Chapter Five:
Idea of School: Negotiations, Experiences and Hopes

The concluding paragraph of the previous chapter has presented two narratives that provided a glimpse of the manner in which the community contested the idea of schooling their children. These expressions may seem to indicate a ‘lack of willingness’ towards (or rather a disinterest in) school education and a “change”. I was introduced to this narrative of ‘lack of willingness’ in several ways from the various actors. It became more prominent when I attempted to understand how the NGO staff, the schoolteachers and the SSA personnel, made sense of the state of affairs at the school. While all these functionaries and informants highlighted that the problem was much more severe in the case of people from oppressed castes, they explained it generally - in terms of a simple matter of intrinsic will or ‘tendency’ (which in their view was either there or not there). Paradoxically, the same informants looked at the achievements of the UEE as absolute, and which in their view would increasingly solve the problem irrespective of the community’s non-willingness. While the initial interactions with the community also in a way supported the view that the State personnel and the NGO staff held, gradually a more complex picture emerged. This generated a question about how the ‘community’ visualised schooling and the aspirations and expectations it had from it. Stated differently, it led to probing the concept of ‘worth’ of schooling from the standpoint of the community and the functions that people experienced the school performing in their lives.

This chapter is an attempt to inquire into the above context and questions. For this purpose, it is organised in three broad sections. The first seeks to explore the narrative of the unwillingness of the community. It begins by introducing the manner in which I was introduced to this narrative while working with the NGOs in the field. It presents how the workers of the NGO who themselves belonged to the community, etched out this description. The section further describes the State functionaries’ perspective in the context of the school and the community accessing it. It focuses on how the idea of ‘schemes’ and ‘provisions’ came to be involved in the concept of ‘school’ and schooling, and shaped the functionaries’ perspectives. The second section locates the
school in the community, and presents some ways in which the people negotiate with the various institutional demands. It traces how the State schemes, the varied expectations of the school and the experiences with the system influence the people’s idea of school and school education. The third section attempts to briefly outline some prominent expectations of the community from the school that are shaped by the ‘traditions’ associated with the institution. It also presents the children’s aspirations from the school and how their ‘hopes’ are framed. If one imagines institutional education as a social/public good, then the questions that the chapter seeks to explore would include – What does schooling offer? What do the people expect and aspire from schools? How do these two interact and shape the idea of school? How the service providers (NGO, Teachers, and State) perceive this situation? How do the people visualise the State school?

5.1. Questioning the ‘will’

The PROBE (1999) had highlighted the willingness of the marginalised to send their children to school as against the ‘general’ perception or the ‘myth’ in official circles of their being apathetic towards schooling. The report calls it ‘convenient rationalisation of low levels of schooling’ (p. 14). Velaskar (2003) and Subrahmanian (2005) also highlighted this ‘myth’. The work that I did led to a similar finding. However, building on such works, I attempted to make sense of how such perceptions and willingness are situated in everyday contexts and how they may be constituted. In this exploration, I engaged with the varied institutions (the school, SSA and NGO) and stakeholders – the schoolteachers, the SSA personnel, the NGO workers and the community in the field.

5.1.1. The NGO’s narrative

As my entry points were the NGOs, the introduction to the varied and often conflicting perceptions about schooling began with the process of engagement with their workers. The interactions with Ms. Kavita, Jagwati and Neetu, introduced me to a ‘belief’ that they held – a belief that there was some general apathy in how community thought about the need for schooling their children. This apathy, Ms.
Kavita stated, “… is the main reason why our work is not going well.” She meant that her NGO’s work does not seem to be ‘flourishing’ (like that of similar organisations) as the ‘community’ was disinterested in schooling. Jagwati and Neetu also drew several parallels to the attitudes of their parents and that of those who did not send their children to school. Jagwati said, “My parents were also illiterate but they ensured that I go to school. However, I find it very difficult to convince the parents of these children.” Neetu added, “… even if you are able to convince, there is no guarantee that they [children] would come.” In such interactions, it appeared necessary to understand what the NGO staff thought ‘convinced’ parents and what in their view constituted the ‘apathy’ or ‘disinterest’.

a. How to convince the community

As I observed how Jagwati, Neetu and Saroj convinced the community, it emerged that all of them repeated the same narrative (i.e. that did not diverge in its substantive content). It appeared as though all three had rote-memorised it. Neetu and Jagwati confirmed. Neetu said, “… actually when we join, we are told by Kavita madam what to say (to the parents) so that they send their children to our school… while working we repeat it so many times…” The highlights of what was said while convincing the people were ‘compressed’ clearly by Jagwati in an interview:

Our school takes no fee. With us [hamare yahan] you get food also.
We give dress, books and bag. You do not have to give us anything;
ot even the janampatri. It is so nearby; the child can come by
himself/herself. It starts at one in the afternoon so the child can do the
work in the morning and come. Afterwards we get the child enrolled in
the big school as well, so you are saved from the trouble. You will not
get these benefits anywhere!

These were the narratives that Ms. Kavita trained the workers in, in which money,
work engagement, bureaucratic procedures and distance from the school were seen as
major constraints that kept the community out of school. At the same time food,
uniform and other tangibles were understood as being capable of working as the
‘incentives’ for bringing the community to their school. The workers, commonly internalised this vision sketched by the NGO leadership, as a shared meaning.

What is peculiar about this ‘internalisation’ in this case was that the NGO workers themselves had similar life experiences as that of the ‘community’ in question. Jagwati, Neetu and Saroj were born and brought-up in the vicinity (a better off habitation in M Block). All three were first generation school-goers in their respective families. However, while they described the ‘community’ in narratives like those stated above, they also distanced themselves from it. As stated earlier, they cited different kind of parental attitude towards education vis-à-vis that of the community. While critiquing the parents for being apathetic towards education, they described their parents as ‘exceptions’ and being more ‘aware’ and internally prepared for betterment. Neetu said, “When someone doesn’t want to come, at the most we can talk. If this does not work, we cannot do anything. Minds do not change. My parents always wanted my good that’s why they sent me to school.” An act of distancing (in terms of interpreting their personal experience) was involved in this narrative dyad. Along with a perceived separation, it also involved a ‘doing good’ imagination/construction of their work.

This became more prominent when the NGO workers described the school as “Hamara School”. The expression indicated an ‘us’ and ‘they’ vision in which in apparent ways the community workers were ‘trained’ at the NGO. Instead of ‘using’ the affiliations of the community workers for a critical engagement with the community, the NGO assumed a role that proliferated the distance between the workers and the community. In this process the NGO also defined the community within the rubrics of ‘seekers of petty benefits’ who are not willing unless they are offered incentives.

However, each community workers’ way of implicating the ‘apathy’ was different. For Jagwati, it was something that she thought needed to be addressed by regular intervention, for the others it worked as a way to rationalise their own disinterest for the work they did.
When parents refused to send the child to the NGO school, the community workers invariably said,


This interaction brings out two crucial things. One, that there was a perception (or understanding) that for the community a child’s safety was a concern, and that the family would feel confident if the child was accompanied by some other children from the same community or home. Second, this narrative was based on a given understanding that children in the community do not really “learn” anything in their daily lives out of school. Thus the community life, in general, was seen as deprived not only in terms of poverty of income but also in terms of learning; which itself was one major constituent of ‘the impoverished’ life. In doing so, learning was also tacitly defined. The NGO ‘school’ offered only ‘some learning’ over ‘nothing’.

For me, this was an initial introduction to how the concept of ‘worth’ was played-out in the everyday contexts. The category of the NGO school was used to define learning by pitting it against what was referred to as ‘wandering here and there aimlessly’. Education was presented as an instrument that will enhance earning capacity of the child, and when it was made available for ‘free’ it should be availed. The NGO’s narrative was limited within this imagination, at all the levels. The NGO at Sitapuri, NLF, was also not very different – except that it had mastered the narrative. In fact the workers there stated that they worked with a ‘missionary’ approach.

**b. Perceiving the refusal**

The NGO’s staff also understood people’s refusal to send their children to school primarily as an outcome of poverty – and situated it within the rubrics of the ‘culture

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2 He will study with children of the neighbourhood. Brother – sister can also study together. As it is when he doesn’t study what does he do? Roams around here and there only no? When he’ll come there he will learn something at least. And if he studies then in future it will be of help to you only, you will feel good also that he learnt something.
of poverty’ (as described in Chapter Four). It was ascribed to a general “unawareness” and a “negative attitude” that poor parents have towards education. Jagwati shares in an interview,

Parents negative *soch pehle se hi rakhte hain*. They feel what will happen by going to school. They have not studied ever so they do not know how necessary the school is. Life *ban jati hai*. They send the child in the beginning, then minds change. If they do not send the child due to work it is still understandable, but when the child does not turn up just like that, then we feel angry… he [the child] will keep on wandering here and there uselessly, but how many schemes you may give he would not come to school… there are so many good schemes.

This seems to indicate that the people living there were being perceived as a collective entity or a ‘community’ with somewhat misplaced concerns. This narrative more or less is found at all levels in the NGO, diverging marginally. Ms. Kavita said,

From past year we have been trying to encourage the people to send them to school; some understand while some are unchangeable. We give them all kinds of benefits but they are not ready, we bring them and they dropout, the cycle continues, even in cases where they are not working.

While this perception sketches a picture of an uncivil and unchanging other, it also indicates a general way of assimilating the various ways of living and learning in the binaries of school and work. When children are neither at school, nor at work, it seems impossible for Ms. Kavita and the workers who learn from her, to make sense of what was happening – and in resolving this disequilibrium the common sense of the ‘unwilling other’ appeared convenient.

When the NGO workers were able to ‘convince’ families and bring children to school, the children appeared happy and expressed their excitement to go to school. Like Ashu (10) said, “I will also go to school and will speak *angrezi.*” However, in most cases their reactions changed on reaching the school. Many of them started crying as
soon as the school gate was closed after they had entered. Some ran towards the door and banged it; others stood still at a place. Some cried when they were made to sit down with the group, while some others did so as soon as they met Ms. Kavita. Some adjusted to this in a few days, while most ‘dropped-out’ in the next few days and didn’t return until the community workers went back to convince and bring them back. In some instances, where the children continued, it came across that they became somewhat docile and looked tired – some fell asleep while ‘classes’ were on. Ashu had joined school happily and continued to come to school for three weeks or so; however he suddenly stopped coming. When Jagwati and I went to his home, his mother did not allow us to talk to him. She explains,

... he will talk to you and then again go with you, but school is doing no good... earlier at least he used to do other things but now look at him; he is always tired and sleeping... if I ask he says ‘mann nahi kar raha’ and isolates himself. I have never seen him like this. Spare us and let him be.

Ashu also confirmed that he wouldn’t want to continue the school saying that he doesn’t feel like coming and that he feels unwell (“mann nahi karta; tabiyat theek nahi lagti. Aap jao.”). Jagwati, as a representative of the NGO, could not give a response to the mother on this matter. She said, “You must be asking him to do a lot of work; how can he feel tired? We don’t make anyone work at school.” Jagwati tried to negotiate with the mother,

You have already given time why don’t you continue?... We gave you so many things – bag, notebook, vardi and now you say that you won’t send the child. You shouldn’t have done that if you had to do this... if all in the locality do this then how will things work? Hamara school to band hojaega” [Our school will shut down].

The agenda of sustaining the centre and the work that the NGO workers did, came across in the manner in which this argument was presented. The ‘welfare’ paradigm of the NGO and the manner in which it was presented was unpacked in similar situations. The NGO also found it difficult to counter community’s resistance or
‘unwillingness’ to send older female children to school. They did not intervene much in this matter also. Even when three girl children dropped-out from the NFE centre, the matter was not pursued beyond a point. Ms. Kavita said in an interview,

... For girls it is a different kind of difficulty altogether; if something happens tomorrow, the blame will come on us; those children who are at the centre will also go. What can we do, they [parents] will have to think themselves... we also do not want to take this responsibility.

The NGO staff never engaged with the community at deeper levels in order to understand the people’s perception of education and views on the NFE centre. It expected the community to be fairly regular at the school, specifically because of the presumption that the work they do was for the people’s betterment and thought that their work and presence was perceived in the similar fashion. The NGO workers felt that when education is made available for free, the people should also show a positive willingness to access schools. Unless it was for work that the child was absent from the school, the entire NGO staff strongly disapproved the refusal to come to school. As I observed these ‘dialogues’, Illich’s (1968) idea appeared to be meaningful in making-sense of the situation.³

The community workers felt that giving examples of the success of the children from the slum would help in bringing people from community to the school. Jagwati frequently quoted Heena as an exemplar and said to the parents in the tanki-wali-jhuggi,

Look at this little girl [Heena]; she has been coming regularly to our school from past one year. Look at her confidence; in April we will get her admitted to the Corporation school; she will surely make her

³ Illich (1968) says:
To hell with good intentions. This is a theological statement. You will not help anybody by your good intentions. There is an Irish saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions; this sums up the same theological insight... I do have deep faith in the enormous good will of the U.S. volunteer. However, this good faith can usually be explained only by an abysmal lack of intuitive delicacy. By definition, you cannot help being ultimately vacationing salesmen for the middle-class “American Way of Life”, since that is really the only life you know ... You are ultimately-consciously or unconsciously – “salesmen” for a delusive ballet in the ideas of democracy, equal opportunity and free enterprise among people who haven't the possibility of profiting from these (p. 1-4).
parents proud soon; she is very smart… anybody can become like her at our school.

Heena’s example did bring some children to the centre. However, it did not retain them.

**Box 5.1.: Heena and poems**

Heena is a six-year-old girl born to a *gadiya lohar* family residing from past three years in the *tanki-wali-jhuggi*. I was introduced to her on the occasion when I lost the way in the cluster. She asked me, if I were a madam from Jagwati Didi’s school and on coming to know that I was, she delightfully shook hands with me and then lead the way out of the locality. She knew every detail of the clusters around, which were like mazes to me even after several visits.

Heena has been going to the NGO school from past ten months or so. She has not been enrolled in a regular school yet, as her documents are not ready. None of the community workers’ knows her by name, though they recognise her by face. Heena likes coming to the NFE for the reason that she wants to go to school, whereas her parents send her to school as they feel it is difficult to settle her at one place when she is at home.

She is one of the few students (out of 7 in 25) in the special training centre who can recite two poems and a song. One poem she knows is called ‘*Badal*’ [cloud] and the other is in English called “Twinkle-Twinkle”. The song is ‘*Sare jahan se achha Hindustan hamara*.’ She has a somewhat hoarse voice but she is the best singer at the school because she has learnt all these by heart. She sings twinkle-twinkle in a way that it is difficult to decipher individual words but she has caught the tune of the poem. She does not understand anything about the poem but likes it the most. She said, “I feel funny while singing this; it has actions as well.” About the rest of the poems and songs, she understands the words but cannot make meaning out of them. She said, “*Acha hai par usme alag awaz nahin nikalte, isko [Twinkle-Twinkle] bolne mein maza ata hai; gol-gol hai na*. What she is indicating has
something to do with the pronunciation of the words – of words that did not make meaning to her, but she found the tongue twisting that it involved intriguing.

Many children in the community feel that Heena is “very naughty and bossy”. As Hazari told me, “She is not a child; she is the grandmother of this entire area… once she slapped me so hard that I was unable to believe that she has such strength.” When Jagwati visited Heena’s Jhuggi, she ran-up to her and escorted her to the homes where out-of-school children could be located – she knew them all. She persuaded the parents of the children as well. “Send her with me; we will both come and go together and I will take care of her, don’t worry!” she said. Having gathered the children she shouted and made them line-up and led the line, which dispersed every now and then, and made her angry.

Heena is about to turn 7 years and her parents now want her to be more careful. The mother said, “You yourself are a woman and you know the dangers… most children in our community suffer the fate at such young ages. Some have disappeared suddenly; we never came to know whether they ran away or were taken away or what happened to them. One of them returned after 3 months and says that he doesn’t remember anything. Look at her [Heena], she doesn’t listen to me. Her actions are such that she herself invites trouble. In the school she will be in front of your eyes, but you never know what may happen on roads… we want her to be at home when she grows a little older.”

While this was how the mother explained the case, Jagwati in an interview said that as the girls grew older there is a fear that they would abscond with the males in the neighbourhood. This brought a bad name to the family as the children in the neighbourhood were considered akin.

The NGO was aiming to achieve the targets within such perceptual framework about the community. The pressure of ‘targets’ surpassed the concerns of the community and the idea of betterment. Although, the community workers themselves had an affiliation with the localities where the work was going on, instead of being sensitised
to the lives of the people they were being trained into a different kind of social distance from the community. The NLF was different in the sense that it had already achieved the targets with a more homogeneous community (in terms of religion, region, identity and occupation) – but how these targets were achieved was narrated as if the NGO had played a ‘divine’ role in improving the conditions of life of the community. More than the community’s education, the community workers’ perception (about their own self and the people) was implicated in this process. This matched the accounts of Pawar’s (1980) experience with ‘education’ (as described in Chapter One). The situation looked like that where an external intervention shaped how the educated members of the community perceived the life around. This led to a situation where the ‘fraternal bonds’ (Ambedkar, 2002) were used and implicated in various ways.

5.1.2. State’s perception: Functionaries’ belief
How ‘the State’ perceived the community, came across in various ways in interactions at the school with the school staff and with the people working at the SSA. In a more explicit form, the entrance gate of the school itself communicated the vision of the State school regarding what would bring people from the community to the school. A picture of the school gate is presented below.

The School Gate

Nagar Nigam Prathamik Pratibha Vidyalaya, E 5, M Block: Entrance
The school gate says:

**Come let us go to school**

- Computer education, Free education
- Monetary incentive for children from minority
- Monetary incentive for scheduled caste, tribe children, insurance scheme for children
- Motivation for girl students, free books
- Free midday meal, uniform, bag, *Laadli*⁴ scheme
- Merit scholarship, English education

Apart from computer education (for which there was no provision at the school) and English education, the list did not have anything to indicate what a child would experience at the school, what she would ‘learn’ or what the ‘academics’ would constitute. In an interview, Mrs. Alpana (school incharge) told me that the contents written on the gate were pre-decided by the UEEM, which funded the whitewashing and ‘designing’ the school walls as learning aid⁵ (BaLA). Regarding the gate, Mrs. Alpana elaborates,

… you know these people only want these schemes and all, so we say that… just a fist-full children have been sent to study and in some time they also realise that they cannot study with these children in this environment and shift to the private schools which are better in all aspects… we all are wasted here with all our qualifications with these children.

In Mrs. Alpana’s view, the teachers catered to a community which was not interested in ‘educating’ the children. It is not that what they say was a baseless perception emerging from an ‘inherent’ disregard for the community. A deeper engagement and inquiry brought to the fore how this disregard is constructed in interactions with the community. This chapter would attempt to describe on this aspect a little later, while

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⁴ An incentive scheme (including cash deposit and accumulation in a bank account) for promoting parents to educate their girl child until the completion of senior secondary school.

⁵ The school walls had some pictures painted on it all through the corridor. The pictures pertained to alphabets in English, Hindi *varnamala*, Mathematical signs and tables, and pictures indicating the basics of physical hygiene.
Chapter Six would focus on how it was factored in the conception of ‘teaching’ among the teachers.

The views of the SSA personnel (at both the state and the national levels) were also not very different from that of the NGO workers and the schoolteachers. However, these perceptions were dependent upon the latter’s account of the situation, given that the SSA machinery did not interact with the community directly. Mr. Mehta, SSA personnel, sounded helpless when he asked me as I interviewed him,

Mr. Mehta: You are a researcher of education from CIE; you tell me what should we do? We have taken all steps to ensure that children come to school… our data says that there are very less out-of-school children… but I know the situation… how do we ensure attendance?

I: There are several schemes to ensure enrolment…

Mr. Mehta [interrupting in between]: Schemes only make parents enrol… Teachers tell us nobody wants to send their child to schools except for the schemes. Teachers themselves are unwilling. Would your research help us in this context? I know it has to do with the community’s indifference to education – but how do we mend that?

Mr. Mehta concerns looked like an expression of a disequilibrium that he experienced as a person working in a State project for education, when he observes how the schemes in a way amplified and more clearly brought-out the ‘apathy’ of the community towards schooling. This disequilibrium appeared to have emerged from the gap between the mandates, which are conceived in a ‘solving-the-problem’ or project mode, and the complexity of the ‘ground reality’.

Irrespective of the dilemmas that Mr. Mehta faces, he continues to discharge his duty as a ‘government servant’, and says, “I have to do my duty so I stop using my mind after a point.” The national component of the SSA continues to train him and the other personnel to meet the goals of quality education without taking cognisance of these disequilibrium(s). Mr. Mehta recalls of the appraisal meetings (PAB) to prepare for which his SPD takes everybody to task – and feels that those are the toughest times
where every single number counts. Now that the targets of the ‘numbers’ are nearly met in the case of Delhi (with UEE nearly achieved), the training (or orienting) revolves around the vocabulary of ‘outcomes, processes and relationships’, in which the state SSA teams in-turn train their subordinates and the schoolteachers.

The national SSA team of consultants, work within the framework of the curriculum that the NCERT develops, and articulate these outcomes, processes and relationships within it. They feel that if the state SSA teams and schoolteachers implement things properly, the targets of quality would be met and the schools would change for good. A resource person in a national level SSA workshop shares in a conversation: “… We have very disappointing teams, they themselves need to be trained… then things would change for sure… when I had joined things were rather bad but now there is an improvement, at least they [the state teams’ representatives] have acquired a basic vocabulary and tricks of ‘how to do’ things from the workshops.”

Mr. Walia (personnel at the SSA national component), puts it somewhat differently in an interview, “How would things change? The SSA teams are indifferent and are hardly concerned, they just do their jobs… Unless they understand and are willing to change, nothing will change… how will community change?” The SSA team/personnel in principle (appeared to) avoid ‘blaming’ the community. The ‘educational theory’, in which most of them were trained, made it a taboo. “I have also read what you have read, and I also empathise with the community”, said Mr. Walia. In both, Mr. Walia’s and Mr. Mehta’s view, the overall system the middle level delivery mechanism was failing or lagging. They both counted themselves as ‘exceptions’ to the ‘norm’ that they encountered during the everyday practice as parts of the middle level systems of delivery.

Their views almost completely converged with that of Banerjee (2011), where she presents the case of primary education in Bihar where the educational demand from

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6 This observation is based on my engagement with SSA. While I was pursuing this study, I had participated in four SSA workshops in various capacities - as an observer, for documenting the workshops, and facilitating sessions concerning CCE and development of guidelines etc. The purpose was to make an attempt to observe closely the perception and the ways in which the work is carried out.
the community exists and so does the apportionment of resources from the top – but the non-efficient performance of the middle functionaries creates a paradoxical situation. However, as I met them over a period, contradictions in the views of Mr. Walia and Mr. Mehta emerged in subtle ways, when they could only explain the situations through community’s lack of will. Mr. Walia stated,

Had I been at the place of these people [states’ SSA teams], I would have thought the same… when one would encounter the reality at the school entire theory goes down the drain… when you see nothing changes despite all kinds of programmes then what would you do? I understand the compulsions of life and everything, but a lot depends on a person’s internal will.

All the interactions appeared to be a part of a larger cycle of blame that was constituted by an explanation of ‘lack of willingness’ on the part of the immediate subordinate. It also brought out a sense of entrapment in the philosophy and vocabulary of ‘schemes’. The schemes that were designed with the particular objective of enhancing enrolment, are working well towards this objective. However, they do not seem to do anything beyond enhancing the enrolment – the social reality does not seem to be ‘responding’ [as Mr. Mehta said, “zameeni vastavikta to wahi hai”]. However, these schemes have generated a perceptual framework and image of the community as that of a social group which looks-up to school for momentary instrumental purposes – as a day care for the children and as a distribution mechanism. In the community as well, the schemes appeared to be in the process of re-organising the meaning of the school and the idea of functions that it is supposed to serve.

In fact, in the course of doing the study, I attempted to understand how the schemes worked at the school. An account of the same is presented in the Annexure 5(1). From these observations it appeared that there was not only a divide between the ‘policy’ and the practice concerning these schemes, there was also a field of politics involved, that had a bearing on the ‘provisioning’ for the children in the margins. Such politics
around the schemes appeared to work in tandem with the larger official narrative of achievement of the UEE targets, which in turn appeared illusive (in the case of Delhi at least). There were several significant contradictions in the numbers and records regarding the schemes, the UEE, number of out-of-school children and the like, and generated a space where several arbitrary practices prevailed (one is discussed below in the Box 5.2). In a way, this may also enable in understanding what may be (and is) usually qualified as community’s ‘lack of willingness’ to send children to school.

**Box 5.2.: The ‘number’ of SC/ST/Minority children**

There was a significant contradiction in the school records and practice in the context of counting of the schoolchildren for the varied scholarship schemes. This related to the mismatch between the number of children availing the scholarship schemes provided by the State for SC/ST children\(^7\) and the actual number of SC children at the school. The school records showed that there were only 52 children availing of the scheme. As I talked to the schoolteachers and some parents to understand the scheme and the situation, I was told that around 80% of the children attending the school were from the scheduled castes and OBCs. However, their parents either did not have the caste certificates (against which the schemes were available), or they were not ‘notified’ in Delhi, which complicated the process of obtaining the certificate (see Appendix 5(1)). In fact, Bagri/Vaghri caste, one of the most prominent castes in the area, does not figure in the list of SC/ST notified by the State of Delhi\(^8\).

For the people who have not been residents of Delhi before 1951, getting caste certificates is more cumbersome. Those who have migrated to Delhi after 1951 (a close reading of the Appendix 5(1) would reveal that they are considered to be migrants) would essentially require a caste certificate of their father to apply for a certificate for themselves, and a variety of other documents. A separate caste

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\(^7\) Rs. 600 per annum for ones who secure at least 55% per cent marks in annual examination (from the year 2011-12 the percentage requirement has been rolled back and the scholarship amount has been increased to Rs. 1000 per annum), and Rs. 100 per month for 10 months or Rs. 1000 per annum for purchasing stationery to those who had more than 70 per cent attendance. These schemes are available to families with income less that Rs. 2 lakhs per annum.

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Certificate is needed for every member of the family.

Das’s (2004) presentation of the signature of the State appeared meaningful in understanding the purposes that the official documents as technologies of the State serve, and in seeing school as a ‘checkpoint’ for defining the nature of a person’s citizenship and identity (Poole 2004). Some parents were struggling to secure these to avail various schemes for their wards and families, some were unaware, and some did not want to put much effort. This contradiction becomes important not only because several children from the marginalised caste groups were being ‘excluded’ from their entitlements, but also because the provision of education in itself was ‘adjusted’ in this light. How provisions may be structured and still may be propagated as ‘good provisioning’ comes to the fore in this situation.

Although, I did not engage in an in-depth analysis of the numbers and the meanings they communicate, such brief glimpse of the scenario (Annexure 5(1)) enabled in visualising how quality of schooling diverges in practice from the standards set by the policies, and how it may construct the idea of a State institution in the community. The discussions may appear misplaced in the chapter, unless the reader contextualises this in the meaning that these ‘schemes’ communicate – particularly in a situation where these are presented as ‘promises’, or ‘guarantees’, offered ‘in return’ for community's investment of willingness and/or time in schooling. The questions that emerged at this juncture were: What does the State communicates through these data and schemes? How well do these represent State’s achievements? Why was there a mismatch between the data gathered by various agencies, and between the reality and the official accounts? Who would be ‘willing’ to come to the school in the given set of circumstances? How (if at all) do these data also become a way of shaping the meaning of quality of schooling? Is such provisioning by the State’s also a way of abdicating the concerns for quality of schooling made available to the marginalised? In this context, it appeared to be a situation where Ambedkar’s (2004) idea that the rights are protected by the moral conscience of a society much more than the law, fitted well.
5.2. Locating the school in the community
The initial visits to the slum clusters and the transit camps brought out that there was a significant number of children who were not going to school for some reason or the other. As Jagwati and Neetu called it, the ‘survey’ that the organisation Prakriti did (in which I also participated) involved a census of the 2 JJ colonies, unrecognised slum clusters, two transit camps and footpath dwellings located in and around the area. It was done in phases that involved working in one location for a week, which included gathering the demographic data, talking to parents and children, convincing them to join the NGO centre and going back to them when they did not turn-up. Through these visits, several principal informants and the clusters where I could work were identified. I was also introduced to the variations in the views that people had about schooling, their perceptions about education and their experiences with it. It in a way helped in unpacking the rubric of ‘lack of willingness’ that the State functionaries and others universally applied to the ‘community’. Though there were basic conceptual similarities in the narratives of the people in the context of schooling, there were differences in the way relevance of schooling was seen. With a slight change in the socioeconomic status of the setting, there was a shift in how going to school was evaluated and prioritised. I could map two prominent scenarios. One was where the idea of schooling was summarily rejected. Second was where school enrolment was prompted by some peculiar reasons. In both these cases the image of school and its functions was central.

5.2.1. Image of school and its functions
During one of my interactions with Teekam’s neighbour Kanti, we argued about the need for enrolling his three children in school. He was a single father whose wife had left home a year ago. He had a small bidi-gutka corner on the pavement near the ring-road from which he earned around Rs. 200 on a good day. In general seemed...
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convinced that there was no need for schooling children. His two children were around six to seven years old but had not started going to school. Somehow one day Kanti became curious to know about what the schools offer apart from teaching:

K: … Would they feed my children as well? I have heard it [Sarkar] gives food but only to some children

I: The sarkari schools do serve midday meal; it is for all children who want to have it

K: I can also feed my children; we are not bothered about food… but they are all growing-up… they run around… they feel hungry all the time… when they would get a rupee from here or there they buy something to eat. They eat all crap from here and there… my son has ‘worms’ in his stomach… what is served in the school?

I: Different things on different days; choley-chawal, khichdi, halwa… mostly rice – may be because it is easy to cook…

K: That’s good… if the sarkar itself does this much, then some tension is reduced. What else does it offer? Something after the school is over?

I: I did not understand your question

K: All this copy-pencil-food is okay; but there should be something afterwards [Lekin baad mein kuch to hona chahiye]

I: Like what?

K: Like some scheme to set-up a dhanda, or some job guarantee, or some return; otherwise how will one wait for so long, wapasi kuch to milna chahiye [one should get at least something in return].

Teekam who was also accompanying me, agreed to most of what Kanti said. The philosophy and vocabulary of schemes had come to be involved in both of their perception/idea of the school. In a way, it also described one form of meaning making of ‘sarkar’ and Kanti’s and Teekam’s imagination of it. The dispensation of schemes through various institutional mechanisms (here school) is prominent in the idea of a ‘good government’. What is implicit is that the rationale of schooling (or compulsorily accessing an institution) is based on an idea of ‘negotiation’ with the government. That is, ‘what does the government offer in return’ is a prominent
question that is weighed in taking a decision about sending a child to the State school. And in that there is an explicit question about the ‘worth’ of schooling. It appeared as though there was a lack of intrinsic worth that the two parents from the community saw in schooling. While it may indicate some kind of ‘apathy’ towards education, but there is a deeper and a more nuanced meaning to it, which I will discuss as the chapter proceeds.

How Heena’s mother conceives schooling or what she demands from schooling (see Box 5.1.) reflects the idea with which she sent her child to the NGO’s school/centre. A ‘fear’ and the concern for her female child’s safety, which was based on her experience of the social reality, guided her to agree to send Heena with Jagwati to the Gyan Jyoti project. The idea that the NGO centre was within the premises of a State school, gave the mother the ‘strength’ to arrive at the decision of sending the child to the project centre (or ‘school’). In fact, Jagwati understood this well, and she always highlighted that her NGO was a ‘sarkari sanstha’ and was run in a sarkari school\(^{10}\) (the one which was known in the area for its better quality). The involvement of the entity called ‘State’ was one of the prominent reasons due to which the NGO could at least get it 25 beginning learners.

However, if one looks at Heena’s mother’s narrative closely it will appear that the ‘school’ per se was only of secondary significance (if at all). Actually, the mother did not send Heena to a ‘school’ at all – she rather sent her to a walled premise where the children would be under a surveillance of women and under the ‘sponsorship’ of the State. What teaching-learning happened there didn’t seem to be a matter of concern. This became clearer when the question of ‘education’ (likhai-padhai) did not emerge in discussions with the mother over a period. When I explicitly asked on several occasions regarding what she thought about education, she did not address the issue and said something or the other that resembled her following argument:

> It’s okay you teach her something, it’s good for her. She is taken care of well is the best part… food, vardi, thaila such things are also

\(^{10}\) The Prakriti workers at times called their centre as ‘sarkari’ school (as it was almost entirely funded by the government).
there… my tension is lesser till the time she is at school… otherwise I will call children from here and there to bring her back.

She further said, “She has learnt some *gana-wana*, but what do we do with this? Even if she learns *padhai* what will change?”

There were many instances during the initial visits to the slums, in which the parents asked to enrol their younger toddlers in school instead of the older ones. These observations on the face value would indicate that a ‘school’, for the particular slum community, holds a different meaning from how it is idealised in general. This comes across in an observation where a two-year-old child was tied to a tap in a house, and the mother, engaged in domestic chores, enquires, “*kya school mein isko baitha loge?*” Regarding tying-up the child, she explains, “... he runs here and there and has fallen into a ditch once... fortunately he was rescued in time by another child... what do I do if I don’t tie him up?” I came across three more cases where children were physically tied to some object (or were entrusted with the older sibling – older siblings carrying younger toddlers on the side-waist was a usual sight). In another instance, in a discussion with a new migrant family to the *tanki-wali-jhuggi*, the mother shared,

> You know four of my children died before this son was born to me… I had a tough time during his delivery. *Ye na kam dimag hai* [mentally challenged]. He is unable to express anything and only sees and listens… he roams around the whole day; we do not beat or scold him – what is the merit in that? My younger girl is bright… fights with the father if he says anything to me… I am only concerned about this son – if he stays in school at least he will be indoors. I will not feel tensed and would do my work. He might learn something good as well.”

For her the idea of school sounded suitable for a child who could not take care of himself and was difficult to look after, and not for the one who was contributing to the household in some way. Thus, the mothers were sending their children to school to ensure that they do not hurt themselves and are under adult supervision.
However, there was another concern that three mothers from the *tanki-wali-jhuggi* shared. These concerns emerged in a conversation about the need for schooling with the mothers:

M1: *Behenji*, I also think that if they all become educated [*padhe-likhe*] there will be some benefit at least. All of them roam around here and there; if they become *awara*, it will not take time in becoming addicts. A lot of them [in the neighbourhood] have taken this path.

M2: Yes, I am also bothered about my son. *Itni gandi zuban bolta hai, lagta hai ki chor-badmash banega* [Speaks in such a bad language that it appears he will become a miscreant]… if I scold him he comes on to beat me; the day before he ran after me to hit me.

M3: *Theek baat hai* [That is right]. As of now my sons are fine, but it seems that when they grow-up they will trouble me much more than their father [who succumbed to death due to alcohol addiction]

I: Are you training your children in some work?

M1: We do not send our children to work, nor do we make them beg like *Sigri Batta* people… Before they turn into *chor-badmash* it is better to get them into school.

M2: They will stay with you people [the NGO community workers], at least they will learn how to speak gently…

M1: I am not bothered about that also; let him not learn anything, I am tensed about him… if he becomes an addict I will be ruined; look at Diri’s brother…

I: I heard about Diri’s brother; but are you sure this will not happen to the other children if they go to the school?

M1: Look, nothing can be ensured but they will be inside the school and away from the *gunde-badmash* [miscreant] boys who look for the younger ones.

M3: I take the responsibility of dropping them to the school and picking them up… whatever be the case I will be standing before the school closes.
In the above narratives, it appeared as though children were being sent to a school to ensure some kind of ‘social-isolation’ or ‘protection’ from a particular social stimulus that the children encountered by the virtue of their geospatial position in the illegal slum.

Through such narratives it emerged that the school did not appear to have been looked at as an academic entity. It was being idealised as a mechanism that can function as a ‘créche’, and hold the young ones while the mothers worked, or could keep children under a surveillance of a particular kind of people (who are women, are ‘gentler’ and more civilized). The fact that the ‘academic’ function of the school did not form a part of these narratives, leads to think about how the notion of education operated in the community, and what kind of a school would the people from the community ‘want’.

The idea of a ‘sarkari’ institution, the notion of the child’s safety, and the availability of the ‘schemes’, instead of ‘inspiring’ people to ‘educate’ children, only appeared to be drawing them to the institution. Such an approach was not only shaping the meaning of the public institutions in the people’s perception but also appeared to be contributing towards the construction of a particular image of the poor ‘citizens’ in the slums in general. On the one hand, this interacted with the categories through which the others (including the State functionaries) made meaning about the community; on the other, it also structured the self-perception of the people from the slum as well. This was particularly because in conversations it emerged that the people increasingly came to see themselves as ‘seekers of tangible incentives’ from the State. Therefore, in their negotiations with the State institutions the people did not view themselves as asserting or claiming their ‘rights’ but appeared to be thinking in terms of the material entitlements and the everyday pragmatics.

In this process, the idea of rights in itself looked distorted or was reduced (, at least apparently,) to the matters of demanding more provisions or seeking immediate solutions. It also interfered with the everyday perception or the meaning of the responsibilities of the State towards the people – thereby shaping the nature of the relationship between the State and its margins. The power of the State to (what
Sadgopal (2006) calls) dilute and distort the quality of the entitlements of the people, becomes visible in these spaces. Also, one way in which the ‘entitlement’ politics may work in the case of a slum community comes to the surface. This is because this process was not limited to the schools, but could be seen in the case of the other public institutions as well. Applying Das’s (2004) framework of ‘excuses’ one may infer how such system of incremental ‘entitlements’ gradually becomes a ‘rationale’ for the poor quality of the State provisions.

Another glimpse of how the idea of a school was framed came across in the interactions with young adolescent girls. It emerged that by its very nature and design the above image of a school shaped the aspirations of young people in the community. The presence of the NGO school (which was located in a government school) in which young women from the community were employed as teachers further added to the understanding of how achievable the aspiration was. This comes out in an interaction where Diri talks to the community workers of the NGO about her desire to go to the NFE school, and I join the discussion:

Diri [to Jagwati]: … take me along to your school; please engage me also in the work that you do
I: Do you want to come to the school to study?
Diri: I will study a little… fond of it since childhood… but will work with Jagwati Didi
I: What work do you want to do there?
Diri: I can take care of the children, cook food for them, see that they do not engage in mischief and do not wander here and there
I: Padhaogi nahi? [Will you not teach?]
Diri: Thoda padhadungi [I will teach a little]
I: For that you will also have to study
Diri: Wo to baad mein bhi hojaega par ye sab to main kardungi [That can happen later also but all this I can do]
I: Do you want to be a teacher?

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11 In 2010 one of the slum clusters in the area a PDS pilot project of GNCTD was launched. Rupees 1000 vouchers were distributed to 100 households. The project was launched through an NGO and was declared ‘successful’.
Diri: Yes, that is what I am saying
I: If you will come to study at the school, you can be a teacher
Diri: Par sirf padhane wali hi to ‘madam’ nahi hoti na... jaise Jagwati Didi aur Saroj Didi [But those who teach aren’t the only ‘madam’... like Jagwati Didi and Saroj Didi]

Diri, an adolescent, seems to associate what Saroj, Neetu and Jagwati do, with her own capabilities and at what she is skilled. The three NGO workers were the role models, who reinforced Diri’s aspirations and perceptions about teachers and schools. For the young girl (from a relatively better off income family but illiterate), the idea of school was associated with a desire of becoming a ‘teacher’ or ‘madam ji’. In fact, most of the NGO workers who worked for (what they called) the ‘sarkari NGO’ had joined it with an idea of becoming a ‘teacher’ of a similar kind – the only difference between them and Diri was that of formal education, and could assume a teaching function to a greater degree. But teaching was only seen as a matter of such degree – therefore the function ‘teaching’ in itself was peripheral in the concept of school. The genesis of this idea could be seen in relation to the general social perception about and the gendered nature of the teaching ‘profession’ or the ‘norm’ that describes the teaching profession. That is, it may be understood as being entrenched in the connections between the conception of a school as a crèche and the child-rearing function that girls perform at home.

In an everyday perception and framework of expectations, the school was thought of as an institution which would provide childcare for the infants and younger children and an employment for young unmarried females. It was also expected that it would not ideally presuppose a high degree of qualification for employment (like in the case of Jagwati, Neetu and Saroj), but in order to function would draw upon the skills or practice of childcare that most ‘naturally’ came to the girls from the community (or in general as well). The primary function of the school in this sense was not academic as such, but that of care taking. It would ideally be expected to perform an emotionally sensitive role much more than an ‘educative’ one in the common way of making sense.
Box 5.3.: An ‘open’ school

The manner in which the parents explained the functions they associated the State schools with, could be observed being played-out in practice in the MCD school where I worked. At times the entity called school, did not look like a ‘school’. For example, on many occasions I found some women from the community (those whose children were enrolled in the school), leaving their younger ones (who were not of the school going age) in the school premises and going back home or for some work\(^\text{12}\). The presence of the older sibling and other children from the neighbourhood within the closed school premises ensured the child’s safety.

The children who were left in the school in such fashion roamed around freely and were involved in all other activities with older children [girls] in the playground. Being younger they also got special privileges during play. The teachers did not check what was happening outside the staffroom or when they did, they either punished both the siblings or ignored and went ahead. On the rare occasions when a teacher was in the classroom of an elder sibling, the younger child stood at the gate or continued to roam in the ground or engage in looking at the pictures painted on the walls, until the sibling could come out of the class. When I used to narrate stories in classrooms, these children also joined the classes, especially when it became clear that the ‘teacher’ (if at all I could have been seen as one) would not scold or object to it. In some instances, the parents, who had earlier seen me narrating stories in the class, left their younger children in my class (without asking or say anything). In that I realised that the mothers who had never interacted with me also could make sense that I was not a teacher or at least a ‘usual’ teacher. The entry of parents and children (from the vicinity) in the school was not much of an issue because the gate was manned by the schoolchildren (on a roll number basis). Being from the neighbourhood the girls knew most of the people and allowed access to their ‘chachis-chachas’ or ‘bhai-behen’. In this sense, it was an ‘open school’ – in circumstances where it was designed to be so it

\(^{12}\) The mothers who left their children were relatively better-off from others. They were also more confident in talking to the teachers in case teachers complained. These parents were also fairly regular in visiting the school for picking-up and dropping their children.
would have been ideal. However, it happened here in an arbitrary fashion and highlighted the idea that parents knew that ‘nothing’ happened at the school.

The above interactions matched (although not completely) with the teachers’, the NGOs workers’ and the SSA personnel’s’ views of the community’s intentions behind schooling – and substantiated the impression that there is a situation of ‘indifference’ to send children to ‘school’. However, as the interactions deepened, particularly with the principal informants in the slum, a more complicated picture of the community’s experience and knowledge about schooling emerged. The concepts of ‘worth’, ‘meaning’, ‘time and space of schooling’, ‘cost’, ‘implication’ and the practice at the school, were involved in this everyday dialogue about schooling, that implicated or made it necessary to understand the constitution of this ‘indifference’ in a different perspective.

5.2.2. Reviewing ‘worth’

While on the one hand the school was not seen as an academic entity, on the other parents held strong views on the ‘worth’ of its academic functions. This led to an understanding that the community’s idea of the functions of school (that came across in the previous section) was not a simple matter of apathy towards education. There was an experience of schooling and school education, living through which the community had engaged in an assessment of its worth and its ‘suitability’ for their lived realities. The narratives that I present below, do not represent the views of the diverse groups with which I interacted, rather concerns only the most marginalised illegal slum dwellers in the field. These observations happened in the tanki-wali-jhuggi with the help of Heena and Hazari.

Heena’s mother in a conversation with me concerning sending their older children to the school brought the focus on the need of schooling. She said,

… This lad from the neighbourhood went to a school; completed the third class; but see nothing has come to his use until now, and he is sitting at home just like that. Nobody took him for anything. Tell us
[me], what is the use? … We will have to work; what will the school teach? It is not of use. On top of that, tomorrow sarkar will send its people to vacate this place, then? Within some days the police will chase us away from here. We will have to go – two days here, two days there. What is the meaning in sending the child to the school? Schemes that they offer also do not benefit us like this – on top of that there is so much of hassle [jhanjhat] in enrolling – what’s the benefit if we have to leave from here? … these songs that she [Heena] has learnt, I don’t know how they will help her or me.

Heena’s mother weighed schooling based on the pragmatics of her everyday life. The state of ‘being in transition’ physically and psychologically, makes it difficult for her to situate schooling (that requires a sense and a state of ‘permanence’) in her life world. Furthermore, she believed that the school could not have equipped her children with anything that is of ‘worth’ in the day-to-day reality and in the concerns that make it impinging to think in terms of the present rather than planning for the future. This is particularly because she and her family were living in the present without any ‘knowledge’ about the situations that may follow in the near future. Gandhi’s (1909) critique of education came to explain the arguments that the mother made. The mother’s arguments also substantiated the thinking with which Gandhi argued for a particular kind of education and social order.

The mother’s account matched the views of the adolescent children in the neighbourhood. It came across in a more explicit fashion during a situation where Hazari narrated his story of dropping-out of the schools he attended as a child. In an interview he shared,

For some days we used to stay here and for some days in Punjab. When we came back, madam [teacher] used to scold me… this and that… I do not know why she kept shouting and what we used to do at the school. Padhai to samajh aati nahi thi [I could not understand padhai]. I never did anything there, except for listening to scolding and getting beatings. I couldn’t have been sitting like that all the time; I had
to start working as well. Then I decided that I will do work only, when
I have to do this then what sense does it make to go to the school? I left
two schools in the same fashion.
The idea that nothing worthwhile happened at the school was centrally located in
most of Hazari’s arguments about or his recollections of the experiences he had in the
institution. He sounded agitated on the question of schooling and thought that his
experience universally explained the plight of the children in his slum. As shared in
Chapter Four, regarding taking the other children from the community to the NGO
school, he felt,

... koi in sabko le bhi jaega school to bhi ye sab do din mein bhaag
aenge... inhe pata to hai hi bade hokar karna to kaam hai aise hi...
main bhi gaya tha do-teen baar phir samajh agaya... kuch nahin hai
bekar hai, kya karna hai.\footnote{Even if someone takes them to school they will run back in two-three days... they know that when they grow-up
they have to work like this only... I also went two-three times... but then understood that its useless.}

Hazari was not angry while he said this, but sounded resolved and firm. He was
gentler in discussions pertaining to the other concerns and sounded enthusiastic about
the new entrepreneurial venture that he had been planning with the women of the
community. Despite having high hopes he talked about the plan in a balanced fashion
saying that he didn’t want to boast about it as the things might take a wrong course on
doing so. He swore by his name while talking about his plans. He had his name
tattooed on his right arm, which he touched when he did so. On being asked (in a
lighter vein) whether or not he could read what the tattoo says, he replied (jokingly),

If you write a donkey’s name on its hand, it will also tell you that it is
his name; he does not need to go to school for that... whether it is my
name or something else how much it matters anyway? Likhai will not
change my name.\footnote{His mother told me, “Some of these boys around are such that even if parents would ask them to go to school,
they would not... what do we have to do with this; it’s their choice... we only want them to become capable of
filling their stomachs.”}

Seemingly, contradictory views emerged in interactions with the relatively younger
children (six to ten years old) from the same community (where not going to school
was common). These children\textsuperscript{15} (Heena, Sunny and Ashu) saw school not as an institution that promised a joyful learning experience, but as one instrument that can help in becoming ‘bada admi’. Initially it looked as if the bada admi that the children were idealising, was similar to that explicated in Sarangapani’s (1997, p. 76) thesis. However, the concept appeared more complicated when I inquired into how the children (in the field setting where I was working) related it to school going. While going to school was seen by the young children as one of the routes to become bada admi, it was not the essential or the only route to become one. I will explore this in Chapter Seven in some detail. However, here it is relevant to state that in many ways, the term ‘bada admi’ was used to refer to an ‘ameer admi’. To explain its meaning the children sketched an image of a man who drove a car, was aggressive, abusive and knew how to use others as a means. This ameer admi was invariably seen as someone who had ownership of assets and production. The children expressed their desire to become bade admi instead of officials or a sportsman. Actually, having been to school was only one (not essential though) trait of a bada admi. That is, the children believed that most bade admi had been to school. However, they could also identify those who became so, irrespective of whether or not they went to school (neighbourhood vendors and kabadis). School education was only one of the indicators from which such assessment was made. I will describe this in Chapter Seven in a greater detail.

However, the mothers felt that the children would have never become bade admi by going to school; and that it was their fate to do menial jobs like their fathers and/or become ‘awara’, ‘badmash’ and addicts. The narratives of the older children (twelve to fifteen years old) came closer and almost matched with that of mothers (like in the case of Hazari). Through the experience of the social world, it seemed that these older children had come to decipher their social possibilities or the range of their capabilities (or deprivations). The school experience, in Hazari’s case at least, brought him to believe/assesses that ‘education’ was not meant for him; and by assessing his probabilities through schooling he seemed to engage in what may be called sociological imagination that was shaped by his past, his present, his observation and

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\textsuperscript{15} This emerged in discussions with Heena, Ashu and Sunny; and matched with the brief interactions that I had with other children in the neighbourhood.
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experiences (vicarious and direct both) (Mills, 1959, p. 5). How schooling performs a conservative function and engages in cultural ‘reproduction’ became more nuanced in how Hazari saw his possibilities at school and his corresponding disposition towards the school education (Bourdieu, 1974).

Bourdieu argues that students internalise the odds of success within their social group and, acting within such a habitus, are bound collectively to reproduce them given the continued existence of the operative structures of the field (Nash, 2001, p. 58). Willis (1977) makes a similar argument while he answers the question why working class children get working class jobs. While these works could help in understanding what was happening in the situation, Gandhi’s (1909, 1938) idea about work, education and synonymising knowledge with ‘knowledge of letters’ situated in an educational perspective what the people had experienced through education. In the case of children like Hazari, even the ‘schemes’ did not work as incentives and the ‘unwillingness’ to come to school persisted. In such persistence, the experience of mismatch between the lives that the people lived and the nature of education available were highlighted. Here, the ‘unwillingness’ also looked like resistance towards investing time in an institution which does not seem to lead anywhere.

While this was the case with the most marginalised within the margins, there were other kinds of orientations/dispositions towards schooling and school education. In the latter category the ‘worth’ of schooling was not questioned. However, there were other reasons for which those who did not question schooling could not enrol their children in a school, or took it casually. Some of these are described below.

5.2.3. Cost of schooling
As per the RtE Act 2009, the elementary schooling is supposed to be free and the State claims that elementary education is made available free. However, an idea of ‘cost’ of schooling operated in various ways in the community. Even the children thought that there was a cost of schooling. In the interactions with the parents in the jhuggi cluster, it emerged that among the various reasons for which the children
dropped-out, the cost of education was a consequential one. There were definitely opportunity costs, but here the parents and the children brought to the fore the direct costs that it involved. When the NGO worker, Saroj, was talking to Sunny (a 7 year old from tanki-wali-jhuggi, who had dropped out of school after coming for a few days) and asked him to resume studies, he said,

Sunny: I do not have money, how will I go to school? [He put his hands in pockets and showed the empty pockets]. I cannot buy books
Saroj: You will not need money; we shall give you everything
Sunny: Last time when I went to your school, you promised you would give everything, and you gave nothing… you asked me to buy a notebook and pencil.

Sunny’s mother affirmed his narrative and said that they cannot bear the cost of even a pencil and a notebook. The NGO and the MCD school both asked the children to bring a pencil, a copy, a plate, a spoon, a water bottle, wear clothes, wear clean clothes, wear slippers and be on time. All of which involved a considerable cost as per the standards of living in the jhuggi clusters. While those in better-off resettlements like the sadhe-barah-gaj could afford most of these, the standards of ‘hygiene’ expected at the school, involved an altogether different socioeconomic standard of life. The school (and the NGO centre to some extent) not only expected that the child be neat and clean, it demanded that the uniforms, books, bags and other belongings be well maintained. It was not that the community did not provide the children with these necessaries, but despite all attempts the standards that the school set were not achievable.

Pre-school training and preparation was another expectation that comprised the cost related to schooling that the better off parents also found difficult to meet. The parents told that the teachers who enrolled the children at the school ‘tested’ them for their ability to hold a pencil, write alphabets and numbers and to be able to read them out. This also matched my observations at the school\(^{16}\). While no child was rejected for

\(^{16}\) Among the cases which I had observed, there wasn’t any child (from among those who came for admission) who did not already ‘know’ the initial Hindi varnamala and counting till ten, before admission to school. The parents told that the child had learnt the skill from the older siblings, neighbourhood children or elders at home, or
not having the ability to read or write, almost invariably all children who came for an admission to the school could scribble something with a pencil. In these ways it seemed as though a ‘culture’ of school and of pre-schooling was being established and/or reinforced. Some of the parents sent their children to a pre-school in the light of this ‘culture’ of expectations, and were bearing a cost as high as Rs. 700 per month.

As I probed, a peculiar kind of ‘cost/expense’ incurred for enrolling a child came to the fore. Teekam unpacked this cost when he said, “Whatever they [NGO/School] say, sending the child to school is costly… they would call me to school, I will have to pick-up and bring them [children] back, bring things and then what about the janampatri and the tuitions?” While the first two relate to the cost of time and space of schooling that led to an opportunity cost, the janampatri and tuitions are a different category of expenses or investments (that I discuss shortly), which were subsumed under the ‘expectations’ at the school. Shabnam’s (a schoolgirl’s) mother also affirmed:

It costs so much… I have to do everything in a hurry and change my work timings as per the school… I lost one house-work [ek kothi ka

at the pre-school/crèche [private baalwadi/chote bachon ka school]. These skills were assumed as a prerequisite for the school and when parents came to inquire about a child’s admission, they were told about this compulsion. Mrs.Ilesh used to say, “I will first make the child read and write and only then admit”, to which parents never objected. Many asked what she would ask the child to write. These skills and abilities were used as the base in the class I. I could not observe instances where a child did not satisfy these pre-requisites, but I asked the teachers to understand how they see such situations. Mrs.Alpana told me that until two years back the situation was better, most of the children had the skill of holding a pencil and scribbling with it. However, now there are several who are unable to. She blamed it on RTE, and the NGOs that bring children directly to school at “whatever” age. Although, she told that the teachers do not refuse the children who do not have such abilities, but tell the parents to put “special efforts” on the child – in this situation she meant that either the older siblings teach the child or that the parents arrange for a tuition. In this context, I attempted to understand if the NGO schools served this function of teaching the basic skills to facilitate the entry to the school with such pre-requisites – and found that one of them (NLF) did this well, while other did not (I describe this later in the chapter). However, in some cases where the economic conditions of the family were better, the child was sent to ‘nursery’ before the school (which included both private crèches and the nursery at the school).

17 Heena confirmed about this cost which related to the cost of time. Confirming some general discussions that I shared with her about the children who had dropped out, she said that the school “is very far”. She says, “…parents did not let them come so far…a lot of time got wasted and their parents went to work…if they come to school they will get beaten-up.” The distance of only a little less than a kilometre had a bearing on children’s coming to the school because of safety concerns, but it was not so in these cases. With her help I interacted with a child who had dropped out and would have otherwise not talked to me about schooling. Some children, whom the NGO workers went to trace after they had dropped out, ran away or avoided talking or went inside homes. The families also refused to talk to them. Lakhi (9) was alone at home with her siblings when Heena took me to meet her. She was cleaning utensils and had kept clothes soaked for washing. On why she stopped coming to school she says, “I can ask my mother to get my brother and sister enrolled in the school but I cannot come…it is so far I feel tired and can’t do anything…I have work to do…when my mother and father will come I will ask them and send my brother and sister to school…they don’t work.”
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*kaamnikal gaya*] because of the change in timing. Then the school meetings, picking-up and dropping during winters and rains… then there will be Rs. 100 every month on tuitions [for one subject]… and then they go to school, see the other children’s things and demand… The *janampatri* costed me Rs. 500.

The children at the school also shared having spent Rs. 50 – 100 on the *janampatri*. They indeed made fun of Shabnam and told her that she had been fooled as she paid Rs. 500 for it. The most expensive aspect was the tuitions varying from Rs. 100 to Rs. 400 per month (depending on the number of the subjects a child studied). The discussions with the informants indicated that these two costs were understood as the ‘implied’ costs of schooling. These were so intricately subsumed in or connected to the school education that they could not have been conceptually separated from it. (I would inquire in some detail about this aspect in Chapter Six). The question of ‘How free is Free primary education in India’ needs to be situated in a larger framework that Tilak’s (1996) and Sadgopal’s (2008) works explicate in context of the RtE. At the same time, such larger critiques also need to be thought through the nuanced ways in which the cost of schooling shapes public perceptions about and participation in the State sponsored education in particular, and in the processes of a democratic State in general. On the one hand the ‘cost’ may be understood in monetary terms, on the other there are psychological/emotional aspects of it that have deeper implications on the concept of the ‘State’ and people’s relationship. Although a discussion on ‘janampatri’ may seem to be a deviation from the main arguments, construction of this narrative has a bearing on how the everyday psychology or knowledge about the State, the school and its functionaries are constituted.

5.2.4. The *janampatri*

Among the most unfamiliar observations related to cases where a desire to schooling was not converted to going to school and not because of some ‘personal’ constraints but because of a peculiar ‘trouble’ that appeared bureaucratic in nature. The trouble was related to non-possession of what was known (or experienced) as the
‘janampatri’. The term ‘janampatri’ started appearing over and over again in the discussions with parents in several situations, much more frequently in interactions with families located the illegal squatters and the footpath dwellers (though it came across in a ‘procedural’ fashion in the other settings as well). It persisted in most of the general interactions throughout the study both outside and inside the school. It was understood and used by everybody in the locality, in the NGO and the school and by the BRCC of the area (however, it was not understood by the two people working in the national SSA component). On a close analysis of my field notes, it comes out to be a term that appears frequently in the pages of the notes where I had documented interactions with the people regarding why they did not enrol their children at school or how they enrolled children at the school. The NGO workers, the schoolteachers and the BRCC explained the janampatri as the people’s ‘naïve’ formulation of the ‘birth-certificate’ – one of the certificates that is essential to avail other certificates from the State. It is a certificate that proves or legitimises a person’s citizenship and grants access to various kinds of State provisions.

There were instances in which parents stated not having the janampatri as the primary reason for not sending the child to the school – in this situation they intended to indicate their inability to get the birth certificate made. These families were more ‘attractive’ for the NGOs (both NLF and Prakriti), as in these cases a much ‘convincing’ or following-up was not required. In such cases, the NGOs’ efforts were more focussed on informing the parents that they would get the janampatri made and mainstream the child in the ‘sarkari’ school through their centre. In fact, the NGO workers used to highlight that ‘their school’ did not demand the janampatri. As Jagwati used to say, “Hamara school janampatri bhi nahin mangta” [Our school does not even ask for janampatri], as if the institution was a person, and that it offered a privilege by not demanding the birth certificate. Sometimes the parents joined their hands or expressed through some other gesture how obliged they were for this. A parent on knowing that the NGO would get the janampatri made, got 9 children from the community enrolled in the Prakriti’s centre – though only 4 of them continued.
Both the NGOs with which I worked, looked at this as a major constraint in getting children admitted in schools. In fact, Zahid attributed the success of NLF in Sitapuri to the fact that most people living in the cluster were people who were willing to send their children to school, but could not because they didn’t have any documents to be able to procure birth certificates for their children. NLF worked towards getting the certificate made for the children; sometimes even fake ones. Zahid said,

This is a major problem… at times those of them who have no papers at all, or those from the Bangladesh borders, are unable to get the papers made… some don’t bother about papers… they are just like that… so the major reason why they come to us, instead of approaching the regular school is that we get the janampatri made for them. Some only continue till the time we get it made and then withdraw their child.

The narrative of janampatri was so powerfully situated in the everyday knowledge about access to schools that some families did not even try getting their children admitted to a regular school for the reason that they did not have the certificate\(^\text{18}\). The nature of the setting where Prakriti was working was different; where a substantial proportion of the families, which did not have the certificates, were not accessing the school for other reasons as well. Nonetheless, not being in a position to get the certificates was a critical constituent of not accessing the system or being ‘unwilling’ to do so.

Initially it appeared that the parents were ‘unaware’ that no documentary proofs are needed to enrol a child at the State schools after the implementation of the RtE. From a lay reading of the RtE Act 2009; it appeared that no documentary proof is needed to enrol a child at school after April 2010 (since the Act was implemented)\(^\text{19}\). However, when I observed the practice at the school where janampatri was invariably asked for and parents’ narratives in this regard, it appeared necessary to explore the issue and

\(^{18}\) Interactions with some of the families brought forth that it was also at times used to rationalise the ‘lack of willingness’. A mother says, “I did not send children to school because I do not know about the school, I always stay at home and don’t move out. …we don’t even have the janampatri.”

\(^{19}\) Mr. Mehta (SSA personnel) confirmed this. However, the school teachers said that no official order says that a documentary proof may not be asked for or may not be required.
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re-visit the RtE Act 2009. In the context of this mismatch a re-reading of the RtE Act 2009, led to a different interpretation. The excerpt concerning this provision is as follows:

While the Act explicitly states that the age of a child may be determined based on a proof of age, it also states that no child shall be denied admission to the school for a not being able to produce an age proof. The information that I gathered from the teachers and Mr. Mehta did not match. While Mr. Mehta said that even a written note from the office of Parshad or Village Panchayat would be accepted as a documentary proof, the teachers insisted that they have been ordered to ask for an affidavit. Whatever the case may be, accessing the Parshad’s office, Village Panchayat or procuring an affidavit, involved a degree of familiarity/preparedness, submission to and investment in the bureaucratic systems of the State. At times such access to the system also demanded having ‘connections’ or what was called jaan-pehchan. This jaan-pehchan in itself came across as a distinct system with its own separate functioning.

Box 5.4.: Social networks: Jaan-pehchan

Jaan-pehchan network in some instances appeared to be functioning almost as a parallel to the formal system. Where knowing some people in the system informally or through someone, enabled a family to access some institutions and get the work done which would have otherwise involved a long/complicated/alienating bureaucratic procedure. Buying a jhuggi, obtaining a rental accommodation, setting-up a stall and taking credit, all were essentially based on the system of jaan-pehchan. Teekam tells, “I get a credit from the wholesaler easily… a member of my community [samaaj] works with him no.” Teekam told me that the jaan-pehchan was based on the regional and/or caste (samaaj) affiliation. It was interesting to observe that he never in general discussed or even mentioned about the samaaj or his affiliation to the samaaj. In such cases,
acknowledging *jaan-pehchan* was common, and the numbers of connections a person had was a matter of pride for him. It appeared to be another character of the informal ‘economy’ in the setting.

In the State institutions, *jaan-pehchan* assumed a different yet similar character. Some parents were able to get a child enrolled in a school immediately without any explicit hassle when they came through someone known to a teacher who worked there (I describe one such case in the next chapter). At least three parents were able to get their *jati-pramana-patra* (caste certificate) transferred through such networks and therefore were able to avail the scholarship schemes at the school. It was difficult to probe how these networks worked as these were very ‘natural’.

While the people took pride in stating their connections in general, as I talked to the people (who had such networks) it appeared that acknowledging linkages in the public institutions was not something that a ‘beneficiary’ would usually do – as it made the link vulnerable. That is to say that these informal links came in the purview of ‘corruption’ in the formal official systems – and therefore put the one who was doing the ‘favour’ in a problematic position (as Shabnam’s grandmother said ‘*bhale admi ki badnaami hogi*’). Further, making such links explicit also exposed the ‘intrinsic inability’ of the beneficiary to make way through the system or a liability on him/her to help the others from the community. Shabnam’s grandmother said, “We got our certificate easily – we had some *jaan-pehchan*; but don’t tell this to others otherwise the whole colony will stand on our head for some work or the other... I told this to you, but others won’t do so; they will say ‘we did it on our own’.”

However, in some peculiar instances the one who facilitated such favours felt ‘good’ in ‘helping’ someone. The favour doer, although doing only what the job demanded him/her to do, felt much better in facilitating someone informally than in discharging one's duty formally. I describe this in the next chapter. At times, Bourdieu’s (2007/1986) conception of the social capital appeared to get played out
in this network of *jaan-pehchan*. This also helped in understanding how the formal institutional systems maintain and reproduce a particular social capital in implicit ways in the urban space.

However, here what is worth noting is that the Act only ensures that a child is ‘not denied’ an admission in case the parents are unable to produce proof of her date of birth. It does not specify whether or not such proof will be required in due course or not, or whether the child can be admitted without the proof or not. It rather makes it mandatory to ensure that the correct age of a child is established through a documentary proof. This is particularly because it is only through the ‘legitimate proof’ that the ‘appropriate authority’ would be able to ensure an age appropriate enrolment for every child. In this context, some questions may be asked: Would it be a compulsion to furnish a proof within a stipulated time? Until then what class would the child be enrolled in? What does a teacher do when she admits a child without a proof? Does she ‘ask’ the parents for a proof? What constitutes ‘denial’ from admission? These questions may not sound valid, but the manner in which admission to the school was ‘granted’ made them pertinent (I describe this aspect in the next chapter).

Taking the instance further, it comes across that the 86th amendment to the constitution also makes it a fundamental duty of parent/guardian to enrol a child in a neighbourhood school. Therefore, it also makes the parent liable for furnishing such proofs as may be “prescribed” by the State. By such dyad of rights and duties not only does the State regulates the lives in the margins, it defines its margins as well, and expands the psychological territories of its governance mechanisms. The system of janampatri looked like a first step in sorting and selecting at the school, which began at the time of birth of a child itself and situated her in her family context or ‘background’. How a family negotiates with the bureaucratic system of such documentary proofs is not defined in absolute terms – rather it is refracted through a social-history of the family or at least its ‘readiness’ to participate in the systems of the State.
This was reflected in the cases where the NGOs’ assistance in getting the certificate made did not convert in coming to the school. Repeated attempts at convincing did not work in these cases. This was the case with those people who lived without addresses – in the smaller illegal squatters, on the footpaths and shifted frequently from one place to another. In other cases, however, the non-possession of the certificates lead to a feeling of ‘guilt’ or ‘shame’ among the people – that emerged from their inability to participate in the legitimate system. This was visible in the manner in which body languages and facial expressions changed in the face of the question – ‘why did you not get the janampatri made’, or ‘why don’t you send your children to school’. The ‘monitoring’ of birth through these documents, appeared to define not only the category of the ‘citizen’ but that of the State as well along with the character of the relation between the two (Das, 2004). This also explained how, in such ways, ‘social exclusion’ may be constituted and how it may constitute ‘capability deprivation’ (Sen, 2000).

Initially, the term ‘janampatri’ sounded confusing to me as a researcher particularly because of its traditional connotations and a brahminical association. How ‘janam praman patra’, a certification by a modern State, was translated into something that had a traditional character, in itself looked important. More significant was the worth that this instrument tacitly ascribed to the institution called school, particularly when seen in the light of the everyday practice at the school.

For a social-group that was more prepared for accessing the school – that is in meeting the demands like that of janampatri, tuitions and hygiene – school education had a different worth and meaning. This was particularly so in the case of the informants who were economically stable enough to bear such costs and deal with such demands of the school (those living in resettlement colonies). The parents did not question the concept of and such implications of schooling, and treated them as ‘given’. Such ‘naturalised’ acceptance of the schools and its implications at times
made the process of education appear like a ‘ritual’ – with its givens, its own momentum and a taken for granted character.

5.2.5. Schooling as a ritual

In discussions with parents in the sadhe-barah-gaj, the cost of schooling and the problems of acquiring the janampatri did emerge but did not seem to be the dominant problems. While these were accepted as procedures associated with the institution, the discussions were focussed on the time investment in and output from school education. For example, Suneeta (Chikki’s and Meenu’s mother (see Chapter Four)), was convinced about the need for schooling for her children. She felt that schooling was necessary for the children “these days” but was unable to explain why. On being asked whether or not she would want her daughters to study till the college level, she said, “Nahin itna kaun padhta hai hamare; agar padhai mein tez nikli koi si to dasvi karke silayi ka diploma karaenge, nahi to kya fayda padhne ka.”

Regarding educating her son she says,

\[
\text{Mera ladka tez hai padhai mein, madam bohot khush reht hain usse; usko dasvi karake fridge ka engineer banenge... thoda haath batega, naam hoga... }\]
\[
\text{Ladki ko to thoda kaam kaaj bhi ajao silayi ka to bohot acha hajata hai, ghar se hi kaam hajata hai... aur kya chahiye.} \]

Regarding a child from the neighbourhood she said, “He isn’t that good in padhai. He failed thrice in the same class… and left school after third… naak kata di, aathvi to karta.” She explained this by saying that schooling has become a matter of prestige. However, why it was a matter of prestige did not come across clearly even in further discussions with her. On a later occasion she said, “Till my generation it was okay, only the rich went to school – but now whosoever is able to manage the bread sends his children to school.” She felt, “These days everybody sends their children to school… rich and poor both send children to school... for my girls it would become difficult to find a match if I say they are illiterate… no one wants an illiterate wife.”

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20 “No no, who studies that much among us; if one of them turns out to be smart/excellent in studies then after tenth we will get her through a diploma in stitching, otherwise what is the benefit of studying.”

21 “My son is very smart in studies, madam is very happy with him; after his twelfth we will make him a fridge engineer... he will be a helping hand, will bring good name... If the girl learns some stitching work it becomes very favourable, work happens from home itself... what else does one wants”
Among the most ‘liked’ topics of gossip in the sadhe-barah-gaj one was concerned with the second marriage of a man in the neighbourhood. An auto driver by profession the man was earlier married to an illiterate woman. He fell in love with a woman passenger who had hired the auto, and later got married to her. Some among the several qualities that made him fall for her were that she was ‘rich’, well spoken, very clever and “dasvi pass”. Therefore, the first wife’s life was in this way obstructed by her non-possession of such ‘skills’ some of which were attributed to schooling.

About her Suneeta felt,

A: The poor woman… suddenly at this age you have to tolerate another woman… everything was going well, and then this crises…

I: “Everything was going well” meaning?

A: Meaning… things were usual, like every home. However, suddenly this happened.

Therefore, in some sense she was looking at schooling as a necessity to ensure that other routine aspects of life, which were considered significant, functioned well. A life well functioning was one in which everything went on ‘as usual’. It was in these banalities of life among the relatively better-off informants that schooling was also situated. Unpacking the ‘as usual-ness’ of schooling was particularly challenging during the process of interacting with informants. This was partly because they had internalised in a rote memorised fashion the rationales for schooling. For example, many school going children said that they were going to school because they wanted to serve the nation [“hum desh ki sewa karna chahte hain”]. Regarding how would school education help in serving the nation they could not respond. Some said, “Our madam has told us”, but they could not tell which teacher told this to them. However, there were instances in which things were clearer.

**Box 5.5.: Schooling ‘matters’**

Mona and Sonu are two children who are regularly seen in a well-known market
across Shiv Puri. They both have their respective stall arrangements on a pavement of the main market road leading into an upscale residential colony at the one end and the ring road on the other. Mona manages a stall of earrings, stockings, small pouches, key rings and hair clips. She has been managing the stall from past 6 months; she is now about 11 years old. Sonu sits (just next to Mona’s stall) with a weighing scale. She has been there from around one year; she is 8 years old. Mona and Sonu are very good friends and help each other in various ways. Sonu, who comes earlier at work (around 12 pm), ensures that the cars are not parked in a way that obstructs Mona’s stall. Mona joins (around 2.30 pm) after her school. She generously brooms the place where Sonu sits, and usually brings drinking water to share. Both of them are engaged in talking, fighting and discussing until 8 pm when they both wind-up and go back to their respective homes. Whenever a customer comes to weigh herself at Sonu’s stall, both Mona and Sonu come to cater to her/him. Sonu asks the customer to step-up and requests Mona to read the scale. Sonu is unable to read the scale herself. However, she is able to tender the change to customers after deducting Rs. 2 for the weighing charge; at times customers or Mona help her in this. One day a customer asks Sonu,

Customer: Can you read out how much weight is it?
Sonu: Mona will tell [she shouts for Mona who runs up to the weighing scale]
Mona: Your weight is forty six
Customer to Sonu: Can’t you read?
Sonu smiles in response.
Customer: Do you go to school?
Mona: She does.

However, simultaneously Sonu nods her head in negative with a shying smile. Seeing Sonu’s nod Mona appears a little confused and asks her,

Mona: Tu school nahi jati? [Don’t you go to school?]
Sonu: Nahi to [No].

Mona tells the customer: Didi fir ye nahi jati hogi [Then she would
not be going].

After the customer leaves, they again get together at Mona’s stall and check the new hair bands that Mona had brought. Mona said, “My mother has brought yesterday from sadar… there are several other things also”. Sonu responds, “If there are more things, then why didn’t you bring?” They continue to meet every day and school is not really an issue among them. Sonu was at school some months back but left soon.

From the past six months the question of Sonu’s schooling does not seem to have appeared in a prominent fashion between the two friends. Or even if it did, apparently it was so inconsequential that it was not even remembered or registered. This has been despite Mona helping Sonu many times in reading the weight for the customer (most customers read for themselves). When somebody brought out the question of schooling somewhat prominently, it did not seem to have interfered in their interactions. It did confuse Mona for a while but it was not something that disturbed her. For Mona, in apparent form, the realisation that Sonu does not attend school was only another information which did not really matter all that much. Mona and Sonu are only two of the many children working on the pavements of this market. Some of them have been working for past 10 years and now own ‘permanent’ pavement stalls, which they proudly address as “hamari apni dukaan” [our own shop].

Having observed the interactions between Mona and Sonu as described in the box above, I attempted to understand from their mothers how school education was situated in their lives. In a conversation with Mona’s mother, it emerged that three years ago their family lived in Sonu’s neighbourhood and that Mona and Sonu knew each other from childhood. However, with success in Mona’s father’s business (the father bought the items that Mona sells, at wholesale prices and distributed to small vendors for selling in the local markets) they shifted to the sadhe-barah-gaj. The mother, Meena, told me that ever since they had shifted to this locality, they had to start sending Mona to the school. She said,
M: … here everybody was sending children to school, so we also got our children enrolled
I: Why?
M: Everybody sends children to school these days, how can we not?
I: I mean why did you enrol her after coming here?
M: Earlier at that place very few children went to school, the ones whose work was better grounded… I myself used to do work in kothis [rich homes]… then we shifted here… all were sending children to school… we can’t be the only ones left out
I: How is Mona doing at the school?
Mother: She is good in studies; teachers are happy with her… we will be sending her for tuition from next month; most children from the community go there [to a particular coaching centre]

It was therefore the shift in the locality that was the most significant factor encouraging the family to send the child to school. A change in the social circumstances made the family see schooling differently in terms of its ‘worth’. However, why the family deemed it important was not purely an individual household’s choice. The schooling for that matter was not at all a matter of choice. A shift to a relatively better-off residential settlement made it a ‘compulsion’ for the family to register the child at a school. The ‘compulsion’ became clearer when the mother did not even mention the ‘aspiration’ with which the child was enrolled in school. Similarly, despite the child being good in the studies the family would be sending her to tuition as ‘everybody’ in the setting was doing so. The norm of schooling (and tuition) among this relatively better-off family was much more critical than the matters relating to the intrinsic worth of schooling.

I: Would working after school affect her studies?
M: It is not like that. All children help their parents at work here
I: And those who go to tuition?
M: Yes, that is there… I was sending her because I was expecting a child… Now the baby can be taken care of by others so Mona can now
manage things at home [including going to tuitions] and I will manage the work.

Mona’s mother had earlier set-up the stall outside another shop but when Mona had to manage the stall, they reduced the stock at the shop and made her shift where Sonu sits. Mona’s family now runs that stall only to maintain liquidity and also because they feel that it is lucky for them. The mother feels that now it is time that they would either bring the stall near home or get someone to manage it. Like other women she thought that she “should now take care of the home… there has always been a lot of work at home”. In such better-off families, fewer women went to work.

On a later occasion where I happened to meet Mona’s mother in the market she shared with me with pride, “We are getting Mona enrolled in private [school] now.” In this interaction it emerged that much more than being seen as a necessity, the school was a status symbol which indicated the family’s affiliation to a ‘better’ social stratum. It worked as a cultural practice/norm much more than an exercise that had an intrinsic worth. Instead, its worth was derived from its cultural affiliation which was not easy to procure. It costed not only money, but systematic attempts and an overall ‘preparedness’ as well (like jaan-pehchaan to get documents made). Also, it was seen like an investment towards a particular cultural and social capital. How a family earning around Rs. 3000 per month apportioned Rs. 400 to Rs. 500 on a monthly basis for tuitions could be explained in the framework of such investments. While on the one hand schooling appeared like a ritual, on the other accessing the institution also took the form of an investment to maintain and to enhance the social status.

The proximity to the middle classes that school education represented was worth investing in, not for the instrumental gains that it would lead but for the constitutive importance it holds in the social status, relations or participation in a particular kind of social life. In Sen’s (2000) words,

Being excluded can sometimes be in itself deprivation and this can be of intrinsic importance on its own. For example, not being able to relate to others and to take part in the life of the community can
directly impoverish a person’s life. It is a loss on its own, in addition to whatever further deprivation it may indirectly generate. This is a case of constitutive relevance of social exclusion (p. 10).

However, such participation is not just a matter of willingness or non-willingness. It has its own constitution, whereby (as said earlier) it entails a certain degree of bureaucratic preparedness – an ability to participate in and make way through certain bureaucratic arrangements which are regulated by the State and are more accessible to (or meant for) particular social groups more than others. Morey’s (2001) autobiography *Dera Daanger* brings out the complexity involved in such participation in the case of similar class-caste context, where caste works in the undercurrent of a particular kind of a socioeconomic condition that constitutes the framework of the experience of school.

The observations and interactions in the field brought to the fore that there was no universal response to the idea of school education. The perspectives about the relevance and need for schooling varied with a change in the socioeconomic conditions of the setting. The views included: looking-up to school for some specific schemes and functions, rejecting the worth of schooling, aspiring to be in the system but being limited by the bureaucratic procedures, and seeing schooling as a ‘norm’. These responses in a way indicated the varied degrees of preparedness to enter the institution of education which has its own demands. On the one hand, these ideas were shaped by the nature of lived reality vis-à-vis the nature and structure of school education. On the other, the ‘quality’ of the State schools accessible in the setting was also pertinent in these formulations. That is to say that ‘experience’ of and the common knowledge about the practice at the government primary schools were involved in the meanings that the people attributed to the school. Although the practice at the school is a subject matter that would unfold in the next chapter, it is relevant to state here that this commonsense knowledge matched my observations at the school22. ‘No teaching happens at schools’ was an everyday understanding in the

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22 During my stay at the school, it was only in the morning hours that some teaching happened mainly during 8.30 am to 10 am. Only a few teachers came in time. Actually, they decided who among themselves could come to school late on which day of the week. After the attendance, most teachers wrote some sentences in Hindi and
community – and this was one reason of the success and demand for tuition business in the neighbourhood. However, there were another set of ideas about schooling or assumptions about what should happen in a school. It was against this framework of assumptions that the worth of school was weighed and the practice at the school was assessed. These assumptions/ideas continuously surfaced in discussions regarding the school. In the following section, I explore some of these assumptions. I organise the discussions in this section around some concepts that the parents associated with the school, teaching, learning and performance.

5.3. Traditions and experiences: Exploring certain ideas

The assumptions about what constitutes good school education were the points of reference that were critical in discussions with the parents. These assumptions, or maybe expectations, were framed within a framework of ‘traditions’ associated with school education. It appeared that these traditions in constant interaction with the school practice or experience structured such expectations/assumption, and the people’s idea of school and education was founded in this process. In this section I will refer to the school practice, the traditions and the people’s expectations to highlight how the idea of school education was framed or to provide a glimpse of the everyday ‘discourse’ about quality of education.

5.3.1. ‘Kitab’

The experiences in the field reasserted the centrality of the textbook in the educational culture in India that has been established in the educational discourse (Kumar, 1988, 1992). The cultural or the ‘traditional’ relationship between a teacher, text and knowledge started becoming visible in the processes in which I attempted to inquire in the experiences of the children in the classroom, and gradually reflected in the discussions with their parents as well. In the classroom discussions it emerged that the children almost spontaneously searched for ‘answers’ in their texts – despite the fact

English for children to copy. Sometimes the teachers dictated mathematics problems from a key and asked the children to solve them. They sat in the classroom for a while, at the most until the mid-day meal and then moved to the in charge’s room. After the meal, it was the duty of the classroom monitors to go to their respective teachers to ask which chapters have to be read today. One of the two monitors used to mind the class whereas the other used to read-out the chapter aloud. When the reading got over or was left in between, all the children did whatever they pleased to.
that the questions at hand did not relate to the syllabus (and that their everyday lives offered better explanations). Their ways of thinking in the classroom situations appeared to be framed by the text.

In one of the storytelling sessions in the class V B, I narrated the story *Eidgaah* (Premchand, 2008, pp. 24-31). Although it was a part of the class V Hindi syllabus, I chose not to narrate from the textbook. I did not specify to the children that the story was in the textbook. However, as soon as I began the narration the children pulled out their textbooks from their bags, on the first mention of the name of the protagonist – Abdul Hamid. With the realisation that the story formed a part of the text, the classroom environment or the ethos changed almost all of a sudden. All the children became silent, moved to their ‘assigned’ seats, took out their pencils, and those who did not have the book asked the peers to share. Hema (the class monitor) ran up to give a book in my hand and asked me, “Ma’am ji, should I read it out?” Before this episode I had never related to the children of the class through a text. I was also not seen by them as a ‘usual’ teacher. Yet the fact that what I was narrating was a part of their textbook intervened (or mediated) in the way they were relating to me in that situation.

While I was narrating the story, they tried to locate the lines that I was reading. When they realised that I was not following the text, they reminded me that what I was saying was not written in the text. The children pointed the ‘conceptual mistakes’ that I was making – one of them reminded me of the amount that Hamid had with him. It appeared that the idea of ‘wrong’ and ‘right’ was based on the text. When I had completed the narration, they asked me to move on to the question-answers and underline important words for them. This was the only storytelling session where the classroom situation became an ‘objective’ or an ‘impersonal’ teacher-taught space, in which the text mediated in the dialogue. The idea that the story was in the textbook, was so significant that it appeared to me that even if the author himself would have narrated the story differently, the children would have contested based on the text.
When I deliberated with them, I found that they did not challenge the text even if they found something that was contradictory to their experience or logic. For example, in the English textbook (NCERT, 2008) the picture of geese (that children identified as ducks) living on a big tree were deemed an appropriate representation of reality by the children. This was despite the fact that two of the children in the class had poultry ducks at home and as per their observations, they were unable to fly any higher than a foot or two. Yet the group including the two children felt that the text could not be wrong. When I attempted to understand how the children thought the textbooks were made, they described the process of printing and binding. When I reformulated the question and asked – ‘who writes what is written in text?’ – Komal said and others agreed, “Ye to chhapti hai; isko likhte thode hi hain!” [It is printed; it is not written!].

Box 5.6.: Children, textbooks and school subjects

The Hindi textbook was the favourite book of the children of the class V-B. Most of the girls had read the textbook within a month of receiving it without any external compulsion or help. Their books looked used and many of them had scribbled something on the pages. Some of them had also done the chapter end exercises. The girls said that they were confident enough of being able to ‘handle’ the subject on their own – as Rinku said, “Ye to hum aap kar sakte hain... har kuch samajh ajata hai aapne aap bina tuition ke.” [This we can do by ourselves… one understands everything without tuitions]. During classroom work with the children, I observed that all of them could write basic Hindi and asked me to give them something to write about. While some wrote better than the others, all of them made mistakes of spelling and grammar. None of them could write in English or read sentences – ten (out of 40) recognised alphabets and could read simple words. While Mathematics and English were the “most hated” school subjects, the girls expressed the desire to be able to speak in English. However, most of them felt shy about it. Even when I spoke a few sentences in English – like “How are you? What are you doing? Shall we play?” the girls smiled shyly and did not reply or seek clarification. Later on as our rapport developed they used to ask me to translate particular expressions in English. For example, the class monitor Hema asked me
to translate “Sab chup-chap baith jao” [All sit quietly] in English. When I formulated it, she used it in the classroom and felt that after a long time her peers were a little attentive to what she was saying.

Many of the girls had been studying tuitions for English. However, they could not make sense of the sentences and words that I spoke or wrote in English. Except for some common words which were a part of the everyday language that the children spoke (like time, sorry, thank you, welcome, okay); they could not meaningfully use their ‘knowledge’ of the language in interactions. They enjoyed making me translate some commonly used expressions in English. They also took a keen interest in the technique of ‘translation’ in general. Based on this liking the children and I designed a translation activity and engaged in it over three days (see Annexure 5(2)).

In an interaction regarding why the children disliked English as a school subject, there was a consensus that it was difficult to understand – “English samajh nahin aati.” Apart from the ‘good children’, most others were of the view that if given a choice they would choose not to study English. It also emerged that even at the tuitions English was not ‘taught’. The tuition teacher primarily tried to make children learn through ‘homework’ which involved practicing writing words and phrases, which were frequently tested through dictation tests.

In an attempt to understand their competence in English, I organised the children in groups to read selections from the English textbook. Many of them could join alphabets to make sense of the simple words, and the ‘good’ children could read many words properly. However, they found it difficult to explain their meanings. It also appeared in this process that the English textbook (NCERT, 2008) is much above the level of the children of the class. It expects children to be fairly well versed with the language and capable of making meaning from it, which becomes difficult as the contents and the pictures in the chapters do not match the lives of the socioeconomic group that at the MCD School. For instance, in the textbook a
The second chapter in the text was titled “Wonderful Waste!” – a story where a king asks his cooks not to waste the vegetable remains and use them to make a dish – in this process the Brahmin cook invents Avial. The contrast between the experience of the children (and the case of the midday meal served in the school as mentioned in the Annexure 5(1)) and the poem, made me think about the meaning of the terms like ‘child’s experience’, ‘child-centered pedagogy’ and ‘social construction of knowledge’ (on which the textbook claims to be based). The text included stories like Gulliver travels, Rip Van Winkle, and Topsy-turvy land, which the children found difficult to relate to. While reading the text they asked me to skip the chapters and were in a hurry to move further. Through these implicit contradictions and experiences, what knowledge does a child constructs and what is ‘institutional knowledge’ becomes a question.

The case of Mathematics was peculiar. While I will refer to it in the next chapter as well, here it is relevant to state that most of the girls were very adept in everyday calculations, played games involving mathematical concepts (like khalli-jhot or even-odd). They also did mathematical calculations while assisting their parents on their shops. However, almost all disliked the school subject. Nidhi and Hema said that they were good at Mathematics, but they also did not like it.

EVS was the least talked about subject among the children and at the tuition centre as well. The children told that their tuition centre focussed primarily on Mathematics, followed by Hindi and English. For the EVS textbook, the chapter end exercises were in the focus. The answers were dictated to the children.23

In the context of the children’s writing, I observed that those who went for tuitions or had siblings studying in higher classes had legible handwritings as compared to the others. Also the children who were studying at the NFE centres of the two NGOs (particularly at the centres of the NLF) had much better handwriting as well as written
As I was attempting to inquire into the children’s relation with the text, I began visiting their homes. One day Shabnam, Anju, Anshu and Nishu invited me to their respective houses after the school. They all wanted to ‘show’ me to their mothers and siblings whom they had been sharing the stories and games we were engaging in the classroom. However, Shabnam had a particular reason for taking me home. She had a ‘bet’ to resolve. She said,

You have to come to my home today... I have told my Didi that I will bring you, she was teasing me that flying elephants were a lie and there is no such story… Atya and Sheenu were also with her… they were all making fun of me… you have to come, it’s not very far… you can leave early… but if you don’t come then I will stop coming to school and will never meet you again.24

This debate had arisen at the cusp that children and I had constructed between two stories, which is described in the Annexure (see Chapter Seven Annexure 7(2)). Shabnam asked if I had brought the book from which I had narrated the story. She was convinced that either my testimony or the book would resolve the issue. She said, “… either you take my side at home or show them the elephant story in the book so that they know that elephants used to fly.” The fact that the book would prove her point and that descriptions in a book validate a point was clear to her25. The significance of a book and how it was regarded as being a source of verifying a ‘truth’ came across in this instance. However, here what is more important here is the episode that followed.

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24 Such association with a story and an engagement with it at home brought out that stories had affected her. The elephant story (Kumar, 1996, p. 6) had remained with Shabnam, reached her home and was a matter of discussion and debate.
25 This was also one way in which children negotiated ‘knowledge’ through testimony (Mathews, 1984). In these instances it appeared that adult’s testimony and written word could not be separated from the dialogic in the social construction of knowledge. Also in the experience of story telling the children’s desire for repeating the stories and memorising them, brought a clarification on how memorising and recalling were being used by the children as techniques in learning, re-designing and further developing the stories. In fact, in using these techniques for themselves in a self-directed fashion the children prepared themselves to analyse the social world represented in the stories. This, of course, is not a case for teaching children by rote, but for valuing the idea that children’s memory is a resource for them with which they design schemes to act upon their world.
I could not say no to Shabnam; she had left no options for me. I reached Shabnam’s home where she introduced me to her grandmother, who was visibly shocked to know that a ‘teacher’ from the school was visiting their house. She asked Shabnam, “Has something happened?” On knowing the reason for which Shabnam had brought me to her home she was all the more doubtful about me being a ‘teacher’. She pulled a chair for me – from under the bed on which Shabnam’s father was sleeping undisturbed by the noise around. When the noise became a little too much, as seven-eight women and their children had gathered at the entrance of the one room house, the father turned his back around and continued to snore. The grandmother asked Shabnam,

   Grandmother: Is she a teacher?
   Shabnam: Yes, she is Gunjan
   Grandmother [confirming]: She is your teacher?
   Shabnam: Yes

Shabnam’s grandmother did not speak directly to me. She looked at me carefully having put her spectacles for the purpose\(^2\), and continued to clarify with Shabnam:

   Grandmother: What does she teach you?
   Shabnam: She tells us stories.
   Grandmother: Stories? Which ones?
   Shabnam: Dadasaheb, Haathi jab udte thhey, Omprakash and many more
   Grandmother: Chalo acha hai [pause for few seconds]
   Grandmother: Kitab se padhati hai ya moonh-zabani? [Teaches from the text or narrates orally?]
   Shabnam: Orally, sometimes from the book
   Grandmother: Orally? [Pause] That we can also do. Anyways never mind [pause]. What else does she do?
   Shabnam: She is writing a book

\(^2\) I had a similar experience when I went to other children’s home initially. None of their family members would talk to me directly – but through the children – as if I was an ‘alien entity’ and that there was a doubt whether or not I would understand their ‘language’ or meanings.
Grandmother’s intonation changed as she repeated, “She is writing a book! Then she must be very well read [padhi-likhi]”. After this testimony from Shabnam, she gradually began talking to me.

What was clear from both these experiences was that a teacher’s association with the text was central in making-sense of her ‘ability’. The teacher reaching the home in itself was enough to doubt if she was a teacher. What added to this doubt was the idea that she does not transact ‘the knowledge’ from the textbook. In both the above interactions, with Shabnam and her grandmother, I was introduced to the concept of a ‘textbook’ that both of them held. It also explained the relationship they were establishing between a teacher and the textbook, and the textbook and ‘valid’ knowledge – or truth. ‘Knowledge’ being contained in the text and the teacher being its transmitter, was a common way in which the children and community visualised ‘padhai’. In this sense, the authority of a teacher did not seem to prevail over the text, instead the teacher’s abilities were assessed based on her ‘mastery’ over the text. Kumar’s (1988) analysis of the authority of the prescribed text over that of the teacher in Indian schools and examination of how the “textbook culture” attributes to the meekness of the teacher in the system of the State, meaningfully explained the situation.

However, another aspect that was critical in the case that I was exploring was that the textbook was the medium through which the parents could make-sense of the ‘quality of education’ being delivered at the school. It was the only ‘way’ through which a parent from the community could ‘judge’ the teachers’ and the school’s practice. The ‘giveness’ of the State textbook was thus serving as a standard which parents could potentially use as an instrument for negotiating with the teacher. However, despite knowing that the text was not being transacted at the school, the parents could not negotiate with the teachers given the distances in their social positions. Yet the fact that the parents sent their children for text based teaching-learning at the tuitions leads

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27 Shabnam’s grandmother, Anjum, helped in understanding the locality better (as described in chapter 3 and 4), and was among the only few people who could make-sense of the study I was doing.
one to understand how the ‘prescribed’ schoolbooks worked as a medium of making-sense of the education that the child received at the school.

More importantly, this episode brought to the fore the grandmother’s concept of ‘education’ – what in her ‘view’ was worth teaching and how it should be taught. This concept was based on a ‘given’ common knowledge about the process of education, teaching and learning. In this common knowledge, not only was the textbook synonymous with institutional knowledge, the concept of textbook was also serving a special purpose of ‘checking’ whether or not institutional knowledge was being delivered. How the textbook worked as a barometer, in itself underlined the manner in which functions of schooling (or the demand from) schooling was understood. More than anything the textbook was seen as playing an essential role in ‘rote’ – the only known way learning.

5.3.2. On rote and performance

The further visits to the schoolchildren’s homes also unpacked the relation that the parents in the community established between rote, knowledge and school. In focussed interactions with the mothers on the complaints they had from the school, several dimensions pertaining to this aspect emerged. The mothers were of the opinion that there were many problems with the school; however, the major flaw was in their children. One of them said:

Aarti’s mother: What would anybody do if my own children aren’t made for studies… Aarti is still okay, look at my son - the tuition teacher is always complaining and failing him; schoolteachers say he doesn’t turn-up at the school… What is there to blame the others when one’s own child is at fault

Shabnam’s grandmother: Absolutely right. Now look at this Shabnam… she is very weak in hisaab [mathematics]; she failed in the school test. The teacher said that had she not [zabardasti] passed her in the exam she would have failed… but what will happen in the big school?
Anshu’s mother: Whenever I go to her school there is a full story of complaints that the teacher tells… I feel so ashamed of myself. I don’t know what is lacking [kahan kami reh gayi]… I can only blame myself.

Child’s performance was a source of stress among the parents of the children who were fairly regular to the school, and rote seemed to be a way of assessing whether a child is capable of performing well or not.

Anshu’s mother: If she does not even touch the book after coming from tuition, how would anybody pass her? My sister’s son is always doing ‘padhai’, you can hear his voice from outside the house at early hours… nobody can force you to study if your heart is not in it. Only some children here can do it.

Shabnam’s grandmother: For girls it is not as necessary to do so much work but they should pass at least; when we are sending them to tuition and doing so much for them… she can’t even recite teen ka pahada [multiplication table of three]

In a similar fashion for the other four mothers, with whom I interacted, rote was the best-known way of learning. Or rather I should say there was no stated distinction between learning and rote in their perception. The mothers used the term ‘padhai’ while describing it. In addition, rote was the only association that they could make with the idea of achieving ‘success’ at school. The mothers assessed a child’s learning, his/her desire for and potential of succeeding through the child’s ability to memorise things.

While the mothers expected the school to serve the function of transacting the textbook and use the method of rote, the problem of a child’s failure or ‘not performing well’ was not attributed to school. It was instead seen as being intrinsically located within the child – as if a child could only perform in binaries, and was either ‘crafted for studies’ or was ‘dumb’. Beyond an extent there were no external agencies (the school and the tuitions) responsible in the performance of the child and therefore were only seen as playing a ‘facilitative’ function. This came across when it became explicit that the mothers knew that little teaching happened at
the school, but still did not engage with the problem beyond a point. Aarti’s mother said, “… even if it doesn’t happen in school, we have tuitions… but these children don’t learn.” Anshu’s mother added, “… school mein kuch nahi hota wo to alag baat hai, par bachcha hi razi nahi to kya karoge?” [“… nothing happens at school is a separate matter, but if the child himself/herself is not willing what would anyone do?”]

In the interaction with the mothers, it emerged that they almost as a matter of fact accepted that schools do not perform the traditional teaching-learning function, and in a same ‘given’ fashion they had accepted the tuitions. In this way, the function of school was legitimately (or rather unquestioningly) ‘outsourced’ to the tuitions. Therefore, a main function (along with a few others) that the school performed was of certification. In that, the examinations were the most prominent part of the school as they were the only ways of knowing whether the child had ‘learnt’ or not. In conversations with the mothers in the context of ‘no detention policy’ and the CCE it emerged that they thought that not failing the children was not a good idea. Not failing would amount to considering the ‘bright’ and the ‘dumb’ alike - however the mothers who considered their children as dumb or not-so-bright felt that they were much relieved now as their children weren’t failed. When I further discussed about the pedagogic changes that the government is planning for improving ‘quality’ in teaching-learning, the mothers were sceptical about them. Anshu’s mother asked, “Will the same be done at private schools?”

5.3.3. Perceiving pedagogy
Class II onwards children started taking tuitions for the various school subjects. In one of the visits to the homes in the community, I saw several pairs of children’s slippers removed in an order outside a small kuchha home. With a curiosity to know what was happening inside I knocked the door. When a man opened the door, I saw a ‘classroom – like’ set-up with around twenty children sitting on a floor mat with their notebooks open and copying something from a blackboard. I asked the man whether this was a school. He replied, “Not a school; it is a coaching class.” While I talked to
the girls of Class V-B about tuitions, they told me that (in the tuition centre they attended) as many as 50 students read together. They spent two hours every alternate day after the school and on the days before the exams, they skipped the school for a longer tuition day. Regarding how teaching-learning took place there, they told me that mathematics and English were in the focus. For mathematics, the teacher usually told them how to solve sums step-by-step and gave them practice sums. For English as well ‘practice’ (recitation and written) was in the focus. Aarti tells, “Our tuition Sir is obsessed with practice… he makes us practice, practice, practice.” This way of teaching-learning appeared to match the mothers’ perception of how a school is/should be.

In a discussion regarding what the mothers of some of the children think should happen at a school, the following picture emerged. The mothers thought that the school should consist of classes with blackboards, benches or dari, a teacher and children. The classroom interactions should involve a teacher using a textbook, reading it aloud and asking questions in between. These questions, in the mothers’ view, were to be asked primarily to check whether or not the child was listening, or to bring back a child’s attention back to the class.

Shabnam’s grandmother: Unless the child has a fear that a question can be asked anytime, she would not listen.

Aarti’s mother: …sawal nahin poochenge beech mein to bachon ka dhyan bhatak jata hai, unko lage ki jawab dena hai to dhyan se sunenge warna ye kahan padhenge? […] if questions aren’t asked in between, children’s attention gets deviated, if they feel they have to answer then they would listen otherwise how would they study?].

Further, the mothers related beating and scolding to regular and essential practices of teaching-learning contexts – particularly in situations where a child did something wrong or did not understand something (including padhai) after repeated trials. They felt that excessive beating and scolding is wrong, but in mild forms for ‘educational’ purpose, punishment has to be used. This came across more prominently in a sporadic incident. Sonali, a class V-B student, was a frequent absentee from the school. One
day seeing me visiting a child’s home, Sonali’s mother walked up to me pulling Sonali along. She complained:

M: Madam, look at this girl, she is not going to school from past one month. She doesn’t get-up in the morning even when I kick her or beat her. Every day she is not willing to go to school… [ache se ‘khatirdari’ karna]’service’ her well at the school [indicating by hand to beat her up]… why don’t you beat her-up? Mine [my children] are not the ones who will do anything on their own…

Sonali [intervening to inform her mother]: Ye wali marti nahin hai; nahin maregi [This one doesn’t beat; won’t beat]

M: Then how will these ones be corrected [reformed]? I understand that beating them will hurt your hands more, but these ones won’t get corrected with affection… in this sadhe-barah-gaj we have samples one better than the other

The mother easily and wittingly could ask the teacher to beat a child with an intention to reform. The idea that I was a ‘teacher’ who did not beat the children did not seem to be appreciated by her. The reason she attributed to this was ‘I understand beating them will hurt your hands more’. Beating the child was a practice that the mother had associated with the teacher. A teacher who was an aberration to the norm of beating, she assumed (or rather ‘knew’) would not be doing this out of sensitivity or some other reason but because of her belief in the ‘futility’ of beating ‘such’ children. Sonali’s response ‘ye wali marti nahin hai’ also provides a glimpse of how a child constructs the image of a teacher or categorise teachers – the ones who beat and those who doesn’t. Sonali had met me only twice in the school and within this short span she could categorise me in the binary schema of the ones who do not beat.

Regarding learning through activity and play, all the mothers whom I interacted with were of the opinion that it could not be a way of ‘learning’. They felt that it may be of use to keep the children busy when teaching is over. Shabnam’s grandmother felt that it was okay to teach something ‘khel-khel mein’ but the ‘asal padhai’ (real study) happens by reading-writing and practicing. She felt that this was essential because
memorising ‘zubani’ (orally) and being able to ‘solve questions’ (sawal banana) was facilitated only by this method. The mothers opined that there was nothing ‘special’ or ‘worthwhile’ in teaching the children about the everyday contexts and surroundings. Anshu’s mother said, “Ye sab kya padhna hai? Padhna to wo zaruri hai jo dekhasuna na ho... gyan ki baat batani chahiye. Baki sab to ye kitab se zyada jante hain, thoda hum bata denge.” [Why teach all this? It is worth teaching something that one has not heard and seen… knowledge matters should be told. Rest other things they know more than the textbook, something we can also tell].

Regarding teaching ‘work’ related skills at all schools (including the private ones) to all children the mothers felt that the schools earlier used to do that but now things have changed. Aarti’s mother said, “Now these things have no space in schools; they are not valued outside also.” While she felt that if the male children were taught how to establish their own ‘dhanda’ that would be the best for the families like her’s, for the girls the kind of education that was available was ‘okay’ coupled with regular tuitions. In similar interactions it appeared that the community had fairly defined expectations and aspirations from the school, which were framed within the traditions associated with the institution. On the one hand what they wanted was not available in the State school, on the other they constantly tested the practice vis-à-vis their expectations/perceptions. This led to conditions in which a ‘mechanism’ like tuitions could emerge and sustain in a legitimate fashion or as a necessity.

Despite these expectations from the school, the parents’ aspirations for the children were limited within a particular kind of possibilities. The chapter has briefly described this to some extent and some aspects will unfold in the next chapter. However, here it is relevant to state that in interactions with the mothers and other informants in the field over a period of time it clearly emerged that they didn’t ‘demand’ much from the

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28 In fact a schoolteacher Shivali (principal informant) also agreed that children knew their immediate milieu more than the teachers. She said, “These children know much more than the ones who go to private schools. If I compare with my own childhood they know much more than what I knew. My parents could not even send me out of the home without fear. Look at these children… their social skills are so strong. They come and go alone, they know prices, how to negotiate, bargaining… everything; you name it they know it. They relate to us teachers so quickly. They try being just like we are. You know… they learn to dress the way we do, even the words we speak.”
school for a girl child (apart from equipping with the basic skills of literacy and a general training in mannerisms). Their aspirations for the male children were different and more ‘career’ oriented, yet were delineated within a particular set. As I engaged with the parents of the school going children (and the schoolteachers) on this matter, it also appeared pertinent to understand the children’s aspirations as well. In this process, what I learnt came across as one of the most significant observations or findings of this research work. It was here that the meaning of the school and the functions that it served became more convoluted. In the following section, I will present an aspect of this and will follow it up in the following chapters.

5.4. What the children wanted to be

During a discussion with the Class V-B girls, I asked what they wanted to become after completing school education or as grown-ups. I wanted to understand their aspirations and their relation to the institution and the process of education. I was not looking for a particular kind of answers but only wanted to document their aspirations. I thought it would be a topic that would interest them and would also facilitate the process of developing a rapport. However, as I put forth the question there was a silence in the class. When I repeated the question, the silence became all the more prominent. Some of the girls bent their heads down in an attempt to avoid an eye contact with me, some behaved as if they were thinking and others silently stared at me as if nothing had happened. When I reformulated the question, the girls smiled shyly as if feeling guilty of not knowing the answer. It seemed that they had encountered this question for the first time ever. After I had repeated the question in different ways, some of them started responding out of a compulsion. Aarti said, “I will become what you are”, and started giggling. Following this everybody started laughing. When I asked Aarti why she wanted to become like me, she responded, “What else do I say?”

As I continued to explore, most of the girls in the class started saying that they would become like me. However, none of them said that they wanted to become a ‘teacher’. They also could not explain why they wanted to become like me (or a teacher) or
what was special about the work that they saw me doing. After a while Anshu gave a response to the first question I had posed. She said, “I will be a policeman. Oh no no! Girl-police [ladki police].” Subsequently, all the girls expressed their willingness to become ladki-police. Anshu could not explain why she wanted to become ‘girl-police’. Komal answered on her behalf saying, “Desh ki sewa karne ke liye” [to serve the nation] and Anshu agreed. However, on being asked what they meant by serving the nation or how they would serve the nation, the silence resurfaced. They looked inquisitively at each other, and finally requested me, “Aap bata do” [please you tell].

On continuous probing similar kinds of responses continued to reappear. It seemed that despite being there in the lives of the children from the past five years and being so significantly placed in their social context, the school had not generated an aspiration or a hope among the girls about their future. They were not able to imagine the varied roles that they could assume on completing education. They were also not able to identify with the educated people around them and aspire to become like them. In a way, this worked in tandem with the message that the home and the social context communicated to the girls – the gender being a critical factor in this context. Among many other things that constituted this situation, lack of a role model from the same gender who had ‘achieved some success’ on the basis of education, seemed prominent to me. This was because the girls were attempting to identify people whom they met in their everyday lives (including me) but could not find one to state with some degree of confidence. In interactions it emerged, the teachers also did not provide an ideal model for imitation for the girls for the reason that they were ‘distant’ from them (an aspect that I will become clearer through the descriptions presented in Chapters Six and Seven).

While I talked to the boys (from Class IV) in the second shift (of the same school) about what would they want to become when they graduate from the school, they were more articulate. Most wanted to be what their fathers were by continuing to assist them in their work and gradually replacing them. Most children’s fathers were self-employed (vendors, small shop owners) and the boys were clear that they wanted
to take the business further and to achieve greater success. They told me that by learning to read and write they will ensure that nobody cheats or fools them in the business. Education would thus enable them to negotiate better with the others (including the State and its functionaries). Some said they would want to launch their own venture ['dhanda']. None expressed a desire to become a teacher or a government official or a sportsperson.  

However, there was a commonality between the girls’ and boys’ responses. Among the boys as well “Policewala” was the most popular response. In the first instance, most of the boys in the class stated this response. The schoolboys could state a clear rationale for becoming a policeman. Amit said, “I will put the bad people in the jail, and ensure that nobody troubles good people”. On being asked what he meant by bad people, he explained, “… the ones who misbehave with or cheat good people.” And the good people were those who did not do such things. The police as an explicit symbol of authority, power and control helped in imagining oneself in a position that is non-vulnerable.

In response to the question ‘why do you come to school’, the children (both boys and girls) laughed at the nature of the question. They said that they came for padhai. However, there was a silence on the question regarding what in their view was taught at the school. Some replied that padhai did not happen at the school but at the tuitions. Amit responded, “We come here because we have to come to here.” Children of ages 8 to 10 years who were not going to school, as described earlier in the chapter, expressed their desire to become ‘bade admi’ by going to school. This notion did not resonate in the aspirations of the children who were in a school. Sarangapani’s (2003) work has also explored some of the aspects outlined above in this section. The work that I did, reinforced some understandings that her work proposed. However, the narratives that I encountered diverged substantively from those presented in her work.

29 Here it became relevant to consider the the Ramaurri committee’s (GOI, 1990) critique of the creation of two parallel streams of education (formal and non-formal) and the purpose of the mainstream education. In this context, the report identifies a need to explore the possibilities of association between the ‘ustads’ in the various trades practiced by the masses. It says, “In the process of preparation of this Report, a study was undertaken to assess the willingness of the persons engaged in business and industry to join in partnership and to assist in providing short-term training to the students” (p. 191).
in the context of the children’s aspirations from the school. Sarangpani’s work presents how the concept of ‘bada admi’ is centrally located in the children’s and community’s aspirations from a State school. While beginning the work I had expected a similar account to emerge. However, as I explored a different understanding of the concept of the ‘bada admi’ started unfolding. I will further elaborate and explain this in Chapter Seven.

What is relevant to add here is that for the children as well schooling was like a ritual or a given – they were not inspired to think about it, to nurture hopes and to have expectations from it. They were there because they had to be there. Inasmuch as I explored in the time that I spent at the E-5 MCD school (where I engaged in several kinds of activities with the children) it came across that when teaching-learning happened in the classrooms and there was something to look forward to every day, the children enjoyed being there. As I began telling stories in the class and engaging with the children, casual absenteeism dropped in some cases. A few days after the work on stories had begun, the girls started bringing their younger siblings studying in the same school to listen to the stories or the lessons that we read together.

Parents also took interest when they saw some kind of activity happening in the classroom. In the school the parents who came to pick-up younger children from Classes I and II at around 11:30 am, stopped outside the classrooms where I narrated the stories and stood by the window peeping until the story was over – as if something ‘exceptional’ was happening inside. Those who came earlier to pick-up the children from Class V-B, waited till the story and the discussion sessions were wound-up – some asked me to allow their younger ones in the class as well or simply pushed them inside to be in the classroom. Having seen me doing the classroom activities, some parents started identifying me when I visited the community and stopped to say ‘namaste’ and ask how was their child doing. When I sought consent to work with their children in smaller groups, the parents agreed – saying that I needn’t seek permission. Paradoxically in this process, they ‘gauged’ that I was not a regular teacher. This made the PhD work both easy and difficult, but helped in understanding
the value that teaching-learning had for the children and the parents who sent their children to the school. It also enabled to examine the ‘ritualistic’ view of schooling, and how the ‘apathy’ towards the academic function of schools gets constituted in response to or in interaction with what happened at the school.

5.5. Making sense
This chapter has presented the varied perspectives on and some perceptions about schooling and school education. It has surveyed: 1) the perceptions of the State functionaries and the NGO workers about the community’s attitude towards schooling, 2) the perspectives of the parents living in different socioeconomic situations, 3) their ideas about what schools should be like and the expectations for their children, and 4) the children’s (both school going and out-of-school) future aspirations. It came across that there are varied agenda with which all these stakeholders look-up to the institution, and that nature of their experiences with the school is divergent. While the agenda and expectations of each of the stakeholders were different, none of these were completely fulfilled by the school – creating a pattern of dissatisfaction from the institution. As a result the situation at the school came across as that of an interaction between: the State’s compulsion to draw a larger number of children, the functionaries’ compulsion of discharging the mandates, the NGOs burden to create and maintain its utility, the varying dispositions of the community regarding sending the child to the school, and a ritual for a child to go to school. In this, the State blames the functionaries, the functionaries blame the people, the people blame the State or the children, and the children have no voice (in fact their voice is not of concern at all). In this process the ‘given’ conditions of the school continue to get reproduced.

It emerged that there are varied kinds of ‘dispositions’ towards school education, which are not only shaped by the socioeconomic circumstances but also by the nature and quality of schooling accessible. The willingness and non-willingness to educate the children are not played-out as binaries. The manner in which the functionaries of the system present these also revolves around the agenda of the State. Educational
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theory has explored the political nature of this agenda and how it gets shaped/refracted through several accords and compromises (Apple, 2000/1993; Kumar, 1991). The situation at the school and the propaganda of the schemes indicates that the State machinery is geared-up with a limited vision to discharge the compulsions of a democratic polity, rather than for providing a meaningful ‘educational opportunity’ to the children in the margins.

The rationale that the State functionaries present about the conditions at the school – that ‘poor’ parents are unwilling to ‘educate’ their children – is laden with paradoxes. For example, given the functioning of the State school it would be difficult for parents (and the children) to have ‘hope’ or an aspiration from it. Also, the ‘excuse’ (Das, 2004) of the apathy of the community itself appeared to have been the way to rationalise the quality of the institution. While this is one way in which the legitimacy of the poor quality school maintained, the various ‘customs’ and ‘practices’ related to the school which exist by themselves irrespective of its academic functions also come to serve this purpose. For example, the entry to the school, the expectations of the school, the cost of schooling, the schemes and the like. The worthlessness and the manipulative character of the institution (Illich, 1984) became prominent to me as an outside researcher in this process.

These conditions made me reflect on the nature of State politics in the margins – where despite the various problems in the system no conceptual change is planned or proposed. Instead a continuous attempt is made to draw a larger number of children in the ‘given’ system through various schemes and project supports. The schemes and projects are themselves made to co-exist with the givens of the system. While interacting with Hazari, Heena’s mother, the parents in the tanki-wali-jhuggi and with many others, Gandhi’s (1937) critique of ‘knowledge of letters’ become worthwhile to think about (and so did the meaning of ‘critical pedagogy’ (Freire, 1987; Giroux, 2010)). In this context, it became pertinent to reconsider the school education vis-à-vis the life in the margins. It is relevant to quote from the Ramaurti committee’s
report (GOI, 1990), which while exploring the *Nai Taleem* in the light of an analysis of the school education from the standpoint of the ‘masses’, states,

> A new privileged class has come into being. It holds a monopoly over political and economic power and sources of wealth. It controls culture and education. It is firmly established everywhere. It is this class whose interests our education is made to serve. (p. vii)

It is in this context that the politics of the institutional knowledge becomes evident and problematic.

The children, with whom I worked, made meaning in these contexts. From the standpoint of a child, the absence of teaching-learning at the school in itself is an episteme that carries several messages about how the world perceives her and her being. The everyday life amidst the overarching narrative of un-educability, the rituals and the compulsions, etches a framework in which a child makes meaning. This reflects in the aspirations of the children, where how they experience ambivalence in their role as future citizens, becomes visible. When ‘a group’ shares these meanings and experiences the complexities of their socio-cultural identities also come into being. A set of questions arises here: How do the children experience the school? What meanings do they make at school (or what do they ‘learn’)? How in this context ‘institutional knowledge’ gets defined? What roles do the teachers play at school in this context? How the teacher-student dyad operates in school? I trace these questions in two ways: first by making sense of the location of teacher at the school, and second by inquiring in the meanings and the world of children.