Chapter Six:
The Teachers and School Space: Work, Relations and Lives

This chapter revolves around the school as a workspace. It explores how the teachers are situated in it and how they construct or shape it. While on the one hand the focus is on the teacher, on the other the chapter constantly draws from the relationships of the teachers with the other actors in the school context. The aim is to describe the relational ethos or culture of the school. In doing so, it touches upon some aspects of the relational dynamics in the school as shaped in the interactions between the teachers, the children and the parents. In this context it examines the variety of roles that the teachers assumed. It develops a picture of the work ethos of the school while delving into how the teachers visualised themselves and their position in relation to the work they did. In this process it attempts to make sense of the nature of the agency that a teacher attributes to herself, and how her predicaments are constituted and experienced.

Before the fieldwork, my impressions about the schools as professional spaces were shaped by the informal interactions with some schoolteachers, my own brief experience of teaching and through my education in a teacher education department. On the one hand, in these impressions the role of the schoolteachers in constituting the work environment was central. On the other, the discourse on how they are positioned in the machinery of education made it pertinent to think about a teacher’s voice and agency. The presentation of the teacher’s position as a meek dictator (particularly in the State system) was prominent in this reflection. As Kumar (1991) presents it, “On top of these routine responsibilities, a teacher could be assigned other kinds of duties… These varied tasks that a teacher could be asked to perform tightened his relationship with the State. In this relationship, he acted as a meek subordinate of administrative officers.” (p. 74)

In many ways, the school experiences reaffirmed these images and lucidly explained the traditional-colonial character of the schooling system that continues to prevail. The initial fear among the teachers that I would complain to the authority, the
inability to refuse access to the school to me (as a researcher) as I had approached through a ‘proper channel’, yet having enough authority to dictate terms and therefore restrict access in a ‘real’ sense, and the nature of interactions between the teachers and the people from BRC, CRC, SSA and DO offices, particularly confirmed the ideas about the position of the teachers.

However, as the interactions with the teachers, the children and the community intensified, these images became finer. The nature of the field observations also brought forth a confusion about the aptness of this lens. The field reality at times lent itself to be explained by understanding the teacher as ‘a peripheral employee in the State machinery’; while at other times the observations appeared to be contradicting such a frame. (Highlighting this paradox is a thrust of this chapter). That is, although the disenfranchisement of the teacher cadre has been a prominent ‘theory’ for explaining the school practice (Kumar, 1991; Goodman, 1988; Apple, 1985, 1988), in the situation that I was inquiring in (around two decades later) it appeared as though such a status of the profession was also constituted by the teachers’ personal and social ‘aspirations’. This confusion made me think about the teacher as a ‘person’ (and not just an employee), the pedagogic roles that she plays in the children’s lives, and the way she perceives the schoolchildren.

In part, this chapter to some extent describes how a disenfranchised group of teachers works and perceives itself. While writing this chapter I was constantly faced by a dilemma or fear of becoming polemical in my description of teachers. This was particularly because a critical examination of the teachers’ position could be used to make a case against the permanence of the cadre, as much as it could be for highlighting a need to engage with the idea of teacher empowerment. The former among these not being the purpose, I draw from the perspectives of Batra (2009), Subrahmanian (2005), Menon (1999), Ramachandran (2005), and Ramachandran et.al. (2008). In this sense Delpit’s (2006) work (in a different perspective though) also enables in understanding the ‘cultural’ contexts of interactions between the teachers and the students, and the lack of ‘dialogue’ among the two as well. The
arguments and descriptions that I present in the chapter have been shaped by such ideas. In this context with a focus on the teachers, the chapter describes the everyday working of one of the many schools, which came across as being essential to understand the experiences of the children who accessed it.

To pursue this agenda, the chapter is organised in three broad sections. The first section, ‘Meeting the teachers: Negotiating entry in the school’, (in continuation from Chapter Three) presents how I as a researcher was introduced to the power and the vulnerabilities of the schoolteachers. The second section titled ‘The usual’ explores how the everyday work at the school was constituted. In this process the section also presents the case of an exceptional teacher, and a peculiar role that the teachers assumed in the process of school enrolment. The third section, ‘Teachers’ perceptions and feelings: The Self, children and community’, provides a glimpse of the experiences, predicaments, dilemmas and ‘personal and professional’ politics among the teachers. While the ‘protagonists’ of the chapter are the women teachers, I draw upon the interactions that I had with the male teachers in the second shift of the school and on other forums.

It is worthwhile to note that during the fieldwork for this study, I got several opportunities to engage with the schoolteachers working in the varied kinds of government schools in Delhi. Although the teachers with whom I worked intensively in a participant observation mode (the principal informants) were located in the E-5 MCD School (and the Sarvodaya School that I visited during the initial phase of the work), there were several others with whom I interacted regularly and systematically on two forums. I participated in six focus group discussions (FGD) facilitated at these forums, each involving 30 to 40 schoolteachers from the government schools in Delhi. These FGDs were full day sessions where the teachers’ first discussed around a broader theme concerning their everyday practice in a plenary session, and then discussed around a set of questions in smaller focus groups of six. The participants of the FGDs included teachers who were not familiar with each other (with a few

---

1 As described in chapter 3, two other institutions facilitated my engagement with such forums.
2 Like teacher’s work, school infrastructure, CCE and pedagogy, understanding the child, and the like.
exceptions). These discussions primarily helped in corroborating observations and refining understandings that I developed during my interactions with the E-5 MCD schoolteachers. For constraints of space and for ethical concerns, this chapter would not be presenting the discussions from these FGDs. However, I will refer to it at relevant spaces.

6.1. Meeting teachers: Negotiating entry
As I began to think about and plan the fieldwork at school, the necessity of approaching the ‘authorities’ (the DOE and the MCD) for permissions kept me under stress. I had known through fellow researchers that entering schools, particularly government schools, in Delhi (and that too for a prolonged inquiry) had become ‘practically’ impossible as the authorities do not permit any kind of research work at government schools. However, the experience that I had (as I described in Chapter Three) in entering the schools was ‘somewhat’ different. I did not encounter any difficulty in seeking permission to enter the Sarvodaya School where I had initially thought I would situate the work (where the NGO’s centre was also situated). However, no written permissions were given – all approvals were verbal. The school principal, Mrs. Sachdeva, was also not too unwelcoming. She permitted me to do the work at the school and since I already knew two teachers (Ms. Kavita – the NGO project incharge, and Ms. Sarita) she did not mind my interacting with them.

However, as I started visiting the school regularly, I realised that my presence was not ‘appreciated’ by the teachers, or I should say that it seemed to have become a source of discomfort. Though I was not observing any other classes apart from that of Ms. Kavita (PGT Political Science) and Sarita (TGT Social Studies), the other teachers disapproved of my visits to the school and interactions with the children. Although I did not intervene in the working of the school, my presence (as a teacher, Mrs. Narula) was becoming a source of ‘distraction’. I soon saw myself becoming a matter of gossip at the school. In Mrs. Narula’s view my mode of attire (salwar-kameez) did not fit in with the ‘school norms for teachers’ (wearing sarees). According to another teacher, my ‘roaming around’ and talking informally to students was against the code
of conduct of the school. When I adapted with regard to these two aspects, the fact that I had ‘changed’ became conspicuous. The actual ways in which my presence had created turmoil appeared to be different from those that were stated. Ms. Kavita later told me, “… don’t mind, they aren’t against you, but your presence does not allow them to talk freely or carry on with the business as usual… they don’t mean any of the things that they say.” Following up on the situation the school Principal laid down stringent rules for me. The most difficult of these was, “… only come for Kavita’s classes and then leave; after the school time you may visit the NGO.” She restricted me from observing Sarita’s classes as well. This was because Sarita was a regular schoolteacher and (unlike Ms. Kavita) was not associated with the NGO (with which I was working in the school). It appeared that my presence in the school had become a ‘political’ matter and most of the teachers clearly did not want me to visit the school regularly. Since the idea was not to disturb the routine of the school, there appeared a need to shift to another school.

The experience in the second shift, or what was referred to as the ‘boy’s shift’ [ladkon ki shift], of the E-5 MCD school further made me think about this experience with teachers and their idea of disturbance at work. The teachers of the boys’ shift ensured in structured ways that I did not interact with the children or go around the school. The fact that I had entered the school through a ‘proper channel’ (this time with written permission) did not leave a space with them to deny entry outright. However, as soon as I entered the school on each of my visits they ensured that I was ‘escorted’ to the office to talk to the school incharge, Mr. Azimuddin, who kept me engaged in some ‘very important’ discussion or the other. He continued to talk about the problems and challenges in his own student life, about his life as a teacher and as a ‘poor’ middle class person, about his own children, about his idea of research, and whatever else he could think of. However, what he underlined in almost all these discussions was the worthlessness of doing any research in the school with the schoolboys.
When I insisted on interacting with the children, he invariably asked me to talk to the best teacher of his school, Mr. Singh – popularly called ‘Sardar Sahab’, to get all kinds of ‘information’ about the children. Mr. Azimuddin said, “… Why do you want to do things the long way when the shorter channel is at your disposal?” “You will go and talk to the students for days and will not get correct information for your research… talk to Sardar Sahab, he will give you all details… he knows everything”, he said. When I explained that my work could not have happened without interacting with the children, he ‘warned’ me, “Madam, you yourself are aware of this area… you know what background these boys come from… now what to say, these are our schoolboys only… so young at age but they are very misbehaved… that’s why women teachers do not stay in our school.”

As I continued to visit the school for a month, I found myself increasingly trapped in discussions with Mr. Azimuddin or Sardar Sahab, but I was never denied ‘access’ to the school. In a well-designed fashion, it was ensured that I could only physically enter the school, talk to a few children and a teacher at the most. Contrary to what was stated, Sardar Sahab’s assigned role was to ensure that I was not ‘helped’ by any teacher, child or parent and that I was under surveillance (which was useful in its own ways though). In these experiences several of the research questions I had formulated in the beginning about institutional practice, its accessibility, institutional knowledge, pedagogy and the teacher got refined or rather contextualised in the particular setting that I was accessing. At the same time, this led to the formulation of some new questions as well. The fear that I would not be able to pursue my research in the way I had thought I would was constructed in these interactions and experiences with the schoolteachers. This also led me to think about the notion of ‘access’ to the institution and the idea of ‘public’ institutions.

However, the construction of this fear was not unidirectional. My identity as a ‘researcher’, or as an ‘investigator’, also generated fear and discomfort among the teachers. A fear that I might ‘report’ and ‘record’ the functioning of the school or even the discomfort of being ‘watched’, was related to my identity. Contrary to what I
was expecting, no one in the school was troubled by the topic of my PhD work. When I explicitly discussed what I was intending to do, it did not create the curiosity that I had expected it to. Mr. Azimuddin told me,

… Whatever you want to study is okay; I have been interacting with researchers for several years… their topics may be whatever, that’s none of our business but they disturb the school routine… when someone not known comes to document, there are chances that they complain about the school… and the teachers cannot carry on the work as usual.

What was the ‘work or business as usual’ and how the teachers understand or shape the ‘usual’, were the two particular questions that this experience generated. The question of how is the access to school negotiated between the teachers and the community, began to evolve from this experience and got further articulated as the interactions deepened.

6.1.1. Gaining acceptance

It was with the help of the state SSA that I entered the first shift of the school where the study was carried out. It appeared that there was a strong presence of the SSA in the E-5 school – through an investment of funds for the construction of a permanent wing in the building, a functional toilet for the teachers, two nursery sections and a recommendation for upgrading the school to a ‘Pratibha’ school. Thus, my acquaintance with one of the SSA personnel, Mr. Mehta, played a mediating role between the teachers and me, and ensured that I could continue working at the school. The stature of Mr. Mehta among the schoolteachers of the E-5 MCD school was central in this and ensured a more legitimate space for me in the school. Mr. Mehta explained to Mrs. Alpana (the school incharge), “Don’t worry she is only a student; she is your daughter’s age. She will not disturb you; you are all doing good work as it is… forget that she is an outsider.” In retrospect, this appears to be a ‘network’ that I had developed that (also implicitly represented or) was based on my socio-cultural identity that included elements of my education, caste, gender and age.
Apart from this, what made my presence there meaningful was that the school was likely to experience a shortage of teachers. One of the eight teachers was to go on maternity leave, one was waiting for the approval for her childcare leave (which she didn’t avail of later) and another newlywed teacher had applied for a transfer to a school nearer to her in-laws’ home (which did not come through during my stay at the school). When I expressed the willingness to interact with the schoolchildren, the school incharge was happy (and so were the teachers) and immediately said in a lighter vein that I could take any of the classes or all of them if I was pleased to! I wasn’t asked what my PhD work was about and when I sought their consent, one of the them said (in a tongue-in-cheek manner, but which appeared to have some sort of a serious message), “… You can do whatever you want to, it’s your work, we have no problems but don’t file RTIs or complain to the SSA or DO about things… we will have to fill papers and go here and there… your research will also be hampered in this process.”

However, this was not something that ensured my participation in the school (as became clear from the experience in the second shift of the same school). The recently ‘earned’ Pratibha status of the school lent more confidence to the teachers who did not mind an outsider's presence. As Mrs. Alpana said, “Our school is the best primary [school] of the area, that is why we are now Pratibha. We have nothing to hide unlike the other schools… if you would go to the boy’s shift you would understand what I mean.” How appreciation from the authorities and a consistent presence of the SSA made a difference to the confidence of the teachers, came across in such initial experiences. The teachers of the school were more open in interacting and letting me do the work. This enabled them to be somewhat indifferent towards or not bother much about my presence.

Although initially I was treated like a guest, often served tea and biscuits in the incharge’s room, and referred to as ‘madam’, things changed soon. Soon I found that the older teachers were referring to me as ‘beta’ [child] and those who were in the same age group called me by name. I was included in staffroom parties and was
involved in assisting in the register work. I was seen as an aide in cross-checking (or ‘tallying’) the accounts in the registers, reading out lists as a teacher made register entries, suggesting English translations of words, writing applications, distributing schemes, and the like. Most importantly, I had also begun working as a ‘proxy’ teacher.

In my understanding, what enabled a more spontaneous acceptance among the teachers in the school was my social identity, which seemingly overpowered my professional affiliations. I was younger than all the teachers at the school, was unmarried and even appeared physically fragile. I was ‘obedient’ and less vocal, and therefore ‘harmless’. I had promised confidentiality, was ‘willing’ to take classes and work (for which I often came across as a naïve fool – some teachers in a friendly manner used to ask me “what pleasures I derived from such masochism”). However, this did not mean that I was seen as being there purposelessly – it was understood that I was there for ‘my job’. This lent sanctity to my presence there.

One of the teachers, Shivali – who later became one of my principal informants, found me to be a reliable source of information and ‘academic guidance’ as she was doing her MA in Education from IGNOU and wanted to become a ‘university lecturer’. She consulted me on several of her assignments and discussed several general issues. At times I even wrote some pieces for her submissions. The meaning of ‘naturalistic’ inquiry also became clearer to me in this process of relating to the teachers at this school, particularly Shivali, where instead of me looking for a principal informant it appeared to me that the principal informant herself approached or rather discovered me. All the informal/general interactions that I had with Shivali or rather the entire process of knowing her as a person, enabled a perspective on how a teacher is situated in the socio-political context of a school and society. In that it enabled to probe how she understands herself and her work, how she relates to the children and the community, and the ways in which this shapes the pedagogic character of the school and outlines the framework of the ‘institutional’ knowledge.
In sum, the relation with the teachers defined my access to (and set the tone for the fieldwork at) the school. It was in the framework of my relationships with the teachers that my rapport with the children was founded (an aspect that I will describe in Chapter Seven). How the teachers perceived and related to me also shaped the children’s ideas about me. This initial introduction to the teachers in their context, also introduced the ‘fears’ that teachers had and how they guarded and held on to the ‘business as usual’ – and in doing so how they assumed the role and authority of a gatekeeper.

6.2. ‘The usual’

The title of this study had been formulated with a phrase ‘politics of institutional knowledge’. The idea initially was to observe the classroom processes and how they shape the social experience of children from a marginalised social group. This idea underwent a major change in the process in which I understood how institutional knowledge ‘worked’ in practice at the MCD school. Initially, as I started visiting the school, I used to work as a proxy teacher – where a teacher who was planning to be on leave asked me to ‘manage’ her class in her absence. I used to ask the teachers about the course content they wanted me to cover, to which most replied that I shouldn’t worry about the course (which they will take care of) and that I should only ‘manage’ the class. In general, I thought that loss of teaching days would be a critical concern in a school, but if I count the number of days when all the teachers were present during my stay there, I would not be able to count more than five days. Some teachers were regular while others absented themselves too frequently. Even when they were not absent, they were not in the classes.

A normal day at the school was six hours long and began with a morning assembly – which was hardly a ten-minute affair. Then the children strolled into the classes and sometimes the teachers pushed them in with a scolding. The girls who were assigned the gate-keeping duties went to report to the teachers. Those assigned ‘broom duty’ continued to sweep the class while assembly went on and shouted at their peers who entered before they had finished the work. The teachers entered the classrooms after
the cleaning was completed, and one could hear attendance being taken in the classes. For roughly around one hour the teachers remained in their classes. After that, some came to the incharge’s room and some moved to sit and talk to the other teachers, while others continued with record or register work inside the classrooms. After the first hour the class monitors managed the classes.

Initially it appeared that this was a temporary phase. I was told that because of a forthcoming SSA meeting to be held at the school, there was some ‘disturbance’. I tended to believe this as this school was known to be the best school in the area. However, the scenario continued for long. There were no classes held in the month of September as I was told that most of the term’s work had been covered earlier on. In October there were too many holidays and November was the same. During the school exams, I was asked not to come to the school as there may be an inspection and my presence might create a problem. Then there were holidays, and then school attendance became too scanty as the students with their families started leaving for their villages for the vacations.

As the time passed I began approaching the teachers to observe their classes for the first hour in which it appeared that they were teaching. In having attempted to observe the classes, I landed up ‘managing’ the class for the whole day – at the concerned teacher’s request. Instead of my seeking permission to observe their classes, the teachers requested me to do so – by which they meant that they would leave after handing over the charge to me. I continued to wait for things to become as one expects them to be at a school. Despite being in the role of a researcher, I was ‘presuming’ that this situation was temporary as during initial interactions the teachers had expressed their ‘grudge’ or complaints about their inability to devote time to teaching – which they said that they loved to do – due to the non-academic workload. Therefore, when I found that they were neither teaching nor doing non-academic work despite having time, it looked like an ‘unusual’ scenario.
In fact in all the FGDs that I had with larger groups of teachers on the two external forums (as stated in the introduction to this chapter) the problem of non-academic work burden was the first among the three most prominent concerns (or probably the only concerns) that were brought forth by the participants – consensually and poignantly. The concern for the workload invariably took up the topic set out for discussion during these FGDs. The two other concerns were that of the poor infrastructural facilities, and the children’s ‘background’ and lack of interest in education. One of the sections of an FGD report is reproduced below for the sake of clarity.

**Box 6.1: An excerpt from an FGD report**

The following sections have been directly extracted from the report of one of the FGDs with 40 schoolteachers working in the government schools in Delhi (with representations from all kinds of schools). These are excerpts from the presentations that the teachers made after discussing in smaller groups of 5 to 6 participants each. For maintaining confidentiality, the source is not cited.

“Despite teachers’ motivation to work, the environment in government schools does not foster quality. The basic infrastructure, including rooms, furniture, learning resources, laboratories, playground and even availability of drinking water and toilets, is inadequate in most schools (particularly in the MCD schools). Within the infrastructural limitations, it becomes challenging to ‘hold’ a large number of students inside classrooms, with pupil teacher ratios staggering at times to 80:1. Because of the shortage of teachers, sections of classes are often combined, without any assessment of how teaching-learning would happen in such circumstances.” (p. 11)

“Moreover, the socio-economic contexts in which most children accessing State schools are situated also influence everyday classroom practice. Apparently, it seems that children and parents from deprived background ‘lack interest’ in or are

---

3 The above narratives matched the findings of PROBE (1999, 2011) the study done by Ramechandran et. al. (2005).
apathetic towards education, which makes a teacher’s work all the more difficult…

Many children are engaged in economic and/or domestic work while they are attending schools. It is difficult for them to devote time and effort to studies, and wait to become ‘educated enough’ to earn a decent living. Given these conditions, the implementation of policies (such as No detention policy, Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation and child-centered teaching learning) for improvement in quality of education becomes a problem in itself.” (p. 12)

“Nature of work

With the heavy non-academic workload, teachers are left with a little time to actually teach. Most of their time is consumed in maintaining registers, administrating schemes, filling-up various kinds of forms and writing official letters. More than being a constraint on time, at a deeper level, such a situation destroys work satisfaction. It creates a non-academic image of a teacher in the larger public domain and even in a teacher’s own perception. In these circumstances, it becomes difficult for teachers to reflect on the quality of their teaching.” (p. 13)

Therefore, I expected to observe how these concerns intervened in teaching-learning processes in the everyday classroom and how teachers were constrained by these. The teachers of the E 5 MCD school had particularly asked me to assess the situation by myself and write a representation to the MHRD and the MCD without naming their school. The powerfully conveyed narrative of ‘assault on teacher’s academic space’, the images of the meek dictator and the complexities of classroom processes that literature had introduced me to, particularly in the context of government schools, also strengthened this feeling.

While initially the teachers not teaching in the school appeared to be an unusual situation, in due course of time it became clear that this constituted the usual. On the one hand, this was not a new observation as it has been documented in literature and studies (Pratham, 2009; Banerjee, 2011; and the works stated earlier). On the other
hand, it took time to make-sense of the ‘work as usual’, particularly when I was also participating with the teachers in everyday school life and also meeting a larger group on the other forums where a different impression about how they worked and perceived their work was being generated.

**Box 6.2.: The nursery school**

As stated in preceding chapters, there were two sections of nursery or pre-school classes (being run by UEEM) within the premises of the E 5 MCD school. There were significant differences in the working of the rest of the school and the pre-school classes. The two nursery sections were separately built in temporary structures in the school. However, these temporary structures looked much better built than the ‘permanent barracks’ of the school. The rooms were properly lit and ventilated, and had a functional and disabled friendly toilet attached. A contractual employee (a woman) was attached with the nursery school to assist the teachers. She mostly assisted the children in using the toilet, supervised those who fell asleep and ensured that the children left the premises with either the parents or the elder siblings studying in the school. (However, she left the school in the month in which I had started the fieldwork).

The teachers of the pre-school sections were mostly in the classrooms. They kept the children engaged in work – mostly drawing, scribbling and sleeping. One of them tells me, “If we don’t keep them engaged, it will become impossible to sit in the classroom… they will run here and there and we will run after them… If you practically look at our work, it is to make the children sit in the classroom and look after them; that is it… Yes it is very difficult but what can we do?” In many ways, despite the pre-school being within the primary school, it functioned like a separate school. The teachers of these classes rarely interacted with the PRT teachers and were not involved in the school activities. Their records and registers were also separate, except the fact that they reported to the same incharge. It appeared that the parents whose children were in the nursery were also regular to the school and met the teachers – even if it was only limited to greeting the teacher.
In fact the work that the nursery classes did was replicated at the centres of both the NGOs with which I worked. In the project centres with clarity of purpose the children were ‘taught’ the basic mannerisms that were a pre-requisite in the mainstream schools. These included making the children habitual to be indoors, eat ‘properly’, use the toilet, sit for hours, listen to the teacher, recite and memorise some things, dance, hold a pen and initiate writing. The children who stayed for six months learnt all these.

However, this was the case with the children who were under 8 years of age. The older children were not only difficult to ‘discipline’ but difficult to retain as well. Ms. Kavita explained the situation, “… with the younger ones it is always easy to work. They start responding very soon, but with those above 9-10 years it becomes extremely tough. Nothing much happens – they dropout most of the times. We all know they will drop-out or will be less frequent and when we bring them back they would have forgot everything – and one has to start from zero every time.” This condition is also explained by researches done in the area of cognition and plasticity which is increasingly being used in the area of Early Childhood Care and Education (Stiles, 2008). Using these it is inferred that early stimulation increases a child’s chances of being at school longer and enhances cognitive reception (Evangelou, Sylva, Kyriacou, Wild and Glenny, 2009).

6.2.1. Shivali: A different teacher
In this scenario Shivali, a principal informant, came across as an exception. Rather, she was acclaimed to be an exception by the school incharge, the BRCC and Mr. Mehta. She was the class teacher of IV B, and the only one in the school who did not move out of her class without a reason. She resisted and felt irritated when asked to leave the classroom even when the incharge called her. She taught for the first one hour in the class, whereby she usually began by listing five sentences in English on the board and asked the children to make a note of them.
The sentences were ‘random’, that is, they did not seem to pertain to the textbook content nor were they related to the classroom discussions of the previous day. The sentences made on one of the days were as follows: “The cow is a holy animal,” “The girl went to the market”, “We should help others”, “We should not tell lie”, and the like. By asking the children questions, the meaning of the sentences was communicated. After the children noted the sentences, Shivali repeated the same process with sentences in Hindi. She did not translate the sentences but gave fresh sentences of similar nature. On one of the days she wrote, ‘Gulab ek phool hai’, ‘Badal barish karte hain’, ‘Hum kal ghoomne gaye they’ [The rose is a flower, Clouds bring rain, We went for an outing yesterday]. She at times corrected these sentences in the exercise books, when the children voluntarily came to her to show their work.

Having done this for the first one hour, she asked the children to open their textbooks and read a particular chapter on their own. Post lunch break, sometimes mathematics was ‘taught’ by asking the children to solve questions from a guidebook that she carried. One child was asked to jot down the solved problems from the book on the board, while the others had to copy them.

Box 6.3. Case of a revered book

A common Mathematics guidebook was used in the school. It was handed over to Shivali by Mrs. Alpana, who herself borrowed it from another teacher when she began teaching. This guidebook had been in circulation in the school from several years – nobody could specify from when – and the teachers who sometimes ‘taught’ mathematics (by handing over the book to the monitor to solve problems on the board when they made a lot of noise) asked for it from Shivali. A child was sent to Shivali to ask for ‘maths wali kitab’. Shivali monopolised the book and some teachers disapproved of this behaviour. The book’s cover was torn and none of the teacher’s knew who had authored it. It had all the topics of the primary level Mathematics – in fact it would have had more than that, had it not been sliced/torn after the page number 221. The remaining section of the book was nowhere to be seen. Shivali had no clue about it, and Mrs. Alpana was unsure. The children were
familiar with the book. As soon as Shivali asked her class to open their Maths notebooks, the class monitor in an automated fashion came forward and stood by her side waiting for the book to be taken out. The monitor Rima and three other children told me that they liked the book as it had solved problems. It emerged that this was the same book that was also used at the children’s tuitions. Rima told me that this book actually had 350 pages and their tuition teacher also had it. Rima also highlighted the fact that she was the one who carried the book most of the times and thus felt important. While using the text in the class she thought herself as playing the role of her tuition teacher. “I imitate Sir ji. He teaches very well. I learn from him and teach my class”, said Rima.

Shivali, when not teaching, gave class-work to the children to keep them engaged. This included tasks like – “Write ten sentences on things you like”, “List your daily routine from morning to evening”, or “Write ten sentences on your teacher”. Having given the work to them, she continued to either work on her MA assignments, read a guidebook for the UGC National Eligibility Test (NET), fill some of the record books, or cover her registers with new covers. After some days she appeared to be relatively free and chatted with me during the school hours when I went to observe her class. Shivali was also the only teacher who used the TLM fund\textsuperscript{4}. During the year in which I visited, she bought charts to cover her class diary and the children’s notebooks and a few cardboards to fit into the broken windowpanes through which the sunlight fell on her table. She said that during her pre-service practice-teaching she made many charts

---

\textsuperscript{4} The TLM fund: Every teacher at the primary school got a Teaching Learning Material (TLM) fund of Rs. 500 that every teacher gets annually for buying resources that may be used for classroom pedagogic activities. During interactions with the schoolteachers and observations at the MCD School, it emerged that this fund was used for buying register covers, stationery (scales, erasers, sharpeners, fluid corrector etc.) and cardboards to cover broken windowpanes. Some teachers told that they deposited it in the school’s bank account. None of the teachers whom I interacted with (from out of 40) had used it for some pedagogic activity. The SSA consultant Mr. Mehta and Mr. Walia both, in two separate interviews, confirmed such use and non-use of TLM fund, not only at this school but also at a national level. In a SSA workshop with the government schoolteachers in the block where the school was situated, a teacher suggested that this fund should be stopped as she found it to be useless and only adding to her work – and the other 31 teachers agreed. Delayed delivery and shortage of textbooks and dress-material for uniform\textsuperscript{5}; and mid-day meal were other noticeable areas where contradictions existed. In class V-B, some five years back using some grant that the school procured a big poster of Jawaharlal Nehru. It was around four feet long and three feet wide and was placed on a wall near the door. On two occasions, a child from the nursery (Neelu), who came to meet her elder sister (Hema) in class V-B did not enter the classroom and stood on the door holding her stomach – the child looked terrified and despite repeated attempts of Hema to pull her in the classroom, refused and resisted. On the third instance when I asked Neelu, she started crying. Hema told me that Neelu was afraid of the ‘man in the poster’.
and TLMs but found it extremely difficult. After becoming a regular teacher, she realised the futility of teaching aids.

The children in Shivali’s class appeared to be habitual to this way of teaching-learning. They had been with her from Class II onwards. There was an implicit understanding between her and the children, so much so that after the first hour in the class their task was only to sit quiet and appear to be engaged. Rima, the class monitor, on inquiring tells me, “… after studying we all have to sit quiet and do our work; we can do anything – Madam does not say anything, but if we make noise we will obviously get scolded” [daant to padegi hi na]. At times, when Shivali forgot to tell the girls what to do after the first hour, Rima and the others themselves asked: “Ma’am ji, which book do we have to open today?” Having opened the books and sharpened their pencils, they sat for a while staring at the pages and gradually (almost naturally) began talking to each other, but in whispers. Whenever their voices rose above a certain level, Shivali reminded the children to do their work. In a conditioned manner, as if she had set a self-timer, after around every 15 minutes she warned, “What is happening… kuch padhlo nalayakon” [study something, good for nothings].

In the observations it emerged that the children in her class were much more ‘disciplined’ (as compared to the others in the school). They were much more regular as well (around 30% of them having more than 75% attendance). Their notebooks, books, pencil boxes and bags were better maintained than those of the other children in the school, and they could sit silently throughout the day. On some occasions when I replaced Shivali in her class, despite all attempts the girls of the class did not speak or respond (excepting Rima and Kittoo). All sat silently and gazed at me as I attempted to talk to them and waited for them to participate or initiate something. Apart from this, as compared to those in the other sections, the children from class IV-B were able to read and write relatively fluently and with fewer mistakes – in fact their writing appeared to be neater and practised regarding the flow and formation of letters. They had also been participating in the zonal competitions. The school attributed all this to Shivali’s hard work. For all these visible proficiencies, she was
the first one to have been given an opportunity to move her class to the new building constructed recently by the UEEM funds. What was all the more exceptional about her was that she was called as a resource person for the in-service training of teachers (I will shortly describe this aspect).

**Box 6.4: Shivali’s MA assignments and her aspirations**

Shivali very often sought help from me to write her assignments. She particularly found it very difficult to write answers for what she called “general knowledge based and theoretical questions”, which cannot be found in the books. One such theme she grappled with was the RtE. One of her assignments expected her to describe the RtE and its implications on the work and responsibilities of a schoolteacher. Another question related to constructivism and its meaning in the classroom context. She thought that such theoretical questions had always been a challenge for her even as a school student. “Theory is the misery of my life; I like practical subjects”, she said. Although she liked ‘solving’ statistics questions, she found the paper on educational research completely out of place – of no use in the everyday teaching, and she had been “grappling” with the terms like hypothesis, refutation, qualitative and quantitative paradigms, etc. Having been asked to think of a problem she would want to research in her classroom and based on it design a small proposal, she requested me to find a problem for her. If one reads her written work, one would find several kinds of mistakes. This also reflected in her blackboard work and the corrections she made in the children’s notebooks (see Appendix 6(1): Selection from a note written by Shivali). In one of her English classes she asked me, “For a cow do we put ‘she’ or ‘it’? ...The cow is a holy animal so it is treated as a lady; I am confused...” (sic). During our initial interactions, she talked to me only in English, even when I made it a point that I talk to her (and everyone in the school) in Hindi.

She had been working in the school for the past four years and felt that she had worked day and night for the children. During my initial meetings with her she used to say, “I never tried for a promotion, despite being all deserving and despite
the bad system in the MCD.” On being asked why, she said, “I love children so much and I am needed here so much that I cannot even think of going from this place.” However, she was particularly interested in seeking guidance from me to clear the NET for lectureship and the various channels through which she could at least become a lecturer in a DIET. She had several questions to ask me about careers in general. She had many complaints about the school, which she wanted me to document and share on forums where it mattered. She allowed me to use her name also if needed as she would soon be leaving the school for a better opportunity. It was in these contradictions that I began understanding her better.

During the work at the school, I did not observe episodes of teaching-learning where something beyond this was happening. Rather, Shivali’s class was the only one where children engaged in writing and reading for at least an hour every day. The most obvious of associations with school – teaching, learning, traditional rote method, transaction of textbooks, teacher’s dependency on textbooks, questions regarding the experience of children in the negotiation of the syllabus, and the co-construction of curricular knowledge – did not appear even in episodic form during the fieldwork. Even in Shivali’s classes, I could never observe how she transacted or introduced a concept. For example, while listing sentences in Hindi, she asked the children to underline all the sarvāṇaam (pronouns); but she did not teach them what sarvāṇaam was, as if the children were already familiar with the concept. Similarly, without teaching fractions, she asked the children to solve the problems from the guidebook by themselves, as if the children already ‘knew’ fractions (‘Halves and quarters’). Despite this several children in the class (and the school as well) ‘knew’ reading-writing and were well versed with the curriculum contents. As described in the previous chapters this was an outcome of the tuitions, which at least 60% of the children had right from Class I onwards. Shabnam, a class V-B child, told me, “Most of them go for tuitions but some do not go because their mothers and sisters can teach them at home…those who do not have any of these unko to likhna bhi nahi ata” [they don’t even know how to write]. Shivali affirms,
… You know, most children have tuitions, those who do not lag behind the others at all levels… whether we teach or not parents would send them [children] for tuitions, then why should I put in extra effort… good that they learn… how much work would a teacher do anyway? I have five charges with me – midday meal, my own class, uniform charge, school attendance charge, textbook charge – what do I do? Then these people don’t let me have holidays either; sometimes census, sometimes election, sometimes in-service training...what facilities does the government gives us that it expects us to do all this and teach also?

While such practice was deemed ‘exceptional’, the norm it legitimised kept defining the school as the workspace or as a space in which teachers practised their profession. Some questions that became pertinent in this regard included – In the absence of a regular teaching-learning activity how was the relationship between the children and the teachers constituted? How do teachers perceive their own work and employment and justify it? How does it have a bearing upon the community that looks up to the school for education? How does the character of the public institution for education unfold in this context? It also became necessary to understand the three critical concerns that the teachers raised (see Box 6.2.) by understanding their conception of work, of the children and community and that of ideal working conditions. In beginning to explore these questions, it would be meaningful to present an outline of the interactions between the schoolchildren and teachers, and between the parents and teachers.

6.2.2. ‘Checkpoint’ and gatekeepers
The authority and the centrality of the teachers in the schools had come across in explicit ways as I attempted to find my feet there as a researcher. The other ways in which the teachers assumed a similar role became visible in the process through which children were admitted to the school. In this context (as explored in Chapter Five through the narrative of janampatri) the RtE Act 2009 mandates that no child
shall be denied admissions to the school, irrespective of the parents’ ability to produce the relevant documents. The RtE was implemented in April 2010 and the orders pertaining to this had reached the school before I began the work. Mr. Mehta confirmed this as he said, “… the BRCC of the ward, Mr. Sharma, himself hand delivered it and Mrs. Alpana herself received it.” Although the teachers did not ‘deny’ admission to any child, the procedure of enrolling children at the school was tweaked in a kind of arbitrary fashion. It is here particularly that the centrality of a teacher, her authority and the social functions that she performs became visible in a broader context. Some of the first observations pertaining to this would enable in making sense of the situation.

a. What constitutes denial to admission?

It was 11.15 am, October 4, 2010, when a man came to the school asking for dakhile wali madam (the teacher who is incharge of admissions). The children, who were standing since morning at the school entry on ‘gate duty’, guided him to the incharge’s office (the only ‘office’ in the school). The man had come for the admission of his child. This was his fourth visit. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, was dressed in a shirt and pant which had faded marks of colours – in all likelihood colours of the Holi festival which had been celebrated months ago.

Only one teacher, Mrs. Ilesh, (along with me) was sitting in the ‘office’. She was the admissions incharge for the academic year. When the man entered the room, Mrs. Ilesh was engrossed in explaining the poor state of the school attendance to me while she was checking her class attendance record. She sounded convinced and was trying to convince me about the explicit disinterest of the parents to send their children to school to study. She said, “All these parents do not have any interest in educating their children… they come to school only for the schemes… tell a single child that something is being distributed in the school, within ten minutes those children would also come who would have never been seen before in the school.”
Having waited for two minutes, the man intervened:

Man: *Namaste madam ji*

Mrs. Ilesh: Namaste, you have again turned up at this time? You were told that whatever work has to be done would be done before 11 am.

Man: Madam, I have left work to come here, I cannot come early… this is the fourth visit; madam [please] enrol today.

Mrs. Ilesh: What do you think; we are all sitting idle here?

Man: Madam, I am not saying this… it is just a matter of a few minutes for you…

Mrs. Ilesh: [No response]

Man: Madam I am a man with a family, the only earning member. Every day if I come here for enrolment then it will become extremely difficult.

Mrs. Ilesh: You know I come to the school at seven in the morning, I work for a full 6 hours, shout in class, fill registers, manage admissions, and *you all* keep coming whenever you want. Whenever you would come, you expect me to leave all the work and start doing your work.

Man: Tell me madam now, when should I come? I will do as you say.

Mrs. Ilesh: Show the papers

Man: Madam, we were told that the *janampatri* is not needed but you asked so I brought it.

Mrs. Ilesh [flips through papers]: *Bache ko kyun nahi laye?* [Why haven’t you brought the child?]

Man: Madam you said first get the papers made, bring the child after that…

Mrs. Ilesh: But it wasn’t said only to bring papers… bring the child along tomorrow, we will write the name.

Man: Madam [pleading] please write the name today, I will bring *gudiya* tomorrow.
Mrs. Ilesh: *Aisa hai, bache ko dekhe bina to dakhila nahi kar dungi na main? Kal usko leke ana saaf kapde pehna kar, khana khila kar aur ek pencil lekar… likha kar dekhungi pehle.* [Look, I won’t admit the child without seeing her, right? Bring her along tomorrow, and dress her in good clean clothes, and feed her a meal, and bring a pencil… I will make her write first]

Man: *Acha ji, par kal to hojaega na?* [Fine, will it get done tomorrow?]

Mrs. Ilesh: How can I tell whether or not it will be done, but come in time, I will see what I can do.

In this instance, on the one hand the teacher does not deny the access as located within the structure of her official duty, but on the other by ‘asking for’ the papers to admit the child she makes her institutional authority evident to the parent. The teacher appeared to be discharging a gate-keeping function and exercising her power to regulate (if not deny) access to the institution. Furthermore, she was asserting her authority by determining the ‘norms’ of the organisation – like that of cleanliness, food and investment – which would in turn consolidate her power of gate-keeping and the authority that she would continue to maintain even after granting access. This authority is institutional to some extent, but is also derived from her social-political position in the social hierarchy. How this process continues after the access is granted will form a part of the next chapter. When the man left, Mrs. Ilesh started explaining how ill mannered the people were and how much they disrespected the teachers. She said, “They feel that we are always sitting idle… how much labour we do, how would they know… the one who bears it only knows it”.

Mrs. Ilesh is the teacher of Class I and has been teaching for the past twelve years. Her husband is an engineer and both her children are pursuing undergraduate studies at a State university. Mrs. Ilesh reaches the school an hour later than the actual reporting time. She usually comes to the school incharge’s room having marked the attendance in her class and having given a ‘griha-karya’ [homework] for completion in the class. Her class is either unmanaged or managed by some ‘senior’ students.
Otherwise, at random a teacher walking by the class slaps, scolds and warns the children to be inside their room. However, Mrs. Ilesh ensures that she leaves her bag in her classroom and a register on her desk. She says, “You never know who comes at what time… at least they will see my bag and understand that the class is not unattended.” She goes back to the class at 12 pm when the parents start coming to pick up their wards. About her class she says, “These children trouble so much… keeping registers is much better than tolerating them… as it is, what can we teach in the first class… even they don’t come to study… nor do their parents send them to school to study.”

Such a situation resembles the one that PROBE (1999) and Subrahmanian (2005) also encounters in the case of Dalit and Adivasi children at primary schools in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, where teachers justify their unwillingness to teach by constructing a counter-narrative about the community’s intentions. Majumdar (2004) explains it through the ‘social distance’ between the teachers and the taught, when she analyses the data for difference in the proportions of SC/ST students and SC/ST teachers in government schools and private schools in rural areas. However, caste doesn’t come across as a factor in the context that I have presented as this argument has been made by the teacher not for a particular social group but the entire ‘community’ that accesses the State school. I will shortly explore an account that brings out the complication of an urban setting in relation to how caste and class operate in tandem or anonymously (where caste appears to get involved with class as only as a matter of ‘coincidence’). However, what is important to note here is that while on the one hand the narratives of uneducatbility constitute a way in which exclusion takes visible forms, it also highlights a sense of lack of love for work, and casualness as well (which is justified through such constructions). This adds meaning to how the narrative ‘non-willingness to study’ is constituted (as discussed in Chapter Five). It is more important to note is that the idea of not teaching seems to have aroused a need to justify, morally much more than technically, the futility of teaching the children. In fact, a close reading of the narrative would indicate that the teacher in
some way feels guilty about not being in the class – in realising that she is away on the sly – but rationalises this by making a case for the uneducability of the children.

Box 6.5: Who was the man?

The man who had come to school is called Prakash. He works as a contractual employee with a thekedar [contractor] who takes up whitewashing contracts. He also takes up some plumbing jobs in the neighbourhood, and is intending to start his own work as a plumber. Relative independence, entrepreneurial prospects and economic betterment, all three motivate him in this direction. He has studied upto class 5, but says that he hardly remembers anything about studies except that he can read and write basic Hindi. Prakash’s day begins at 5 am in the morning. He says he wakes up an hour earlier than what he should as one has to line-up to use the mobile toilet van. He gets ready by 7.30 am and cycles to the house where the thekedar has taken up a whitewashing contract, which usually involves cycling for 40 minutes. His work keeps him engaged till 7 pm or at times 9 pm, with only one hour lunch break in between. Having started for home, he stops in between to talk to a shopkeeper who promises to help him in starting his own work as a plumber.

He reaches home around 9.30 pm or later. During the work season he earns somewhere around Rs. 2000 for a 7 day job; other times much less than this. He is the only earning member of the family, which includes his wife, four children and mother. He is convinced that his three sons must learn some ‘work’ along with schooling so that they can stand-up for themselves and the family. For schooling he says, “Theek hai padhai likhai achi baat hai, zaruri hai... par khali isse to kya hoga... kaam kaaj ana bahut zaruri hai... bina uske kya karenge... par jab aajkal sab padhate hain bache ko to hum bhi to chod nahi sakte”5. He would want his sons to have their own entrepreneurial initiatives. He has been going to the school for the admission of his eldest child, a daughter, and believes that education has a

---

5 “Okay studying is good, it’s necessary… but what will happen with this only?... knowing work is extremely essential… without it what will we do… but when everyone educates [schools] the child these days then we also can’t leave it.”
The Teachers and School Space: Work, Relations and Lives

| different function for the girls: “Ladki kuch padhegi to ghar acha rehta hai, kagaj wagairah ka kaam kardegi... thodi baat karna seekhegi...” | For enrolling his daughter in school he has been reporting to the thekedar in the morning and then slipping away for two hours in between after informing a fellow worker. He is irritated but prepared to come to school again and says, “kaam karana hai to chakkar to lagte hain”. Prakash comes from the Nepal-India border and describes himself as a Rajput, but later on brings a caste certificate to the school to claim a scheme for SC children. |

The idea of education that Prakash and many other parents like him have is different from what the school provides. The kind of schooling and education that Prakash visualises doesn’t exist, and he is accessing the school despite that. By doing so in some ways he is recognising the cultural capital of schooling which comes across in the idea that ‘when everybody sends their children to school how can he deprive his children from schooling’. He does not problematize the idea of school education actively, but subtly registers it in how he balances his aspirations from education. However, he expects schools to provide a basic set of reading, writing, speaking and comprehension skills – which the school does not seem to provide. Even when the tuitions replace the school in this significant function, schooling does not cease to lose its worth. The worth is maintained through its ‘omnipresence’ in the lives of the better-off classes. The gate-keeping function that the teachers execute adds to its significance. This negotiation between the school and the masses is the process where the NGO working in the area had found its space. The NGO works as a channel between the gatekeepers of the schools and the people who have the willingness to send their children to school, but feel limited by the ‘denial’ tradition.

On 13 April 2011, around 11 a.m., a man, a woman, a girl child and a young adolescent male came to the school office. This was a family visiting the school to enrol the child. They had come to the school a day before but were asked to come after a few days as Mrs. Ilesh was on leave. When they arrived the office was filled

---

6 “If a girl will study something the house runs well, she will do paper work… will learn to speak a little.....”

237
with teachers. Mrs. Sharma’s son got a job in a well-known multinational company, for which she had organised a small ‘party’. All the teachers were dressed in their best and were eating and laughing when the four people entered the room. Having stood unattended for a while, the father said:

Father: “Admission ke liye aye hain ji” [I have come for admission]

Mrs. Ilesh [without looking at them]: Come tomorrow between 9 and 10

Father: I had come yesterday at that time

Mrs. Ilesh: You must not have come between 9 and 10

Father: We have come several times but the work didn’t get done.

Mrs. Ilesh: Have you brought the janampatri?

Father: Yes, here it is

Mrs. Ilesh [looking at the papers]: Ye bachchi to choti hai, iska pehli mein nahi hoga, nursery mein karao [This child is too young, she cannot be enrolled in the first standard, enrol her in nursery].

Father: Won’t happen? Why?

Mrs. Ilesh: She is May born, so she is five; had she been April born then it could have been done.

The child who was holding the father's hand was carefully looking at the teacher’s face while she was speaking. The teacher did not look at her or speak to her – it appeared as if the child was not there at all for the teacher. The presence of the family did not perturb the proceedings in the room, as this was a situation and work ‘as usual’. One of the teachers was shouting at the top of her voice asking the other teachers to pass a food item to her. Everything in this situation was so banal and commonplace in the day-to-day affairs of the school that it ceased to be visible to the teachers. Catering to at least five parents every day, informing them about the same process and answering similar doubts, was mundane. The family continued to explore options by talking to Ilesh madam:

Mother: Then let us wait for one month… when she is 6 we’ll bring her.
Mrs. Ilesh [sarcastically]: “Aise thode hi hota hai… she will only get through nursery… our [middle class] children go to school for two years before the first.

Father: Will have to go to the nursery? Won’t get into pehli?

Mrs. Ilesh: All our children do so, we aren’t mad that we send our children to school for two years before the pehli; you go to nursery and get her admitted

Father: Where do we go now for the nursery?

Mrs. Ilesh: To the room number two

The comparison that the teacher introduces between the order that she ‘herself’ or parents from the middle-class follow (with respect to schooling) and the ‘easy route’ that the family wanted to take for their child, is of relevance here. Why would she bring in such comparison where it does not seem to be contextual or even logical, is a question worth pondering upon. It is in such instances that the ‘social distances’ that work in the perception of the teacher, the discomfort and mismatch she experiences between her socioeconomic world and her profession, and also the lack of agreement with the work that she is mandated to do (as a public servant) become visible. How such classed norm reaches the parents who access the government schools or implicates the parents decision regarding enrolling the child is another aspect that comes across from this situation.

Mrs. Ilesh joined the party as soon as the family went out. The family returned in a few minutes saying that there was nobody in the room where they were sent. Mrs. Ilesh said, “You won’t find someone at any time you come; do one thing, come in early in the morning”. She quickly added something very pressingly as if her whole argument would have remained incomplete without this, “…aur suno ye bachchi ko thoda saaf-suthra kar ke lana. …ache kapde pehna ke… School hai ye, koi mazak thode hi hai” [and listen bring the child a little clean and tidy. …put on good clothes… This is a school, not a mockery].
To understand what she was saying I observed the child. It appeared that a visible extra effort had been made in ‘preparing’ the child for her first visit to the school. She had been dressed in a light blue full-sleeved kurta and salwar with a pink dupatta – probably an outfit that would have been kept for special occasions, and her slippers looked new. Her hair was oiled and eyes were neatly kohled. The way in which the child was moving about in or ‘managing’ her ‘dress’ communicated that there was something special about it. The fact that the whole family had come for the purpose of her enrolment also indicated how critical the decision-making would have been. As I talked to the parents while they were returning to the home, I came to know that this was the first girl child from the family who was coming to school. The mother told me that all of them had come together as they did not know, “Kab kya zarurat pad jae” [One never knows what need may come across]. The parents did not talk much except that they communicated a disconcert over how they were being sent back. The meaning and the worth that schooling has gathered traditionally, plays a role in deciding the significance the process of entry to school marks, and what emotions it arouses in those who have gained access to it for the first time – and in such moments the meaning of ‘right to education’ becomes animated. Making sense of the processes and the rules for this access (like the age eligibility) for the first time, in itself is a task that requires the help and support of relatives/neighbours, or the jaan-pehchan network, which is often used to ‘get past’ the gate-keepers.

The family did not return to the school over the months I stayed there. The meaning of ‘access’ to the school, ‘denial’ to enrol and in turn the meaning of the institution called school was framed in these interactions and process for the community. While the authority of the teacher (negotiated through/in the symbols like janampatri, cleanliness of the child and the like) gets established in such situations, the category of ‘our children’ and ‘your children’ also gets introduced within the institutional space. How a child is introduced to the space, to the teacher and to the social distance during the first visit to the school is highlighted in this situation. Although the child as an agency does not seem to be ‘involved’ in the dialogue, her presence and her observation of the interaction in itself ensures her involvement in learning this first
lesson at the school. How caste was involved in the process, if at all, was not explicit. However, it came through at times in ambivalent ways in the narratives of hygiene and of cultural uneducability of the community.

On another occasion, a mother who had visited the school for the second time was sent back to come another day as Mrs. Ilesh was late. The mother complained of having taken a leave from her job of a freshly appointed MCD *safai karamchari*:

Mother: Madam ji, [please] tell me what all papers do I have to bring so that I don’t have to take many leaves.

Mrs. Jain: Tomorrow you come with the child [Mrs. Jain did not even notice the child standing near the door]

Mother: I have brought the child today as well.

Mrs. Jain: Okay, but what will she do today? Bring her tomorrow.

Mother: But at least tell the *kagaj-patri* to be brought so that I save a second round [*doosra chakkar bach jae*]

Mrs. Jain: Janampatri and two photographs, and your *jaati pramana patra* also for the scheme for [SC] category

Mother: *Janampatri to nahi hai... photo khincha lenge* [Don’t have *janampatri*... will get photo clicked]

Mrs. Jain: *Bas to fir aise nahi hoga* [It won’t happen like this]

Mother: Madam please tell properly, I have to leave work and come

Mrs. Jain: Yours won’t get done in one visit... you will have to run around... you will have to make an affidavit

As I observed the dialogue, I wanted to understand why in the first instance the teacher talked about the caste certificate which was not necessarily needed at the time of admission. On inquiring about the matter the teacher tells me, “What is there to not know about it? She [the woman who came to enrol the child] says that she works as an MCD *jamadarni.*” The ‘automatic’ connection between the work and the caste was not new and was encountered on several occasions (while I was in the field). The manner in which the people from the community described their ‘family name’, as presented in Chapter Four, also indicated how work was offered as a substitute of
caste. However, in this case it was the teacher who attributed the caste to a person and in that she not only involved the person but an institution and a caste community. “The MCD *jamadarnis* are very vociferous”, said Mrs. Jain. Therefore, she was convinced about the need to ensure that the mother was tamed during the admission itself: “I will see how she misbehaves with me in future… did you see how she was talking to me? …no respect for teachers”. In these instances, the ‘arbitrariness’ in the power of teachers emerged as an aspect worth probing.

In discussions with the teachers of the school regarding the RtE and the obligation to enrol the child even without any formal certificate, it became clear that the teachers were aware of the mandate (unlike what appeared in the discussions in Chapter Five). In an FGD with a larger group of teachers it emerged that some of the MCD schools in Delhi were not asking for it, while some were – based on the decisions taken at the school level. Those teachers in whose schools this was continuing said that they were ‘instructed’ at the school level by the principals to either ask for an affidavit made or for a letter signed by the *Parshad* or the Gazette officer. Mr. Mehta (SSA) told me that the SSA had given the schools a ‘flexibility’ to accept even a written receipt with the parents’ signature, in the event that they could not arrange the documentary proofs.

However, although I could not verify this through official notices or records, I was told by Shivali that for availing the varied schemes at the school the birth certificate was necessary. She also said that there was no ‘formal’ notice for allowing the children without the proof/affidavit to sit in the classes (despite the fact that she knew that the children cannot be ‘denied’ admission as described in the Chapter Five). And that until there was a ‘formal’ notice regarding allowing children to sit in the classes, the school would not change the ‘policy’ of enrolling the children. As said earlier, as per Mr. Mehta’s account, the notice was delivered in time to all the schools in Delhi. This situation looked like that of a ‘chaos’, or what Das (2004) would call illegibility of the rules, that created space for arbitrary action by the State functionaries. It was in
these conditions that ‘who’ the functionaries were, in their social, personal and professional life spaces, became important.

To understand the rationale with which the teachers continued to ask for the documents, I further probed about what their view was about the relevance of such procedures. Mrs. Ilesh said that she was aware that the janampatri is not necessarily required, but made a case for it being meaningful. “… if at the time of entry itself parents get a janampatri or affidavit made, it would be good for the child only (sic)… several later issues will be taken care of even if the child drops out and when we don’t give her the certificate”, she said. All the six teachers who participated in the FGD felt that the running around for this purpose was surely not a waste, and was a very essential exercise for the parents. Mrs. Jain feels, “When the child is born these people take it too casually… don’t even make the effort to register the birth… if we compromise on such things no one will go in for the registration.”

As I asked why it was important to get it made when the school certificate works as a documentary proof for verifying the date of birth, the teachers made a case. Mrs. Ilesh argued, “… because of all these idiotic policies the school will turn into a birth registry Kendra… what will the other departments do then if these jobs are also carried out by schools?” “It’s easy to speak, but we should not admit anybody without proof… anything can happen these days… the police too asks us not to employ even servants without registering their proper identity with certified proofs”, said Mrs. Jain.

Therefore, logically it was for the general ‘social good’ and ‘safety’ that the janampatri was being asked for, even when it was not needed. By getting it made, the teachers were thus performing their social duties, irrespective of the institutional role by which they were bound. They were ensuring that the institution of birth registration does not become redundant and that the tradition of registration that they had followed (as teachers and parents) was maintained and reproduced. Further, they were also ensuring that the school’s duty remained confined to what it has been crafted for.
Illich’s (1971) idea of institutions as self-fulfilling systems sits well here – and such narratives also explain how these institutions play such self-sustaining functions.

Further, the perception of the teachers about the community also came across through these instances. The idea of an uncivilised, morally misplaced and anti-social other, guided these perceptions. In the act of regulating the access, the teacher engaged in the act of defining the other and legitimising her own perceptions (Said, 1973). By regulating this access and performing the gate-keeping function, the teachers constructed their authority over the public system of education. Where the RtE apparently takes away (though in ambiguous ways as seen in Chapter Five) this authority from teachers, the teachers of the school question and challenge the whole movement by expressing the moral corruption of the community. Although the teachers knew that they could not deny admission, they seemed to represent to the parents from the community some kind of authority and regulation/denial capacity in giving access.

It would be incomplete to understand these interactions as plain acts of negotiations between the teachers and the clients of the school. This is because it is not only the meaning of access and the school that is constituted in this process. The idea of ‘public’ institutions, the civil servants or functionaries, ‘Sarkar’ and the citizen in itself is constructed in the public perception in these interactions. A glimpse of the form it takes in the people’s perceptions has been presented in Chapter Four. It is also relevant to revisit and note how this has a bearing on the community’s ‘willingness’ to send their children to the school (or how the ‘interest’ or ‘apathy’) in relation to the institutional space called the school was being constituted in the context that I was researching. The idea that the entire practice (official or informal) was spatially and structurally located inside the State institution for education, leads to a need to inquire into how the State as a political entity was involved in it. Based on Sadgopal’s (2006) arguments one can say that the functioning of a State institution and the purposes it comes to serve is also a part of the ‘design’ of the institution itself. It thus makes it pertinent to analyse the nature of public systems and their ways of working, and how
these institutions become instrumental in framing the narrative of modernity, inclusion and equality. Further, the constitution of the educated and modern urban middle class would have to be examined not only from an economic and sociological frame but also from a socio-emotional perspective. The questions that are worth asking in this process include – Who has the authority to grant/deny access? Where is he/she situated in the socio-political architecture of society? Who authorises him/her? Who is denied/granted access, and to what? In this context, it becomes critical to broaden the frame of analysis and to locate the teacher and the community, in the socio-political matrix and ‘structures’ as constituted by class, caste, gender and the conflicting interests and agenda implicit in these. Understanding the teacher only as a peripheral civil servant (or a meek dictator) in this sense appeared to be insufficient here – as here the teacher also appeared to be performing the function of maintaining or preserving ‘her position’ vis-a-vis a social group.

6.3. Perceptions and feelings: The teachers’ Self, the children and the community

6.3.1. Predicaments about work

The teachers’ perception of the main challenges in their work and their perception about the people who attend the school come across in a more articulate fashion in the following selection from the same discussion, where the teachers further contested the possibility of a change in the overall ethos of education in the MCD schools of Delhi:

Mrs. Alpana: I must ask you, how can a change come about? There is so much of this useless work [administrative] that we are unable to teach anything. There is no head master, we cannot assign work to contractual staff… every teacher has at least four charges… no water, no cooler, fans are not working well… It is the same in all schools so one cannot even seek a transfer.

Shivali: Look at my situation. I have the stock register, midday meal… it leads to so much frustration… all this will ultimately get vented on the children, no?
Mrs. Alpana: And you know I have been working here for the past several years, I know these children do not have any interest here. Parents do not want to listen to anything… they feel the school is a crèche. When they go to work their children will be safe, they will get food and money, that’s it. Just give money to one child in school, within a matter of 15 minutes everybody will line up outside the school… children, whose faces you have never seen, would suddenly show-up… fathers will come in whatever the condition they are in, some will stand before you half-nude in towels… that’s their culture. Otherwise you keep on calling they won’t come. They care a damn. The group that attends these schools are all like this; how much can you avoid them?

I: But don’t the poor parents want to educate their children? I think that is why they send their children to tuitions.

Mrs. Jain: They do not have any idea about their child. One child’s mother asks me every morning whether her daughter has reached school or not, or did she go to the tuition yesterday. Arey Bhai… how am I supposed to know, you are the mother… it’s your responsibility to send the child to school and pick her after the school. She tells me that she works till late night and therefore wakes up late… she is not at all bothered… don’t I work till night? There are a hundred things to do at home. But I know where my child is.

Santosh: The government just makes a policy and throws it on our heads. The situation is such that these children and their parents do not know anything. Think of those who do not even bother to enrol in schools. Now we are told that you are to enrol in an age-appropriate class. How do we take in the child? What will he do here… he has not learnt anything until now… Those who are here are not willing to learn, on top of this you bring the whole world and make them sit on our heads… then how will we teach? That’s another reason why we stress
that they bring the *janampatri* at least, when they will invest so much
time in that they will value the school a little bit.

The teachers were provoked by my question to such an extent that they went out of
their way to make the case. They attempted to converge all their arguments regarding
the challenges involved in day-to-day teaching. Much more than the challenges of
teaching, the narrative conveyed the resistance that the teachers have developed
towards their own work. The central premise of the argument here does not seem to
be the non-academic workload but rather the predicament in teaching the community
which is socially distant and supposedly culturally inferior to the socio-cultural world
that the teachers represent or belong to (Delpit, 2006). However, the intention is not to
simplify the case to the idea of conscious practice of discrimination by the teachers.
The complexity of the case was situated in how ‘a person’ (or a group of persons)
feels trapped in a set of circumstances which she could have avoided, given her class
position.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 6.6: Feeling good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| One day, Mrs. Alpana’s housemaid’s neighbour had come to the school to enrol her
child. Unlike in the other cases narrated above, Mrs. Alpana took a keen interest in
the matter. In fact, she went beyond her institutional duty to help the woman. Mrs.
Alpana immediately asked Mrs. Ilesh to enrol the child, who in turn guided the
woman about the process much more patiently than she did in the other cases. The
admission was in any case not difficult; the child’s *janampatri* was readily available
and she was already enrolled in an anganwadi. Mrs. Alpana also offered slippers to
the barefooted child. However, the mother told her that both she and the child had
slippers, which they had removed outside the office.

It is difficult to discern whether it was due to the acquaintance or some other
concern that the teachers were more considerate in their dealing with this case.
When I asked Mrs. Alpana said, “… her [the woman’s] husband died in a road
accident a couple of months ago, and she has six children to take care of.” Mrs.
Alpana explained to me how difficult the life of a single mother is. Her own sister was a single mother and was struggling to find a job. How Mrs. Alpana’s feeling of empathy transformed her from a strict teacher (who was ‘acclaimed’ among the schoolchildren for the ‘heaviest hand’) to a gentler person, showed a glimpse of what she found missing in her relation with the children from the community. She says, “It feels good when you help somebody… rest… there is nothing in this job.”

However, by catering to the case, Mrs. Alpana had visibly ‘obliged’ both the women and the child. The mother thanked her repeatedly and expressed how relieved she was. It is not too difficult to discern the kind of value that the school as an institution and schooling for her child had for the mother. She had found a channel to reach the school and did not come to the school directly. She discussed the matter with an acquaintance who in turn requested the teacher. Removing the slippers outside the school office also adds meaning to the case, where the perceived or the real social-distance also seems to be mediating in implicit and manifest ways. The teachers’ response was thus understood as a ‘favour’ or an act of kindness (and not her duty), or at least worthy of being thanked for repeatedly. Although the child remained silent, she observed the entire experience and was introduced to the school and the teachers in this process.

6.3.2. Duty orders

The conflict in the cultures was deep seated in the teachers’ everyday knowledge or common sense about the space where they were working, and was conveyed in various forms.

Box 6.7: Arguing against orders

Two people had come with the election work related orders. One of the men, Mr. Sahdev, was from the office of the BLO and another man, Mr. Rajesh, who was a close “associate” of the Nigam Parshad, was just accompanying him. When the BLO officer spoke about the purpose of their visit, Mrs. Alpana refused to receive the orders. She said, “Sir, you tell us how do we do this duty? There are 1200
children in our school and only 5 teachers; each has 3 sections and 4 charges. There is no headmaster. If we go out of the school, what will happen to the children? You get us an order from the DO office; they are our bosses, and we will only obey their orders.”

When Mr. Sahdev insisted that she received the orders and that he couldn’t do much about this except note a complaint against the school, Mrs. Alpana called the other related offices and tried to avoid the situation – but she was clear that she would not receive the orders. She said, “… There are so many gent teachers who are willing to do the duty. Why don’t you give them the duty? They are never assigned any work. We are ladies, we have homes, there are many young unmarried teachers and knowing the kind of the area, they cannot be sent around. If something happens then who will be responsible?” Other teachers said that they would take “CCLs” (childcare leaves) even if they were assigned duties, while Shivali added, “Now even the money doesn't lure us; since 2008 I haven’t got the money.”

When Mr. Sahdev did not agree to these cases and was firm on his stand, Mrs. Alpana took Mr. Rajesh outside and talked to him to ensure that they did not get duties. Mr. Rajesh convinced her that he would do something. The BLO officer did not argue much except that he was only doing his duty and would report the facts as they were. He also told Mrs. Alpana that the BLO office had published the advertisement in the newspaper about this, and even if they did not receive the orders their names would still be in the duty lists. Mrs. Alpana continued to argue and tried to convince him. She even got cold drinks and eatables served to settle the matter. Finally, she succeeded in sending away Mr. Sahdev without receiving the orders. She asked him to go to the other schools first and get their consent, saying that until then she would try to negotiate with the BLO directly. When the officer left, she called up her husband, who had some ‘network’ in the election office, to do something about the matter.

---

7 Actually Mrs. Alpana lied about the whole scenario – there are 622 children enrolled in the school out of which 250 are usually present. There are around 7 permanent teachers, and 2 contractual teachers, none of whom is on leave.
Mr. Sahdev came after a while to show that another M block school had received the orders very peacefully, and went back. Mrs. Alpana told me that Mr. Sahdev was lying and that the headmaster of the other school (whom she contacted on the phone) received the orders only after putting up tremendous resistance. She told me that this was the usual story.

While refusing to accept the duty orders that required the teachers to go to the houses in the neighbourhood to enrol people on the electoral roll, Mrs. Alpana made a strong case for the difficulty that ‘women teachers’ face in doing the work. When the officer, who brought the orders, left she explained more ‘openly’ to me:

Mrs. Alpana: Now that the two males have gone I can tell you what I was saying… all these children stay in one-room homes. And before [the appropriate] age they get to know a lot many things. They know everything… what would they do?… they will talk among themselves about it.

Shivali: Yes, they may even know things that we as adults do not know.

Mrs. Alpana: Mother-father fights, father’s alcohol addiction and abusive behaviour, money and all… all things are ‘out-there’ before them.

Shivali: And they don’t have any space to study, no help at home in studies… what will they learn?… we can’t help them

This argument did not appear to be related to the duty or the refusal to take the orders, and it was difficult to make sense of the case that the teachers were making. The narrative continued:

Mrs. Alpana: And drunkard-ness is a huge problem in this area… going to their homes is futile. Some fathers are even unable to stand straight and talk; they stink when they talk. It’s not the children’s fault but what can we do? If the police will raid they will find a sharab ki bhatti in every second home… nobody here is interested in studies,
sometimes children come to school on an empty stomach and complain of stomach ache… there is no concept of saaf-safai [cleanliness]… everything around stinks… how would anybody work here?

Shivali: …. you know Alpana madam hinted about this to Mr. Sahdev because otherwise the BLO says that we are sitting at the school and thinking such things; but the truth is that every teacher knows every child in her class and the family culture they come from… when we refuse duty the officers blame only the teachers, but never the parents.

Attempts made by me to understand how the argument being made was related to receiving the duty orders led the teachers to go deeper into the descriptions. I could only understand that the poignant case the teachers made about the pathos of the location and the uncivilised ways of the people was directed at ‘proving’ that there was no question of their going for any sort of work in the community. On a later occasion, Mrs. Alpana confirmed that her main concern regarding this duty was that the people in the locality were usually drunk, were “manner-less” and wandered around ‘half-naked’. She said, “We have newly married and unmarried teachers also; if something happens to them who will bear the responsibility? We being 40 years old don’t feel safe visiting these homes; these young girls are like my daughters. You tell me, will you want to visit these homes?”

The teachers invested a lot of effort in arguing against similar orders. In most of the instances these arguments gave them a framework to justify and establish that going to the locality was ‘impossible’ for the women teachers and it was unjust to ask them to do so given their gender. In such instances, it appeared that they, to a certain extent, countered or subverted the traditional ‘meekness’ associated with their jobs by finding ways of refusing the orders by developing a counter-narrative of the vulnerability of their gender. Around the time when such orders were expected, the incharge’s room discussions involved calling up connections in various offices and trying to do away with the orders. In the FGDs, in which I had participated with larger groups of teachers, similar concerns and voices were heard against the election and census duties.
6.3.3. The narrative of workload and of holidays

a. The victim

In February, Shivali got a letter from the election office (from the BLO AERO office) regarding the fixing of her duty for the caste census. She got this letter at home through registered post. When she came to the school, she first went to the incharge’s room with the letter. After some 30 minutes, she barged into class V-B, where the schoolgirls and I were at the prime of a story telling session. “I have been dying to fight with you… the other day you were talking about the forms of resistance among children, right? Resistance factors do not only exist among children, they exist among us teachers as well… what will you say about my resistance?” she said.

Shivali had misunderstood the notion of resistance that I had referred to while talking about for one of her MA assignments. Nonetheless she was expressing resistance. A letter regarding a training session and duty for the caste census, which was to take place in June 2011, had made her restless. It involved five days of the summer vacation time to visit the neighbourhood houses for the census and to attend the training for the same. She was baffled by the fact that five days of her holidays would go waste. Shivali continued, I have got this stupid letter… I have decided that unless I get a written order from the DDO, I will not go. My reporting is to the DDO, I will


8 Entering the classroom when the group was engaged in some work had not seemed to arouse an apologetic feeling. It was the way the things were. Anybody could enter at any point in time and could legitimately expect to be given patient hearing. At times when I refused to leave the engagement in the classroom and go to the office or to a teacher, it was considered as misbehaviour. The teachers collective in the initial days of my fieldwork had thought of it as extremely rude and asked me to amend this if I had to be there. A meaningful engagement in an activity was not in the cognate of how school is usually conceptualised by the insiders of the school. Not that the purpose is to break the engagement; it is not in the imagination of the school. However, over a period of time, my not coming out of the classroom became acceptable and so did the idea that I am not a teacher. Many teachers told me that if I were a teacher then I would not have been doing so. Some expressed that had they not been having so many things to do they would have also taught like this. A few also narrated how their relatives doing a BEd from good places, did their work imaginatively. One of them said, “CIE makes you children very idealistic; but in reality this idealism doesn’t work”. In further discussions with the teacher who said this, it was implicit that in her perception the institution from which a teacher gets her professional degree has an importance. And that a teacher education institution can potentially make a teacher “idealistic” (by which she meant someone who has ethical considerations along with the professional skills). However, she also highlights how this training/education is inadequate in the face of “reality”. The difficulties of the real school situation do not allow for a space to ideal practise and thus forces the teachers to ‘adjust’. In a way she was highlighting the theory – practice gap that characterises the field of education. Yet, this teacher and many others agreed that there are many teachers who continue to practise what they have learnt. However, it is significant to note that this narrative was not offered to explain one’s situation, but was a rounded justification of not being an ‘idealist’ – based on the fact/or a perception that since I was not a teacher and I was free from the ‘burden’ of living in the reality, I had the luxury of being an ‘idealist’.
not go if any lay order comes. Just recently I have done election duty [in 2007], now again I get this other duty [in 2011]. I will not go. And they sent it to my home, such extreme misbehaviour this is. They know if they send it to the school, we will not receive it… there are eight more permanent teachers with me, no one got it, that’s why it is pinching me even more… Now this SSA and all (sic) will also make us go through [the in-service] training during the summer vacation, the entire holiday will be lost. I do not know how the post office loses all my letters except these ones.

Shivali was clearly resisting the idea of working during the holidays. She was attempting to find a logical way of explaining that the orders were morally incorrect. What complicated the matter was the feeling of ‘injustice’ emerging from the fact that her fellow teachers would be at home while she would be working. The fellow teachers in the incharge’s room had ‘teased’ her for this. Shivali further says,

Now see for yourself, we all want to work, but all these duties do not let us work… I must tell you that I did this job for the reasons that thodi social service hojaegi, which is good for all of us, that I will complete my studies and then peacefully marry. But here leave alone marrying, I don’t get any time to study. If I had to work so much I would have better gone to a public [private] school… wahan bache to ache hote [at least children would have been good there]. What is the use of my degree to these children, when I do not get the time to teach?

Shivali’s idea of work or a job comes across in this narrative – that teaching in a public system to children from deprived socioeconomic backgrounds is not an occupation in itself but a social service. Thus, the teacher perceived herself as playing a ‘charitable’ role rather than performing a duty. The meaning that the public system holds for her is different from how she conceptualises a private system – the former being for those who are not worthy of being worked for, and the latter catering to the ‘good’ ones.
In between, she stopped and reminded the children, saying: “Shut-up, have you not learnt manners?” By this time the children had completely lost their patience, and had started coming in between to show the drawings they were making, and started asking me to start the story again. She could not restrain from shouting at children:

*Nalayakon*, learn to shut your mouths. You have shown to which school you belong… you have shown who you are, no? You always show your colours to everybody… no respect for teachers. Nobody will come to show the work to madam… you are always in a hurry to finish the work… no concentration. If you do so, she will not come to your class ever again.⁹

The next day she meets me and continues,

I could have just done one DIET like the others and joined, but no… I did my graduation, masters, a proper BEd and now I am doing an MA in education. I am not interested in studying so much… but each child will benefit from me… but no, these people do not want this to happen; they want me to waste my holidays in training and in useless duties… when I am so frustrated where will I vent this? On children, no? (sic)

‘Venting of frustration’ on children was a common justification for corporal punishment and scolding in the school, which I will discuss in another section. But here what is more important is that the teacher in question was completely agitated about the idea of doing the duty, and in the process of making her ‘resistance’ more logical and morally sound she implicated several other aspects – for instance, the in-service training. Although the idea of training during the holidays for the refinement of skills does not sound appealing to the teachers (which is also because of the poor quality of such training (Ramchandran et. al, 2005, p. 26)), academic degrees that are additive towards a materially visible progress were relatively better considered. It also gave a sense of association with and a possibility of a social mobility into the ‘academic elite’ class. The idea that a degree would help in her teaching better is offered as a justification for the resistance to the duty. Therefore, this study time was

---

⁹ The students giggled at this ‘scolding’, later (on inquiry) the class , Rinku, tells me, “Shivali madam has such a habit of talking and shouting; so we all bet as to when will she shout and what will she say.” Anshu says, “You will go insane if you talk to her… one day she started to talking to Priyanka madam in the morning and stopped after two hours.”
also legitimately supposed to be spaced within the duty hours, because it was not for the personal benefit of teachers but for children’s sake. However, in-service training is seen neither as an opportunity to learn nor as a duty. For teachers it is (as Mrs. Alpana once said) a “conspiracy to snatch teachers’ holidays and make them work as much as possible at minimum cost”. Some teachers also expressed that given the amount of work they are made to do, their job was no better than that of a ‘wage labourer’.

For the next few days Shivali’s arguments continued. She was engrossed in making a case against the duty orders and explaining how ‘inhuman’ these were for a teacher. However, as I talked to her and said that now that the orders were with her why she was not thinking about doing the duty that was only for five days, she added several layers to the case. In response, she made her argument stronger:

S: Last year I had gone to these people’s homes [indicating by hand the direction of the residences outside]; most of these people [children] come from here. These people do not have that much manners; all men are drunkards and misbehave. Trust me; the gandagi in this entire area is so much that I contracted an infection all over my face. The doctor told me that all this has happened because you travel to dirty places and that it will not go now… And now when I think of my wedding, I feel tensed because of these marks. (sic)

I: But I think that’s your perception….; in any case if you don’t want to do the duty then why don’t you go to the election office or approach the teachers’ union?

S: Going to the election office is also of no use… they are so dangerous… they resort to Eve teasing women\(^\text{10}\). My father has restrained me from going there. Now you tell me how to tackle this problem.

I: What about the teachers’ union?

---

\(^{10}\) Such impressions that Shivali had about election office sounded all the more out-of-place as I had been visiting the office during the study for collecting some information (that I never found there). Also, the office had a larger proportion of female employees. These were times when I started doubting Shivali’s reliability as an informant. However, except for this episode all the factual descriptions that she had given were fairly reliable and were re-affirmed by several other informants.
S: The teachers’ union is so useless; they deduct Rupees 300 from every teacher’s salary without informing us, and do nothing for us. There are thousands of teachers in the MCD system in Delhi; how many crores [of rupees] the union must be deducting; where does this money go?

As I probed into the case of the duty orders (talking to Mr. Mehta, Mr. Sahdev and Ms. Kavita) it came to the fore that not all the teachers get duty orders during all the elections; and that there is a system of assigning the work. In addition, the special requests, sick-leaves, childcare leaves and the like, are all taken into consideration. The duty that a teacher is supposed to take up, in all the elections put together, is not more than ten days in a five-year term. Census happens once in a ten-year term and involves not more than ten days of work. The resistance looked problematic when seen with observation that the teachers’ actual time-on-task in the school was not more than 1 hour 30 minutes in a day, at an average.

Even the teacher-training period was considered as a ‘duty’, and was discharged with a lot of pain. It did not befit the idea of professional development as it was not instrumental to any immediate growth in salary or status. A good number of teachers did not attend training. However, working as an “RP” (resource person) who enjoys some monetary and social benefits was better appreciated. Shivali was an RP and said that it increased her possibilities to make connections with the important people who have some say in the fixing of the various duty schedules, facilitating teacher transfers and the like. In this context, I corroborated from Ramachandran et. al. (2008), who, based on a study conducted in five states of India, find a similar scenario, … teachers’ transfers were regarded as ways of “obliging” teachers who were close to powerful people, or were doled out as rewards (or punishment) for services rendered such as assistance in political campaigns… Both teachers and authorities thus utilise all available channels to manipulate the system for their own benefit, generating an enormous problem not only in Rajasthan but country-wide. (p. 15) (sic)
In fact, the broad findings of the above mentioned study facilitated corroborating all the other aspects of this chapter.

In the compelling argument that Shivali had made over a week, everybody including the school system, the children, the community, the postal services, the election office, the teachers’ union and even me as a researcher were being charged of foul play, or of conspiring against her. In the narrative that Shivali presents, she clearly stands out as a victim – a victim who by her peripheral position in the system, her gender, and situation vis-à-vis the ‘nuisance-making’ community was rendered meek and incapable of action. However, except for fighting such small ‘wars’, like the one that Mrs. Alpana fought with Mr. Sahdev, the teachers did not offer any resistance in places where it mattered.

In an initiative at another forum (which I had described at the beginning of the chapter) a group of thirty-five teachers continued to voice similar experiences over a period of time. However, they rejected the idea of making a polite representation (even anonymously) before the relevant authorities. They expressed their discomfort and strongly articulated the ‘insecurity’ that they felt in any such dialogue with the authorities. In such situations I continued to reflect on Kumar’s (1991) explanation of the paradox of the teacher’s personality and found it explaining the situation. However, at the same time I found the case diverging from it – as this situation of withdrawal did not appear to have emerged out of the fear of the authority, but looked like a structured attempt to maintain the personal conveniences, or like a self-constructed ‘privilege preserving’ mechanism. It ensured that the teachers did not come into the bad books of the authority, maintained good ties with the union and did not become conspicuous in the eyes of the State. This would come to their rescue in situations where teachers wanted to seek or prevent a transfer; get LTCs, study leaves and promotions approved; and get their names left out from being listed for various kinds of duties. Sardar Sahab affirmed that I was not wrong in saying so, by clarifying the rationale behind this: “You are right, because fighting never leads to any gain… you may win on one occasion but it’s a loss in the long term… as it is, what do we
have to do? We are simple *sarkari naukar*; we have to do our duty and look after our house[s] peacefully, we are not here to change the world… if one makes more noise, whatever privileges one has will also dwindle away.” In my discussions with the teachers on other occasions and on the other forums, similar constructions of the work and the self emerged.

**b. Teachers’ union**

Despite having a teachers union in place, neither did the teachers voice their concerns to the State, nor did they share their opinions and ideas among themselves as a ‘community’. In the process, their ‘victimhood’ instead of getting subverted by the presence of a teacher union, was perpetuated through it – the teachers’ union in itself became instrumental in adding to it. In attempting to find information on the strikes that the teachers union organised in the past three years, I could not trace any – except that in 2010 it had filed an RTI for a delay in the salary. The teachers union last went on an indefinite strike in December 2001, on the matter of pay disparity and fewer earned leaves as compared to the other government offices. However, due to a fall-out between the various factions, the strike ended within two days.

In fact, what I found (by talking to teachers) was related to the dynamics of the teachers’ union, which apparently works like a ‘negotiating agency’ between individual teachers and the offices that give work orders. Sardar Sahab spoke with a sense of pride when he told me how for the past five years he had never done any election duty as he had strong ‘connections’ with the teachers’ union, which in turn has a good ‘*jaan-pehchan*’ with the *Parshads*. The degree of comfort in the manner in which Mrs. Alpana interacted with Mr. Rajesh, the right hand of the *Parshad*, who had accompanied the personnel bringing election duty orders, also verified such connections. In fact, Mr. Rajesh was himself a teacher until some 10 years back and was involved in the teachers’ union through which he made political connections. He then left teaching and started working as a full-fledged property dealer. Sarita tells me that most members of the union were males and most of them had either a real estate
business or a coaching centre. Sardar Sahab confirmed this, not in a pejorative sense but ‘as a matter of fact’.

6.3.4. Gender and conjugality

a. The teacher-talk

The incharge room was used as a staffroom by the teachers and was never left vacant; some teachers were always there. All of them had places of their choice and there were smaller friendship groups among the seven regular teachers. The most common topics of discussion were the holidays round the corner, and how they could be clubbed with weekends to get some days at home. Teachers planned their ‘sick leaves’, casual leaves and child care leaves after discussions with each other. This was specifically the case with the teachers who were married.

The newlywed teacher in the school, Priyanka, who was waiting to get transferred to a school near her in-laws’ home (so that she could “reach home in time”) was the most frequent absentee from the class. She had given the complete charge of her class to me and came to the class only on the day when the SSA team’s visit was expected. Shivali says about the state of Priyanka, “You know she doesn’t feel good here now… poor thing! Since she got married she travels all the way… you know her new house is 7 kilometres away… she is waiting for her transfer to come through… I pray it happens soon.” The senior teachers were happy with the short distance between the home and school. One of them had refused a transfer-with-promotion, as it would take

---

11 In my discussions with the teachers in the school and at the other two forums, it came across that many of them planned their LTC (leave travel concession) well in advance of the summer vacation. The ones who ‘really’ went on vacation left Delhi almost within a week after the schools closed and returned in ten days or so. They even skipped their compulsory in-service training schedules. Even when the teachers were in town, they told the office that they were going on vacation. In a group session that the SSA had organised (which Mr. Mehta led) for teachers from various schools of the three wards in the vicinity (30 teachers in which all excepting two were females), the teachers refused to come to the school for one day during the summer vacations. Although most of them cited some work or going out of town as a reason, one teacher says, “We all have homes, children and families – I don’t think we can leave our children during the vacation and run for these children” (sic). Later on when Mr. Mehta tried to understand why she said so, she said that she was only being ‘honest’. However, in this honesty also, the teacher did not individualise herself from the collective and used “we” instead of “I”. The manner in which the teacher made a difference in ‘our’ children and ‘these’ children, appeared to have more subtle ties with how in the everyday family and class cultures the social distances get situated. While coordinating some FGDs, I tried to invite teachers for workshops and discussions, particularly during their holidays. However, the response that I got was poor. The few teachers who agreed to attend during the holidays were mostly males; and they participated not because they were interested but because they could not refuse. Though many males also did state the same reasons as the women teachers did, not all had the ‘family’ excuse. Holidays appeared to be highly valuable for the teachers, and more so in the case of the women teachers.
her farther from home. Apart from this, the senior teachers also discussed the marriage proposals for their grown-up children or shared words of wisdom about getting their children married. They also gave ‘good tips’ on homemaking to the younger teachers. At times I wondered, while being an audience to the incharge room discussions, whether at all the teachers were ‘on-the-job’.

It was not that the teachers did not talk about work. Rather all the staff-room talk happened while the teachers were engaged in ‘work’. All of them brought their respective ‘pending’ records and registers into the room for completion and sought help and clarification from each other. One of them told me on behalf of all the others, “I can say this for everyone and no one will disagree with me that it is better to do register work than shout in the classroom.” None of the teachers disagreed. It appeared that the teachers not only did a lot of administrative work, they found it more worthwhile than teaching. However, this was not so simple a conclusion. As the discussions proceeded, it appeared as if this work helped them to justify themselves and maintain their worth not only in the eyes of the outsiders (authorities and others) but in their own perception as well. Priyanka says, “… I am not very fond of teaching here; until my transfer comes through, I am only passing the time and for that I do my register work; after all it is not that I am a work shirker. In fact I cannot sit idle and that’s why I do this work, it is not all that urgent.” That is why these registers had a central place in their arguments and narratives of work burden. It formed the foundation of the arguments for justifying their not teaching in the classroom. However, it was not necessary to justify this always; there were times when teachers were blunt or ‘honest’ (see footnote number 13).

b. Dilemma of a male teachers

It is not that this is a case peculiar to a gender. How teaching has become a gendered profession could be one way of understanding the situation. However, the case of male teachers did not seem to be much different inasmuch as I understood from the discussions with a larger group of teachers, and in the work that I did at the second
In the second shift boys’ school, teacher absenteeism was starker. The boys were usually seen running and playing in the ground. In some classes, the boys could not even name their class teachers. The reason why I was not able to talk to the children in the second shift in an intensive fashion was that the teachers (all males) ensured that I could not do so, which in itself highlights a fear of being judged. It also involved a fear of my ‘discovering’ some facts that may put the teachers in problem. Santosh told me that five male teachers in the second shift had their own real estate businesses and that one of them had promised to look for a good deal for her as her family wanting to invest in property.

The case of Sardar Sahab may explain the situation of a male teacher. Mr. Singh ‘supports’ a tuition centre (where Mathematics and Accountancy are taught at the Senior Secondary level). He knows that taking tuition is not permitted as per his duty rules, but tells me that it is his ‘family business’. In an interview he tells me, “My income is too meagre to support my family, so I have to earn from other sources as well. Our family has been into real estate for some time and now we have a bigger office in Rohini; so the office at my home was vacant – I thought what better than using it for a noble purpose; my brother helps in it...”. On a later occasion when I asked him about how he manages to look after the job and two businesses, he says, “… I joined the MCD for this reason only. I am free until 1 pm and I am not the only one who manages the business; the entire family takes care of it [property dealing]. After 6 [pm] I am again free, so I teach tuitions for two hours”. Mr. Azimmuddin also confirms, “For males, making good money is necessary; while you do other things you can also teach here. It’s only a matter of five hours.”

From what emerged from the discussions with him and Mr. Azimmuddin, it appeared that for the male teachers of the school the school job was a source of regular income, while the other ‘side businesses’ brought windfall gains that fluctuated. Income from

---

12 It was in such observations that I understood the meaning of corroboration in research. I was visiting the second-shift school and talking to teachers at other forums to corroborate data. The nature of the complexity that such corroboration added to the data, brought multifold refinement in the way I was making sense of the situations. In this process, I also understood that the ‘utility’ of corroboration is not just limited to ‘confirming’ the observations, but much beyond that.
a government job ensured a degree of stability, and teaching being a relatively easier avenue for such employment, Sardar Sahab had joined the job for this ease of income in addition to that from his family business. Therefore, teaching at the school was like any other job, or rather much less important than the other things that he was doing. Albisetti (1993) throws some light on how gender plays a role in the teaching profession. He explains the mass exodus of males from the teaching profession in the nineteenth century in America, and of the increasing feminisation of the teaching profession. He examined the stricter norms for recruitment and retention that worked against those who saw teaching as a transient profession, coupled with high paying industrial jobs – which in turn made the opportunity cost for choosing teaching very high (as cited in Johnson 2008, p. 4). This explanation seems to throw some light on the case of Sardar Sahab.

Further, the male teachers had ‘connections’ in the MCD system and had an up-to-date knowledge about the entire system and its working. Many a times the women teachers from the first shift sought guidance from them in the matters concerning the system. Sardar Sahab told me that it was because of these connections that he was able to sustain his tuition business. He said that it was very difficult to hide things from colleagues and other people and thus there were chances of being ‘caught’. Some time back his neighbour made a complaint against him. It was only through these connections that the complaint could be ‘dealt with’. He also told me that the women teachers could not have made such connections, as they were not in a position to frequently visit and make connections in the system – thus the male teachers helped the women teachers and thus earned ‘goodwill’. I was told that such goodwill was beneficial if a teacher contested the union elections in the future. The male teachers invested a good time and effort in developing and maintaining these connections. On many occasions I felt that it would have taken lesser effort in teaching than in doing this. However, Mr. Singh explained, “… it is always good for the men to know important people. You can also say it also gives some pride as well.” It appeared that the sense of ‘power’ that these connections generated was significant for the male teachers.
c. A contention

When I started working at the school and interacting with teachers, I realised that Shivali was extremely worried about her marriage and most of her discussions revolved around this issue. She appeared to have found someone in me who was able to understand her situation. Her family pressure was a source of anxiety, and the women she met at the school were another. Her peers, particularly the older teachers, had been ‘asking’ her to find a suitable match for herself. She has been constantly meeting prospective grooms who either were not suitable or did not find her to be “pretty” enough.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 6.8: Shivali’s life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Shivali was about to turn 29. She was the only daughter born into a nuclear family, having strong ties with other relatives. Her father worked as a Bank PO in a nationalised bank and her mother was a housewife. Shivali had studied in a private school and was brought-up as a child who did not have specific career aspirations. Her father had always thought that teaching was the best job for girls, and seeing her mother’s ‘plight’ at home she also thought that she would be better placed as a teacher than being at home. She says, “I never was very ambitious. I knew that I had to be at home after marriage or at the most be teaching, so why should I waste my energy? Whatever I may do, I can’t change it... as my mother couldn’t.” She broke down as she said this. Reconciling herself, she said that she would prefer to become a DIET lecturer or a bank PO, and that she was working very hard for it. She thought that such a position would get her a ‘greater respect’ in the family without having the need to work from “9 to 9”.

In similar instances, while talking to Shivali it appeared as if in her family, in the institution she works, in the system in which she is employed and in general, she was experiencing herself as a victim – a victim who despite having all resources to make sense of her experience was unable to do so. In fact, she even saw the children also as her victimisers or at least as those who could potentially do so. She says, “It’s just that these people are young, otherwise they would have made my
life miserable – they, as it is, don’t let me do my work.” Thus, in her interactions with children she was subverting this potentiality. It appeared that the victimhood perception was her way of rationalising her lack of willingness to act upon her world, and of denying her agency or coming to terms with it (Freire, 1970). She said once: “I know I can do things if I want to – I am earning, I am well educated, English speaking, have my own connections – par kaun kare [but who would do], neither does anybody have that much time or energy... even if I change, the world won’t.”

She says that the work hardly leaves her any space to take care of herself. She strongly feels that work should be reduced, especially the election duty, census work and register work. However, on another occasion she says. “I did this work only because it involves working with children, so it’s safe; there isn’t much running around, teach for five hours and then you are free to take care of your home especially after marriage… income bhi achhi hai.” [is also good].

At times, as I observed the teacher talk, it appeared that Shivali was excessively ‘bullied’ or pressurised to get married. Her everyday life in the school was being affected by this. She confided in me that the main reason why she does not move out of her classroom and prefers being engaged in register work in the room itself, is that she doesn’t want to be a subject of bullying and embarrassment. Shivali’s experience had another aspect to it. Shivali was regarded as being ‘more sensitive’ (in a relative sense) towards the children and towards her work. She was well informed and better educated – and in that she was a subject of jealousy as she was favourably looked upon by the incharge and even the SSA team. Thus she was, in a contrived fashion, being marginalised at the school. The pressure was adding to her frustration to such an extent that she almost abdicated socialising at the school. The constant teasing appeared to be a group mechanism, forcing her to conform to the norm.

The question of marriage troubled the two unmarried teachers in the school so much that they preferred to isolate themselves. Marriage was also a major reason for rivalry
between two teachers (Santosh and Priyanka) at the school, which I could not understand until it came out to the fore in an unusual episode. Santosh one day made a noise about how frequently Priyanka absented herself from the work; she wanted some ‘concrete action’ to be taken. She had been having trouble with Priyanka from the time I had started working at the school, for some unknown reason. At times, there was an apparent friction between the two while deciding on the charges, signing the register, leading the assembly, etc. At her being absent too frequently, not going to the classroom, shouting too much at the children and things like that, Santosh was angry with her and expressed her discomfort. In doing so, she unknowingly came to the main point, “I know it’s all about marriage… what if now she is married? Would it mean that she would throw tantrums? Even I will get married someday, then I will tell her how tantrums are thrown. You know but then also, I will not say anything about my children [schoolchildren] and will continue to behave with them like I do now; I won’t abandon them like she has” (sic).

Santosh had been given two additional charges ever since Priyanka got married and ‘legitimately’ refused to participate in the work. Santosh thought (and her thought matched with my observations) that unmarried teachers were given much more work at the school. The married ones in ‘acceptable’ ways took less work because everybody felt that they had other things to do. Shivali also agreed with Santosh and said that even unmarried women had many things to do like “taking care of mother, cooking, cleaning, submitting bills…” The register work or the charges willy-nilly came to the two teachers even when they themselves did not volunteer. When a teacher would not complete a work, Mrs. Alpana would make a ‘personal request’ to Santosh and Shivali to ‘help for the last time’. Mrs. Alpana once told me, “… there is no use in asking others, they are married no.” The heated debate over marriage continued for days, where I found that the friendship groups among the teachers were actually dependent upon the stage of family life the teachers were experiencing – irrespective of their own age, educational qualifications, the classes that they taught and their general interests. The talks within the group also reflected this.
6.3.5. Eligible and ineligibles
In the due course of events, it appeared necessary to talk in general to some aspirants who were looking forward to joining a teacher preparation programme, to understand what motivated people to join the ‘profession’. This was not a systematic inquiry, but a way in which I wanted to corroborate data and check by zooming out of the field, if I was over-reading. I prefer to situate it in Annexure 6(1) (and not in the main body of the text). However, what I want to present here is the idea that teaching in itself did not appear to motivate many people who were working as teachers or those who aspired to be teachers. The motivation came from the ‘convenience’ that the ‘job’ provided to a particular social group – ‘safe for women’, ‘soft’, ‘regularity of income’, ‘permanence’, and the like. While teaching appeared to be a matter of convenience for the teachers with whom I engaged during the course of this study, it was inaccessible to another set of people.

Jagwati, Neetu, Surveen and Zahid (community workers of the NGOs) all wanted to become teachers. They had not nurtured the hope of becoming teachers as much as they do now after having worked for the NGO and with the children from the slums. All of them had studied in MCD schools and graduated from the Sarvodaya Vidyalayas in Delhi. This was in sharp contrast with the teachers who were teaching at the school. Although, none of the four young people were ‘critical’ in terms of understanding teaching-learning, all of them on getting an opportunity to undergo professional teacher training would have understood the ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ of teaching in a much more nuanced fashion – as all of them had experienced working in an educational context, and were motivated to do so. They wanted to undergo such training after the experience of working with the children from the slums.

Zahid and Jagwati were known for being hardworking and sincere, so much so that their employers considered them as assets. Both of them were convinced that the community they work for deserves a better life - and that lives need to be and can be improved by education. It was not that they had thought about it on their own. In part, this came from what Zahid calls “the NGO training”, which at times seemed to
resemble the approach of a ‘welfarist’ agency (as described in the Chapter Five). However, it also had a deep connection with their life experiences and the social context in which they had lived. Jagwati had learnt from her observations in her vicinity that educated people (particularly women) were able to lead lives that are more dignified – she constantly compared how she was living a better life than her illiterate mother. She tells me,

My mother and father do not know how to read… nor did they teach my elder sister for long… I am the second child in my family who has completed schooling… and we both know that we are in a better position than our parents. Had I not been educated I would not have got a job, I would not have known so many things that I know now… therefore for all women it is necessary to complete schooling and work.

However, Jagwati and the others cannot become teachers. Neither do they have the ‘eligibility’ nor the ‘privilege’ to invest a year in a teacher education programme. While Zahid realised this soon and dropped the idea of becoming a teacher (after he failed in his Social Work degree examination) he feels that he can do the same work even outside the school in different ways. However, Jagwati was perplexed. She wanted to work as a teacher in a government school – not because she prefers the public systems, but because the private schools are not an option for her; she knows that she wouldn’t get a job at a private school. However, her economic background does not allow her to leave the job and pursue a fulltime programme – and a part-time teacher education degree is only for those untrained teachers who are in regular employment at schools. It is noteworthy that Zahid, Jagwati, Neetu and Surveen were from the oppressed caste groups (OBC and SC). All of them thought that they would open their own schools someday where good quality and free education could be made available for the children in their community.
6.4. Making sense

The social reality that higher education in India is much more a preserve of the middle classes and of the privileged castes, reflects in the findings of the studies done in the area (UGC, 2008). And the gendered nature of the teaching profession (more increasingly so) is so visible, particularly in urban areas, that it does not seem to require a research evidence – though the evidences are available (NUEPA, 2009)\(^{13}\). The composition of the social group that aspires to become teachers becomes evident not only through the statistics available, but also through what is visible in everyday practice. This seems to constitute the common knowledge about this ‘profession’ and the commonplace nature of this condition in a way legitimises its practice. The classed and gendered nature of the profession (that has come to be so), seems to work as a ‘norm’. This normalcy conditions the common sense in a manner that a love for the work, performing the duty, desire to become a good teacher and to meaningfully contribute to the field, sounds like naive idealism or an ‘exception’ (which rather than being seen as an ideal case, legitimises the norm in which it doesn’t seem to fit). These norms necessitate a need to inquire into the construction of and transitions in the conjugal relations in the middle class and explore in detail the nature of the domestication of women (and men) in urban educated and ‘modern’ classes (Chakravarty, 2011, 2012). In this context, Apple (1998, p. 200) states, “Yet teachers are not only classed actors. They are gendered as well… In every category, women are more apt to be proletarianised than men.” Referring to the class and gender connections he locates the rationalisation of the teachers’ work on the intersection of these two, indicating the historic ties of capital, labour and patriarchy.

This also brings in the need to understand the character of modern political economy and ‘work’, and the nature of ‘shadow works’ (Illich, 1981) on which it survives – which becomes visible through the manner in which male and female teachers justify their choice of profession. How certain kinds of work become support systems for the ‘real’ professions gets explained well through the frame of shadow work. The school,

\(^{13}\) ‘There are about 145 districts across 35 states and UTs that have more than 50 percent female teachers… Urban areas (66.15 percent) had higher percentage of female teachers than rural areas (37.20 percent) in 2008-09’ (p. 160). These figures have gone up from 64.94 percent in urban areas and 35.39 percent in rural areas in 2006-07 (NUEPA, 2007, p.132).
in many ways, appeared to be performing a ‘lag’ filling function to maintain a particular economic standard or social status – a lag that was created by modern work and professions.

In the situation that I observed it came across that the teachers did not see their work as important, or rather themselves as important components of a system that is meant to assume a particular role and discharge specific responsibilities. The manner in which a government service has been presented by the teachers in the above narratives, does not just reflect an individual’s perception or intent, but is a construct that is crafted within a tradition of relationship between the middle class, the masses and the public systems. A ‘legitimate claim’ of the middle classes for employment in the public institutions is embedded in this construct. This claim is made with a particular concept of work and its culture. As Batra (2009) puts it:

School teaching in India has declined to the status of a least favoured profession over the last three decades. It has largely become a last resort of educated unemployed youth, part-time business people and young women seeking to find a part-time socially acceptable profession. Yet, the massive demand for teachers in both government and private schools almost guarantees a job to most participants of the better teacher education programmes. Government and nongovernment organisation-led educational school reforms have paid little attention to this reality and continue their focus on improving access to schooling and building a more convivial teaching-learning environment. In this context, it would be necessary to develop an informed understanding of who comes to be a school teacher… (p. 12)

Being in a “sarkari” position not only provides a sense of security but also a particular status in society, and arouses a feeling of being in a governing system and thus being in a position to ‘govern’ the other and the self. The general discourse on employment ‘claims’ of the middle classes in public systems and separate low-paying schemes for the masses further strengthen this understanding. Despite being employed
in public-systems, working for the public is thought of as a favour or ‘social-service’. Contrary to this conception, working in a private system calls for a different understanding of work culture – where a teacher would be addressing a ‘better group of children’, who are near or even above her in the social hierarchy. This seemed to match Delpit’s (2006) contextualisation of how the difference in the teachers’ and students’ ‘cultures’ shapes ‘the silenced dialogue’ in the schools where cultural gaps between the two are constitute the ethos. She says, “The upper and middle classes send their children to school with all the accoutrements of the culture of power; children from other kinds of families operate within perfectly wonderful and viable cultures but not cultures that carry the codes or rules of power” (p. 25).

It is for these reasons that the teachers’ work (or rather the quality of State schooling) comes under critical scrutiny in several contemporary writings and becomes a legitimate basis for arguments in support of low-cost schooling – which may be achieved by ‘rationalising’ the teachers’ salary or employing contractual teachers (which in turn connotes the State’s withdrawal from education) (Jain and Dholakia, 2009; Tooley and Dixon, 2007). However, this is not what I intend to communicate through this chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight how the teachers themselves were reproducing the conditions in which they found themselves trapped and were resisting change. In fact the situation described herein explains how the reduction in teachers’ salaries or any other measure that de-stabilises teachers would only further dilute the quality of schooling available to the masses (Sarangapani, 2009).

While working with the teachers at the school and the forums, I found myself confused (and also trapped) about how the adjective of meekness explained their position. As and when I looked from within the purview of the system of schooling and the hierarchies therein, it appeared to offer a way of understanding the situation. However, in a broader social context where the socio-spatial locations of the children who attended the school and of the teachers appeared to be refracted through a socio-political structure of society, the ‘meekness’ of the teacher did not appear to explain
the situation. While this looked like a paradox, it also came across that the imagery of a powerless employee also did not fit well in the situation that I was observing. This was particularly as I could not understand how the teachers who were not discharging their ‘duty’ could continue to survive in the system. While the teachers were in subordinate positions and experienced powerlessness in the system, they also critiqued it continuously, twisted its rules and mandates, negotiated with it, and maintained it for their convenience. Ramachandran et.al. (2008, p. 12) state:

We are confronted with this reality: regardless of the ‘system’ there are always teachers and head teachers who are able to elicit parental and community support to improve the overall learning environment in the school. Equally, notwithstanding the best programmes and high budget allocations, a group of indifferent administrators, head teachers and teachers becomes a stumbling block in improving the learning environment. The agency of the head teacher and teachers at the school level and that of the administrators who directly supervise the school emerge as critical factors. [Emphasis original]

It appeared that the ‘meekness’ in many ways was a mechanism of convenience that served the interests of a classed and gendered cadre – and this appeared to me as one manifest form of disenfranchisement of the teacher cadre. This ‘meekness’ made teaching an ‘attractive’ profession for the informants I was working with. This safeguarding of class interests became all the more problematic when it was explicitly based on depriving the ‘other’ classes from what was of interest to them – or what now constitutes a fundamental right of the young people. While within the system a teacher may be positioned as a meek dictator, from an outsider’s perspective s/he appeared to invest her ‘agency’ in preserving ‘the business as usual’ and in turn weakening her own capacity to act upon her social circumstances. Further, in this case, in the almost complete absence of the traditional role that a teacher performed (i.e. transaction of the official curriculum) how the teacher’s ‘power’ or capacity to dictate was constituted was another confusion that occupied my thinking – which I will discuss to some extent in the next chapter.
While on the one hand this chapter attempted to inquire into the case of the teachers, on the other it also attempted to present how the school space was structured and fashioned. How this context shaped the experience of the children in the school is a matter that shall be explored in the next chapter. The next chapter will begin with a discussion that revolves around the relation between the teachers and the children in the school space. It will then proceed to explore the meanings and the worldviews of the children.