing this – as the following section makes clear – it ideologically validates certain ways of being, while devaluing others. This devaluation, as the self-constructions of Korku students and their parents make clear, exceeds our present understandings of inclusion as intrinsically linked to social policy reform.

### 3 'Neither suited for the home nor for the fields': the disjunctions between formal schooling and the everyday lives of the *adivasis*

Normative constructions of 'tribal' populations take for granted their inhabiting different lifeworlds, distinct cultures that are in large part outside of modernity and its attendant political and economic imperatives. This has often generated research around tribal children that has highlighted their childhood socialisation experiences and is persuasive about how the preservation of their cultural practices would require their continued isolation. However, given that tribal populations in India are already entrenched in or are in increasing danger of becoming enmeshed within market economies of exploitation and opportunity, how do we begin to articulate and understand tribal

children's experiences with formal schooling beyond narratives of their cultural distinctness?

Although the large-scale entry of *adivasi* children into formal schooling is very recent and has been facilitated by state efforts to universalise elementary education, parents in the village recognise the significance of sending their children to formal school. The interview-narratives<sup>1</sup> of several parents reveal a local, historically nuanced rationale for school education as succinctly summarised by Kalu, a Korku parent, when he says, 'The speech of the school-going child changes and that is good. In school Korku children learn to speak in Hindi. They will be able to help with doing calculations while at home. If a person does not know Hindi then the *mahajans* [traders] will more easily exploit him.' Despite their interest, however, the quandary that confronts all of these parents – similar to what Kaluram narrates at the start of the article – is that their children are innately unable to learn and perform well in school. Therefore in this section, I would like to analyse Kaluram's narrative through exploring the 'cultural' space of the school. I do this in order to further problematise the social inclusion paradigm beyond the realm of evident policy prescriptions, as well as to critically shift the theoretical lens from its existing articulation of the distinctness of tribal traditions to recognising the distinctness of school culture and its attendant affects on the creation of subjectivities among tribal students and parents. This would require understanding the specific nature of Indian colonial modernity and democratic practice as one that is not premised on bourgeois hegemony as well as understanding the historical role the formal school plays in trying to rectify this absence.

Several post-colonial historians and anthropologists have discussed the social realities that govern democratic practice in India, pointing to the absence of a hegemony of bourgeois and liberal practices considered essential for the traditional functioning of a democracy (Chakrabarty 2002; Chatterjee 1997). Both cultural technologies of rule during colonialism as well as the nationalists' reactions to these<sup>2</sup> engendered the rise of a small indigenous elite who were part of civil-social institutions, well-versed in the norms of civil society, while the rest of society existed outside of this and were ushered into modern democratic norms through the independent

nation's adoption of a modern, liberal Constitution. Therefore, while electoral politics have allowed certain groups to challenge older hierarchies, the everyday functioning of Indian social relations has not become liberal in any recognisable way. In large part the cultural codes for the expression power and authority in everyday life are enmeshed in relations of domination and subordination that are far from civil. As Chatterjee states:

An important consideration in thinking about the relation between civil society and the state in the modern history of formerly colonial countries such as, for example, India is the fact that whereas the legal-bureaucratic apparatus of the state has been able, by the late colonial and certainly in the post-colonial period, to reach as the target of many of its activities virtually all of the population that inhabits its territory, the domain of civil-social institutions as conceived above is still restricted to a fairly small section of 'citizens'. This hiatus is extremely significant because it is the mark of non-Western modernity as an always incomplete project of 'modernisation' and of the role of an enlightened elite engaged in a pedagogical mission in relation to the rest of society (Chatterjee 1997: 31).

This *pedagogical mission in relation to the rest of society* that the nation's elites are engaged in, has extensively made use of the apparatus of the formal school to reach members of political society.<sup>3</sup> This pedagogical mission that characterises the functioning of Indian modernity is crucial to understanding the historical role that schools, as institutions of state, have been required to play in creating modern, bourgeois citizens out of its various 'populations'.<sup>4</sup> The history of modern schooling in India is intrinsically tied to the creation of a modern liberal self and can be traced to the policies of the colonial state and its need to create 'a class of interpreters' who would function between the state and the masses.

The East India Company Act of 1813 was the first act that allowed the governor-general, the highest colonial representative in India, to use £10,000 towards the education of natives. This money was not spent towards mass education but was rather devoted to creating, what Governor-General

Macaulay called, 'a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' (Macaulay 1972: 249). This 'filtration theory' which focused on providing a modern liberal education to a few of the colony's indigenous elites was achieved through a deliberate neglect of the vast network of vernacular schools that existed in colonial India. According to the 1837 Adam Reports on Indigenous Education there were at least 100,000 of these schools (DiBona 1983). These vernacular schools were usually a two-tier network which included *patshalas* which were community-based schools for the lower classes, and the Sanskrit schools or *tols* (as they were known in Bengal) for the upper-caste *brahmins* or the upper classes. While the lower castes were excluded from the learning of the Sanskrit and Arabic-Persian learning of the *tols*, the *patshalas* functioned as independent schools with their primary responsibility being to the community, and the teacher exercised control over what was to be taught as well as determined when a child had adequately learned a particular subject matter (Acharya 1994). However, the subsequent bureaucratic control of these vernacular schools by the colonial state in 1854, ushered in a modern uniform system of education which expanded, made natural and helped underpin the cultural space of formal schooling within modern, liberal understandings of the individual self.

By this is implied that underlying the culture of formal schooling in India are certain modern ideals of rationality and progress, within which *adivasi* populations get viewed as non-modern, or traditional. The dominant culture of modern schooling implicitly assumes that a school-going child is nurtured and inserted within a particular socio-cultural axis prior to his/her presence in school. This cultural axis, immersed as it is in this pedagogical function of the state, is interested in the child incrementally acquiring certain civil-social skills; absorbing a particular bodily discipline; becoming increasingly self-regulating and rational, and imbuing a work ethic that is invested in an imagined future career. The privileging of the above manifests itself in the school space through the functioning of a norm on the basis of which teachers acquire the legitimacy to delineate and classify students in relation to a 'natural' order (Foucault 1977).

It is therefore in relation to this modern natural order that Korku students in the village are viewed as lacking, are classified as being 'slow' and 'unclean'; very much within a standard 'deficit model' in which they have to reform, transform themselves to measure up to the norm. It is the non-modern *adivasi* as requiring reform that defines the practice of schooling. It is this reflection of the school's dominant view of them and their lack of certain skills that *adivasi* children internalise in their self-constructions as students. Nakun, a young Korku girl studying in the third grade at the primary school, rationalises this lack saying, 'Muslims and upper castes study well. Everybody in their community is educated. My parents are not educated. If my parents were educated perhaps I could have learned much more. But people in my community don't study well.' Nakun's self-construction as a student is deeply entrenched in the inferiorisation of her *adivasi* community. The modern school space quite naturally presumes that the 'ideal' human self is one that is intrinsically tied to modern world views and livelihoods and therefore anyone outside of these constructions is ascribed an identity within an axis of deviation even prior to his/her presence in school.

The hegemonic functioning of the idea of being modern as progress allows these upper castes who are more inserted into capitalist relations of production (as traders, shop owners), without being necessarily liberal, to construct the *adivasi* community as primordial. The 'culture' of the *adivasis* becomes a familiar trope that is produced among upper-caste teachers, students and their parents to understand the incapability of the *adivasi* child and the concomitant burden they are perceived as exercising on this institution. *Adivasi* parents within this axis of moral-political rationality can only be visualised in terms of a discourse of 'drunkenness' and 'disinterestedness' in their children's education. For tribal children and parents like Nakun and Kaluram, this creates an inevitable sense of shame and the internalisation of failure that they believe natural and self-created.

This failure of the tribal child to do well within the school space has further ramifications when we take into consideration another aspect of this hegemony of modernisation that is intimately tied

to formal schooling. This is namely that colonial modernity – devoted as it was to creating ‘a class of interpreters’ – helped constitute modern schooling as a space that privileges mental labour over manual labour. The qualifications formal education awards are popularly viewed as the conduit to ensuring the transformation of lives from exploitative physical labour to formal employment. Concomitantly, what this implies is that formal schooling has historically been constructed as a space in which manual labour is not only inferiorised but is considered unworthy of someone who has an academic learning<sup>5</sup> (Balagopalan 2002; Talib 1998). While this inferiorisation of manual labour, needless to say, fits in well with traditional caste hierarchies (see Subrahmanian, this volume), what is important to take note of here is the ways in which the modern formal school sediments these dichotomies fairly deeply as well. This divide also has its effects upon the self-constructions of tribal students with dire consequences for the *adivasi* community given both the increasing impoverishment of these communities and the larger power and financial networks that gaining a formal sector job involve.

In this village – in the past 40 years of the history of the school in the village – not one Korku has been able to get a job in the formal sector. Kaluram says, ‘In our family, Manohar studied until the 12th grade. But he wasn’t able to find a job after that because the jobs went to all the people who had money. It is only the people who have money who have jobs. Even if a poor man studies what work can he take up? He was not even able to set up a shop as that also required money. *Adivasi* parents don’t have the money to educate their children that is why villagers are scared of sending their children to school. Even if you spend money on them, teaching them, they do not get a job and they do not want to work in the fields anymore. They are neither suited for the home nor the fields. In so many years of the school’s existence in the village not even one Korku child has been able to get a job as a teacher.’

In the village economy in which the *mahajans*, or traders, continually exploit tribal labour in multiple ways, the teacher symbolises for Kaluram a formal sector job that is prestigious, secure and that which he would like his children to gain from

an education. But the lived reality of these jobs being non-existent to tribal graduates generates his critical analysis about why Korku parents fear sending their children to school. The symbolic distance that formal schooling creates from the world of manual labour is severely detrimental to *adivasi* populations, because their increasing dependence on short-term migration for subsistence requires their children to contribute to the work of harvesting grain twice a year.<sup>6</sup>

The increasing pauperisation of these communities within the economic policies of the neo-liberal state continues to make manual labour of these children integral to the subsistence livelihoods of their parents. What the fieldwork made apparent is that this does not in any way affect the *adivasi* parents’ interest and keenness in sending their children to school. But the ‘failure’ of their children in school, both to learn and to secure jobs even when they do manage to finish schooling, requires them to preserve the abilities and inclinations of their children towards manual labour. Therefore this larger ‘exclusion’ that formal schooling signifies – and as articulated by the *adivasi* parent when he says, ‘neither suited for the home nor the fields’ – is not one that the social inclusion paradigm as currently articulated easily accommodates. This is because the paradigm fails to adequately trace and therefore sufficiently theorise the historical trajectory of the power–knowledge axis that frames formal schooling. The argument in this article is that the equity issues that existing theories on social inclusion bring to the fore do not fundamentally question the discourses of modernity that underpin formal schooling nor the mental–manual labour divide inherent to it. Therefore if we take seriously both the desire of these marginalised populations for formal schooling as well as the functioning of the school as a modern space that is inherently disrespectful of the present and most probably future lifeworlds of these populations, then the contradictory compulsions that frame our engagement become apparent. The argument here is not that *adivasi* children should be kept outside of formal schooling given this historical trajectory. Rather, it is to point to a situation whose complexities cannot be easily classified into policy guidelines unless we begin to take seriously the larger power frameworks that shape the self-constructions, lives,

and livelihoods of the very populations we seek to include within the space of the school. Nor should this *adivasi* need for their children's productive labour imply support for what is a very common refrain in middle-class India, namely that these poor children need basic education and then vocational training. The choice of vocational training beyond elementary education is conceptually not in itself a flawed solution: the problem lies in it becoming within the current power nexus the naturalised solution for *only* poor children. Given that these children's lifeworlds are already indexed in physical labour this would only mean systemically ensuring their, as well as formal schooling's, further entrenchment within this manual–mental divide.

#### 4 Conclusion

It is widely understood that formal school exists as an institution within the modern state to create the desired rational citizen–subjects out of its diverse populations. Within this apparatus it has traditionally been upper-caste teachers who have been deployed to carry out this function of the state. Therefore in some ways schools have always acted as a space that has legitimated and made invisible upper-caste hegemony over marginalised populations. As this project has made clear, we can begin to redress this upper-caste hegemony through understanding the exclusions – in terms of discriminatory practices – that continue to frame the experiences of marginalised children in formal schools. This can be done through discourses of

rights, equity, equality, citizenship, etc. that draws the attention of policy makers to the continued disadvantages these populations face within existing state efforts to ensure their greater inclusion.

However, this policy approach relies on the mechanisms of state ignoring in large part the fact that the modernisation function of the state as carried out through schooling often generates intrinsic feelings of shame in the self-constructions of these same children. The modern school has therefore functioned as a prior effort to generate civil society through instructing its inhabitants in the ways of ideal citizenship. The social inclusion paradigm being fundamentally premised upon state, as well as civil society mechanisms to realise its ends, will have to factor in the irony that this dependence underscores. This can begin through understanding the functioning of Indian modernity not as an incomplete project in which certain civil–social institutions have either failed or require to be generated because this would in great part coincide with the modernisation project of the state. Instead through analysing Indian modernity as consisting of the domains of civil society and political society we can begin to question the hegemonic as well as situated workings of power within these domains. And through this, analyse effective local self-generated strategies – which might not necessarily fall within civil–social institutions or the discourse of rights as currently defined – to comprehensively address issues of educational equity.

#### Notes

1. The interviews were conducted as part of this research project between September 2001 and June 2002.
2. For more on the negotiated nature of the national modern as constructed by the nation's elites, read Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton University Press 1996).
3. It is important to clarify here that Chatterjee's work (1997) is in large part devoted to critiquing *an understanding of non-Western modernity as the incomplete project of modernisation*. He does this through dividing the two domains that encompass Indian modernity into civil society and political society. While the first refers to the enlightened elite who are already modern within Western bourgeois standards, the second refers to those who lie outside this domain of modern civil society. The ease with

which the latter can be read as *tradition* is avoided by him in his effort to understand ways of coping with the modern that might not confirm to Western bourgeois ideals and therefore he proposes a notion of political society as lying between civil society and state.

4. I use Michel Foucault's (1991) idea of 'populations' here to refer to the ways in which modern government functions – economic policy, law, bureaucratic mobilisation – require the classification, enumeration and description of different inhabitants of a country into a set of discrete 'populations', in order to use a certain set of rational tools to reach these as targets of state policy.
5. In my ethnographic research with street children in Calcutta, India, I found that discourses of becoming

human or 'manush' were intrinsically linked to formal schooling, while 'khatni' or a life of exploitative, manual labour was thought to await those who did not attend formal school. This binary of *khatni* and *manush* discourses – discourses present in the wider, modern Bengali society and its complex colonial history – were those within which street children framed their learning experiences.

6. In this village, this short-term migration takes place twice a year, once during October/November for the soyabean harvest and then during April for the

wheat harvest. These migrations last at least a month, and even though children might not necessarily migrate, their attendance in school is drastically reduced during this period because they have to help with household chores in the absence of several other family members who have migrated. This migration in large part contributes to the children dropping out of school as the school's exam calendar coincides with the April migration (see Balagopalan and Subrahmanian, this volume).

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