Chapter Seven:
Experiences of the Children: Meanings and Worldviews

This chapter intends to describe and analyse how the children (with whom I worked) experienced the relations around them, and made sense of these experiences as situated in the context developed in the preceding chapters. The chapter has been organised in three sections. The first concerns the school’s pedagogic environment and the children’s ‘engagement’ with it. It presents the social distances at the school, which were described to some extent in the previous chapter. However, here the focus is on the children’s experiences. In a way this section enables in developing the rationale for the account that follows. The second section relates to how the children engaged in making-sense of ‘other children’s’ experiences and of the categories of the adult world which shape these experiences. It comprises a selection of the discussion sessions on five stories or narratives\(^1\) from which the children’s ideas and experiences of caste, class, childhood and education come to the fore. The descriptions in the third section take the reader out of the school, as it presents select accounts from the FGDs with a group of children working as ‘ragpickers’, in an attempt to introduce the children’s experiences of a particular kind of work. It tries to develop a picture of the social world that emerges in this experience. It is worth noting that the work presented in this chapter spanned over the period of the study, and thus at some places the descriptions oscillate in time.

7.1. Social Distance: Silence, punishment and the body

As described in Chapters Three and Five, the silences that I encountered when I began the work with the Class V B girls at the school, made me reflect on the meaning of the research that I was attempting to do – particularly in the context of the method that this research was following. My adulthood, class and gender ensured that I was fitted in the frame of a schoolteacher, and that I was addressed as ‘ma’am ji’ to begin with. In the classroom there were long periods of lull, where the children gazed at me as I attempted to ‘talk’ to them – as if I was doing something that was strange or was not expected from a ‘teacher’. The schoolgirls talked among themselves, and talking

\(^{1}\) From the various stories I narrated to the children during the course of the study.
appeared to be the most prominent way in which they related to each other. However, they interacted with me only in particular ways and within a limit. I attempted to talk with them on several issues (see Chapter Five) ranging from the games that they played, the midday meal, what they wanted to be, what they liked about their school, the movies that they had seen and even about the sound that the classroom’s door made while opening and closing. However, except for ‘giving’ categorical responses, the schoolgirls didn’t ‘engage’ much. In a few instances of particular kinds the silences disappeared, but resurfaced soon. For example, during the initial days of work as I used to enter the school the girls ran to shake hands with me, but when I attempted to interact in the class, they only smiled or chuckled. As I tried to inquire into the nature of these silences, the concept of ‘social distance’ (between the teacher and the children) emerged as a rubric, which could potentially explain how these zones were defined and reproduced. In the following section, I build on certain narratives of the teachers and parents which locate the children’s silences in a context. Following these narratives I will focus on the experiences and the narratives of the children.

The previous chapter has outlined that there was not only an absence of formal teaching-learning at the school, but there was also an ‘apathy’ towards it among the teachers. However, this apathy in itself facilitated conditions in which children could construct ‘knowledge’ about their social world, the Self and the Other. This knowledge construction was further strengthened by the norms of the routine practice at the school. These norms were established in the everyday interactions and ‘contact’ between the children and the teachers, both of whom represented distinct social groups. These norms were established through the practices, where it appeared as if the ‘body’ assumed a central role in communication or worked as a medium to communicate. Two kinds of interactions between the teachers and the children constituted these communications: punishments and (what I call) ‘the body in the political realm’.
7.1.1. Punishment

In the FGDs, on separate occasions, the mothers of some of the schoolgirls (as discussed in Chapter Five), the teachers and the NGO workers, all argued in favour of corporal punishment and chastising the child. In the perception of these adults these were very effective ways of ‘teaching’ the child at school. Several researches have examined punishment and discipline as being central to the concept of the modern school, particularly based on the lens of Foucault (1977). While in the academic discourse there has been a focus on understanding how corporal punishment has been replaced by more organised (or ‘legitimate’) forms of surveillance, in the modern institutional spaces – including schools and families (Deacon, 2006) – reports and studies continue to highlight the persistence of corporal punishment (Kacker, Varadan, and Kumar, 2007). Punishment also comes to be examined from the standpoint of freedom and the innate virtue of the child or the discourses around the concept of the pre-social child (Rousseau, 1762). ‘Politics of childhood’, as it comes across through the thesis of those like Aries (1962) and Holt (1975) – where childhood is seen as a social construction of modern adult institutions and their practices – also provides a frame to analyse punishment. The mothers’ perspective on beating the child could be understood in this frame and also as being constituted by their image of a ‘traditional’ school (see Chapter Five). They understood punishment as a part of the (traditional) functions that they expected the school to perform – of ‘training’ the child in what they thought was worthwhile. In that, the above theoretical underpinnings helped in making sense of the situation. However, what these theories could explain only in part was the manner in which the teachers and the NGO workers justified corporal punishment and the practice of humiliating the child.

**Box 7.1.: Parents’ view on punishment**

Shabnam’s and Aarti’s mothers, while debating on the matter of the schoolteachers’ attitude, distinguished between two kinds of punishments. First, the one which is for the ‘benefit’ of the child [bacche ke bhale ke liye]. It included punishing the child on matters like absenteeism from the school without any reason, for not doing homework, for not paying attention when something is being taught and for getting poor marks. Second, the one when a child was beaten for
‘personal reasons’ [apne karan] and excessively. That is, when a teacher’s anger had nothing to do with ‘teaching’. Aarti’s mother says, “Sometimes they [the teachers] just beat our children because they are in a bad mood; or because they feel what is there to teach them; they are useless [inko kya padhana, ye to bekar hain]”. The parents therefore distinguished between the use of punishment as a strategy for educating and ‘beating for personal reasons’. This indicated that the mothers registered the ethos of social distances at the school and felt that their children were not treated well by the teachers. They cited instances where people had withdrawn (particularly their male children) from an MCD school in the area due to excessive beating which fell under the second category. On the visits to the homes with Jagwati, I met some mothers who inquired about schools where children were not beaten “too much” and “without reason”. They expressed their intention of withdrawing their children from the schools which they were attending.

In an FGD held with the E-5 MCD schoolteachers on their work and relations with the children, I introduced the question of punishment. I asked them how they regarded the “prohibition” imposed by the RtE Act, 2009, on the practice. The teachers, Mrs. Alpana, Santosh, Shivali and Sardar Sahab, strongly disagreed with the mandate, and with the idea that they could function without beating the children:\(^2\):

Santosh: Look at the situation in which we work; these children are from such backgrounds that there is no way in which they can be controlled… what do we do?

I [seeking explanation]: What do you mean when you say backgrounds?

Santosh: Meaning is obvious; what do I tell you? Look at them; they just wake-up from their beds and come here… Who comes here to

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\(^2\) In a FGD with 40 teachers from government and private schools in Delhi (at one of the external forums), the case appeared to be similar, where the teachers argued for the need to beat and humiliate the children to reassert their functions as teachers. However, here the arguments like ‘children no more respect teachers’, and ‘they don’t listen to teachers’ were central. Teachers resisted the idea of CCE as being effective in classrooms, as it cannot be implemented in the absence of punishment. Here, it appeared that they used punishment as an ‘aid’ in teaching at their schools. However, in my personal interactions with some of the teachers at a later stage, their views matched almost perfectly with those of the teachers at the school where I was working.
study? If I don’t beat them they will not even let us be here in school… do you think they respect anybody?!

Sardar Sahab: … you know we [schoolteachers] are doing a great social service; we control the criminals of the society for five whole hours every day… instead of respecting us, the government blames us… says that the teacher doesn’t work

I: But I don’t face any problem with the children here

Mrs. Alpana: Ours is a girls’ school; it is still okay. In the boys’ shift you cannot work without it [beating]… it looks like a house of animals [daanger-khana]. But yes, some of the teachers don’t beat; what’s the use? Your hands only get broken.

I: But if the working conditions are made ideal and there is a one to one relation in the classroom, will things improve?

Sardar Sahab: Only marginally; that too in some schools; not everywhere. That’s why there is no point in sitting in the classrooms; so much depends on the background that no teaching works for children whose families are not correct.

I: I am confused about the background. I mean, is it the economic class that interferes the most or am I understanding wrongly?

Sardar Sahab: You know it is a mixture of many things; it’s your whole personality. You can be less poor but that does not mean that you are good. It’s in the family.

Shivali: Actually, as theory tells, the whole child matters; his personality is integrated, so the home culture and habits reflect in his cleanliness, respect for others, the language he speaks…..

I: Does caste or religion make a difference?

Sardar Sahab: For me all are one; I do not distinguish. That’s a separate thing that most in this locality are SCs… But some SC children at our school are good, they are better off economically and don’t avail schemes; so just by looking you can’t make a difference between them and the general category children. (sic)
Santosh: You cannot say things for sure here; you do not know here ‘who is who’. But this has a lot of things together including caste and religion. You would generally see that better-off people send their children to the Gaur school [a neighbourhood low fee charging school]. So you are left with the rejected lot. If I do not beat them, you tell me what do I do?

This excerpt highlights the teachers’ concept of their own social role, the family ‘culture’, the poor, the ‘SC child’, and the like. Here, although the teachers perceived their work within the rubrics of ‘control’, ‘surveillance’ and ‘institutional authority’ (Foucault, 1977), the rubric itself was defined by a perceived sense of ‘social distance’ between the self and the subject. In a way it extended beyond the institutional authority and position. This distance was not limited to the dyad of teacher and child, but was guided by the ‘background’ or the social positions that the teacher and the community represented. Although caste and religion also formed the essential constituents of such a background along with the economic status, these could not be clearly discerned by the teachers (by “looking at” a child or in a simple fashion) given the nature of the setting. However, it could be made sense of through the indicators like ‘cleanliness’, ‘language’, the ‘personality as a whole’, or the ‘family’.

Situated in this context, the aim that the teachers attributed to their work was not of ‘delivering’ or ‘transacting’ the school curriculum. It was seen in the purview of a larger social function of taming a particular social group, which could potentially become (or was) a ‘nuisance maker’. That is, the taming was not used as a strategy that would be facilitative in teaching in the classroom (as no teaching happened there), but was framed under an ethos of ‘distance’ which sometimes took the form of apathy. This ethos was shaped and rationalised through the description of an amoral, unhygienic and unworthy social group that accessed the MCD school. The manner in which the teacher (Sardar Sahab) explicated the commonness between his and the police’s work seemed to converge the agenda of the two State agents. The teacher saw himself discharging the social function of ‘civilising’ and repressing the one who is an aberration – an aberration not to the norm, but to a perception of a ‘cultural’ other (a
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part of which was introduced in Chapter Four). In such practice, the teacher also reasserted and legitimated the ‘norm’.

It is also worth noting that in this discourse the child was not seen as a child, but as the ‘Other’. Or maybe I should say that such discourse and practice could only be rationalised by generating a particular image of the child as the Other. Such discourse about the background of the child dominated the FGDs with the teachers. It constituted the ordinary staffroom discussions and surfaced in the formal workshops at other State sponsored forums as well. It was freely expressed as a genuine problem with which the State schoolteachers ‘struggled’. How Otherness (a concept central to post-colonial thinking) is constituted in everyday discourse came across through the ethos of distance between the teachers and the community in question. As described in Chapter One and Two, works like that of Said (1978) helped in giving words to such ideas that emerged from the field – ideas which were experienced more than observed.

While most of these interactions took place within the groups of teachers and only tended to surface in discussions with other adults, they were subsumed in a nuanced form in the interactions with the children. These were implicit in the way the teachers dealt with the children. (I will shortly describe this aspect in some depth but here it is relevant to say some things drawn from the observations in this context). It is difficult to understand how the children made meaning of the tacit messages – as these messages were not communicated in isolated incidents or cushioned (or ‘hidden’) in the official curriculum. Instead, they formed the overall philosophy in which the relations at the school were established. This social distance that the teachers ‘facilitated’ in the school, worked as the backdrop against which the child made meaning about the social world and her location in it. It appeared that the questions like: What is taught at school? What is worth teaching? How to teach? What is the role of the teachers and the school? – were redefined by the teacher in the light of the socialisation function they assumed, less as agents of the State but more from their standing vis-à-vis a social group.
At the NGOs the case was not completely different, but more complicated as these distances took a different form. The distance was less between the NGO workers (who also taught) and the community to which the children belonged. Therefore, it gave rise to a state of confusion in which different kinds of relationships were observed. Like in the case of Zahid and Jagwati, there were no episodes of physical punishment. Both of them relied on scolding the children in order to ensure that they could ‘teach’ *[sikhana]* them. Zahid said,

I was one of them. I was also like them only; when teachers beat me I fell ill. These children are from even more weaker *background* than I was. I know what it feels being in that position – so I do not feel like beating them… These children are so small [young], some of them are very weak; if I beat them they would stop coming…

Here the ‘background’ played a different role in meaning making. It was an instrument to decipher the affinity with the children. As discussed in Chapter Six, such observations made it worthwhile to consider the social distance between the ‘teacher’ and the child as being a significant constituent of their relationship, and also to reflect on the question ‘who becomes a teacher’ (Batra, 2009).

However, in the case of most of the community workers the ‘distancing’ was starker. They attempted to ‘keep away’ from the community to which they themselves ‘belonged’. Saroj, who herself was from the community she was working for, shares, “… after studying so much also if I have to remain here, then what’s the benefit *[fayda]*; I do not want to be here doing this work. I want to go to a good school that has good children.” How education and association with the NGO distanced the community worker from her own ‘background’ resembled Valmiki’s (1997) and Morey’s (2002) explication in this respect (functions that modern education played in their lives). Yet, Saroj could not express this openly at work, even to one of her best friends Jagwati. In the case of the NGOs that I observed, the presence of people like Zahid and Jagwati was critical in maintaining the norms of working with the children. This may not have had an impact on how the other workers ‘felt’ about their work and the children, but made such discourse on ‘backgrounds’ less obvious or visible. This is not to say that the NGOs were better places than the government schools, but to
highlight how the concept of social distances worked between people belonging to different social positions, and the nature of fraternal relations between them. The following section explores how the children at the school experienced this distance. The section draws from the observations and interactions at the school. However, it only presents the overview of the understandings that I draw, due to constraints of space. Yet most of the understandings presented in the section will be substantiated in the section titled ‘the body in the political realm’.

**a. Children’s views on punishment**

As I talked to the schoolgirls about their experiences of corporal punishment, they told me that the teachers were “very good” and did not punish them too often. Since this was contrary to what I had observed, I inquired further to understand how they perceived punishment. From the discussions it emerged that the girls qualified only ‘isolation’ as a punishment. That is, they only considered being asked to get out of the class, to stand-up with hands raised, to sit in the corner alone or ordering others not to talk to a particular child as punishments. Regarding the teachers slapping them, pulling their ears and holding their hands firmly, the girls said that these were ‘normal’ and were not punishments at all. The teacher’s scolding was not even taken into cognisance by the children. Aarti explains, “Dantna bhi koi sazaa hoti hai? Wo to madam aise hi bolti hain”. Komal adds, “Wo to unka tareeka hai, wo bolti hi aise hain… sab koi aise hi bolti hain to dantna kaise hua?”

Hema, (monitor of Class V B) on one of my first visits to the class when the children of the class were shouting and running here and there in my presence says, “… all of them have a habit of being dealt with sternly [sakhti ki adat hai]; unless you beat one or two you will not be able to speak….” Hema had been given a stainless steel scale by Ms. Priyanka to control the children of the class. However, she said that she had never used it for beating any of her peers. She says, “I don’t beat them. When they don’t listen to me I only scare them with the scale”. In fact Hema ‘controlled’ the class in her own way. When the class became chaotic and no strategy worked, Hema

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3 “Can scolding be a punishment? The madam speaks like this” “It’s their way, they are like that… each one speaks like that so how could it be scolding?”
expressed that she was upset with the ones who were going out of the room and that she would not speak to them. The other girls noted it, stopped making noise, and went to her to accept their fault. With these strategies the need to use the scale was minimised. This gave a sense of fellowship or a ‘fellow feeling’ among the children. In the observations I never found the scale being used for beating. Instead, it came handy in tearing papers, for playing or pulling/pushing things.

However, the girls could not articulate the absence of this feeling in how the teachers related to them. While apathy and ‘distance’ were one part of this behaviour, slapping and pulling ears and hands were other components of it. The schoolboys’ (from the afternoon shifts) experience of punishment was different. In fact, the girls agreed that the boys were dealt with much more ‘harshly’ and that they were ‘beaten-up’ by the teachers.

**Box 7.2.: A differing opinion: Schoolboys’ anger**

There was a difference in how the afternoon shift schoolboys understood punishments. The boys said that ‘beating’ sometimes made them ‘angry’ – this did not happen always but usually when they were beaten “without reason”. While discussing a story where a child was punished by a teacher for the latter, the boys thought that if this had happened outside the school, they would have ‘revolted’ and would have asked their parents to call the police. However, they said that the police could not be called to schools – only parents could fight with the teachers. In that, I related the schoolboys’ aspiration to become ‘policemen’ (as described in Chapter Five), in part with the experience that they had with the teachers, and that outside the school in general. This was one occasion where the boys’ and the girls’ responses differed in a basic way. The boys in general talked more on a variety of topics, and were not ‘silent’ – literally.

However, in observations it appeared that the case was only a shade different. In both the shifts, for ‘mistakes’ (like roaming around, shouting outside or inside the classroom, being in another class, spoiling their clothes, spilling the midday meal and

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4 Ambedkar (2002, 2004) (see Chapter Two)
fighting with each other) and also at random, the children got a beating from the teachers. The girls told me that Santosh madam and Alpana madam were the ones who had “heavy hands”. They all ran as soon as they saw any of the two teachers approaching, and entered the classroom which was the nearest and sat on the benches as if nothing had happened. In fact, Rinku used to enact this whole episode to make her peers laugh. She was popular for this act and performed only on being pleaded with to do so. At times she would move her hand in a peculiar way (to mock a ‘heavy-hand’) as a cue to remind the peers of the episode – this in itself was enough to make the girls laugh.

In conversations and observations it emerged that although, the children were ‘scared’ of the beating, they did not always resist it when being beaten. One of them confided that they folded their hands over the face and head to avoid being beaten in a way that could cause a higher degree of pain. While the others agreed, Shabnam had a different view on the matter. She says, “Ma’am ji gets hurt that way; so we should not do that….” The girls told me that none of them cried in front of the teacher when they got a beating, as they might get another one for crying.

In discussions and observations, punishment appeared to be so overarching in the life world of the children that they seemed to have accepted it as ‘a given’ or fate – so much so that violation of respect and body was completely internalised. The children were in the ‘habit’ of being beaten to an extent that they could not analyse the situation beyond this. When asked questions that demanded engaging with their experience, they shied away or changed the topic. However, in the instances of punishment in the stories that I narrated, they examined the experience of punishment in general. Although, punishment was a significant experience and a routine, it was not the most efficient way of ‘managing’ the children. Punishing the children could have put teachers in trouble if parents complained about it. Even the teachers felt that ideally they would not want to beat the children because of the problems that it may lead to. This was specifically because corporal punishment, increasingly, has become difficult to justify, particularly because the RtE Act’s mandate and the child-centered vocabulary stand in opposition to it.
To contextualise the nature of the punishment, it is relevant to draw from Foucault’s (1977) work, originally written in the context of prisons, but often applied to understand corporal punishment in schools. While exploring ‘modern’ institutional punishment, Foucault explains how the pain of the body no longer is the constitutive element of the penalty. The body now serves as an intermediary or instrument which is “caught up” in a system of constraints and privations. Yet, the body continues to assume a peculiar place in the act of disciplining and punishing. Building his thesis titled ‘the body of the condemned’ he says, “Punishment like forced labour or imprisonment… has never functioned without a certain additional element that concerns the body itself… which is enveloped, increasingly, by non-corporeal nature of the penal system” (p. 16).

Although Foucault examines justification for punishment as a strategy intended to “obtain a cure”, how the teachers at the school justified it went beyond this. The justification was enveloped by a particular idea of the Other as the ‘nuisance maker’ and the Self as the victim. Even the children understood punishment as a technique to cure only in part. While Said’s (1978) conception of ‘Orientalism’ (as the construction of the Other) and the post-colonial theory (particularly with reference to the category of colonial) may not directly be applicable here, it is relevant to understand that apart from making visible the political construction of identities, these ideas also highlight a geo-spatial politics or ‘context’ that shapes these constructions. The spatial situation or the affiliation to a ‘slum’ was central to how the children’s identities were being described and presented (see Chapter Four).

### 7.1.2. Body in political realm

As described earlier, punishments of isolation had a deeper impact on the schoolgirls. They felt much more humiliated by such punishments. Komal had said “...bacche hain to maar to padegi hi na [we are children so won’t will get beaten]; …at home and here also, but when madam asks me to stand outside the class, I feel very bad.” The reasons for such isolation more frequently included: not paying attention when the teacher took attendance or said something, loitering around in the school, using a
cuss word or fighting with a peer who complained to the teacher, urinating outside the places assigned, or parents not turning up for scheme distribution. The girls considered these acts as their ‘faults’ for which they thought they had to be punished. Social isolation was an experience limited only to the school. The feeling that social isolation aroused helps in understanding that the children felt humiliated when distanced from their peer group. Therefore, it may be inferred that social distancing generated a feeling of humiliation among the children and that they were able to understand this experience.

It was such ways of ‘punishing’ or ‘communicating’ that appeared to be much more powerful than corporal punishment. This falls in line with how Foucault (1977) explains punishment. He says, “The expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will and the inclinations” or the ‘soul’ (p. 16). However, the observations at the school, continued to lead me to view how the body got involved in inciting penalty on the ‘soul’. While the implications on the body in certain kinds of situations did not appear to be ‘physically/biologically’ significant, they were directed through it in a manner that looked peculiarly complicated. The ethos of social distance at the school made it pertinent to make sense of the signs that such exercise of punishment, or of implicating the physical, would generate. Foucault’s analysis, where he locates the system of punishment in a certain ‘political economy’ of body, appeared meaningful here. Although his analysis is focussed on punishment, it offers a way of making sense of meanings that are produced through the body, in general as well – particularly in the context of power relations. He says that even when violence is not used in the exercise of punishment, the body is central. This is traced not to the biological realm but to the political field:

… the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have immediate hold upon it; they invest it… train it; force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound in accordance with complex reciprocal relations with its economic use…; the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. (p. 25-26)
He argues that ‘knowledge’ of the body is not constituted simply by the science of its functioning but by the ‘political technology of body’. This technology may not be systematic, but diffused and random. It is such nature of this ‘politics’ that makes it difficult to describe how it functioned at the school. However, some glimpses of it may be signposted through certain instances where it took forms that were more apparent.

a. Making conspicuous

There was a particular way in which the child’s body was made conspicuous. At times the teachers shouted at the children for reasons that could not be related neatly to the ‘fault’ in question. Such scolding was random in nature and could emerge in unrelated contexts. For example when a child was constantly talking to a peer despite general reminders from Shivali, she says loudly enough for everybody to hear, “Kanu! Just look at yourself, particularly your legs; how dark they are looking… at least use soap when you bathe. When did you last bathe?” When the other children started laughing, she says, “Why are you all laughing? Should I show you all a mirror?” In another instance, when a child was found sitting in her sister’s class, Ms. Alpana says, “You are the worst girl of the school. In how many days do you take a bath? Both you sisters do not bathe.” In such instances, these comments looked random or arbitrary, but it was this arbitrariness that framed the expanse of a teacher’s control over the children in the institutional setting.

The children were ‘regulated’ by remarks about their body and appearance – particularly in terms of how clean they looked. This worked as an efficient ‘strategy’ (for inciting a silence) considering the fact that this was a girls’ school, especially in those cases where the teacher’s institutional authority was limited or would not have worked as effectively. Such comments made a child feel awkward and shy, while also creating conditions to arouse self-contempt among the children. Their body language and expressions changed and a general withdrawal could be observed. When I tried

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5 As seen in Chapter Two, Das (2004) emphasises such ‘arbitrariness’ in the State’s action to understand the politics in the margins. As one considers the teachers as functionaries of the State and the school as a State institution, one form of State-margin interaction or politics becomes visible.

6 In Chapter Three, in the narrative where I described the ‘good girls’ of the school, such expected norms of neatness and cleanliness were the main constituents of the ‘goodness’ that the teachers attributed to the children.
talking to some children about this, they did not talk but only smiled and shied away. Only one of the girls, Aarti, who was scolded by Mrs. Jain in a similar fashion on the same day, said (smiling as if feeling shy), “Ajeeb sa lagta hai; sharam lagti hai” [It makes me feel awkward; I feel embarrassed/shy]. Other girls avoided my glances (or making an eye contact) and kept smiling in a peculiar way until the topic was changed. During these interactions, some of them admitted that they felt extremely self-conscious on such occasions. It was during these moments that the meaning of ‘talking’ to children emerged as being different and more complicated to me as an adult, than how I had thought about it before beginning the study. In this process, the method of storytelling was fleshed out.

b. Performing the ‘functions’: Investing the body
As I delved deeper and explored meanings of the child’s physical presence in the school, another kind of observation started fitting into the rubrics of the relational politics. The presence of the child brought her into the purview of serving some functions in the school. Cleaning (sweeping the classroom, and cleaning the table and chairs in the incharge’s room) was one such function that I have already described. The functions stretched beyond these. The girls ran several petty errands for the teachers. One of the most common and ‘accepted’ one was where the girls were sent out of the school to the neighbourhood shops to buy stationery and photocopy papers.

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<th>Box 7.3.: The errand</th>
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<td>While I was narrating a story in Class V B, one of the children, Nidhi, expressed her wish to tell a story. As she was began, Mrs. Alpana came into the class and said, “Nidhi come here, take these pages and get them photocopied from the shop next to Aggarwal’s.” Nidhi left the classroom to carry out the job saying, “Please don’t move to the next story before I come back… I will be back soon.” When she came back Mrs. Alpana found that the photocopied papers were jumbled up for which she got a scolding and had to go back. The story session was paused and the group waited for her. However, it could only be resumed the next day as the second time when Nidhi brought the papers some text in the margins was not visible. Nidhi came to the classroom between her runs to the shop and back, and each time she</td>
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asked the group to wait and not to begin without her. On such occasions, even my refusal to send the children out of the class did not work.

At times, when the teachers decided to celebrate some occasion in the school, the children were sent out to bring food items and soft-drinks from a nearby shop (the Kishan Chand halwai). On the last working day of every month, which is a half day at the MCD schools, this was a routine. The children were not chosen at random for this task. Only the ‘favourites’ (the ‘good girls’) did the task, and became objects of envy for the other girls. Some of the ‘favourites’ themselves went to ask the teachers if they wanted them to bring something (as described in Box 7.3., while some like Nidhi felt disturbed as their classroom engagements were disturbed, but could not refuse the teachers’ order). How not only the ‘good girls’ but all the children internalised this role vis-à-vis teachers, explicated in a broader sense how the children learnt about the social distance and relations. The construction of the feeling of ‘envy’ disengaged the girls from problematising their experience.

There were two occasions where the whole dimension of child’s position in the school and the politics through the body became very explicit:

1. One day, as the school got over, I went to look for Shivali who had not yet come downstairs from her class. I went upstairs to see her. As I reached the class, I could smell a familiar perfume that I associated with a particular brand of hair oil. On entering, I saw Shivali seated on a bench and two girls of the class oiling her hair. On seeing me, Shivali said, “These two girls do a very good head massage.” She had made two children stay back to oil, massage and comb her hair. She had brought oil and a comb from home for this purpose. When I tried to talk to her about this, she said (there, before the girls), “My headache is a result of shouting at them; they can at least do that much for their teacher.” The children did not react to this. When I tried to talk to both of them later, the girls did not say much, except, “Madam likes it, so we do it.” Shivali confided that on every last working day of the month, she brought oil from home, and the girls themselves came to her to ask if she wanted them to oil her hair. She also said that the other girls felt envious of the two ‘preferred’ children. As I attempted to talk about this with the girls in subtler ways, they changed the topic. It
also appeared difficult to talk of such matters as it could have made children feel vulnerable or even exposed to the risk of some action on the teacher’s part. Such observations did not fit into the concept of a school, but the fact that these were happening there made me consider or think even more about the function that the school serves and how a child experiences such schooling.

**ii.** The second occasion was where a child of Class I defecated in her uniform and the teacher called her neighbour from class IV to clean the child. The child dutifully did the job, reported to the teacher and asked for soap to wash her hands. The teacher asked her to throw away the soap after washing her hands. Another girl of Class IV helped her friend to dress the younger child in a spare uniform that was kept at the school for such emergencies. As I asked the children about it, they told me that this happened many times, and they performed the task as they considered their neighbours who were studying in the school as sisters and felt a sisterly affection for them. They told me that they felt bad about it, but if they did not do it the younger ones would have to stay dirty. However, they were not able to discern the absence of such feelings in the teachers.

c. **Establishing the ‘codes’**
Further, the teachers in a ‘code of conduct’ made the ‘distance’ explicit. For example, the children were supposed to follow two behavioural rules: ‘to not touch the teacher’, and ‘to maintain a physical distance’. These rules worked only for the child; teachers could arbitrarily follow or break them. I saw them being broken particularly during the acts of punishment and in those like the ones described in the preceding section. The idea that children freely touched me and my belongings, explored the books that I carried to the class and that we shared water from each other’s water bottles did not sit well among the teachers at the school. Some expressed their discomfort. Ms. Priyanka said,

Priyanka: How can you do that? That’s not the way teachers behave.
I: Did I do something wrong?
Priyanka: Wrong in the sense that, not that you can’t do it – but it is not the way
I: Meaning?
Priyanka: I mean they [children] are not supposed to touch you and be so close; that’s how a school should work. If you let them do it, they will climb on everybody’s head.

One of the girls of Class V B was once leaning against me while putting on her shoes. When Mrs. Joshi (a nursery class teacher) saw this, she said to the child,

You are not supposed to touch teachers; learn to behave yourself…
don’t you see the wall; you should take its support and wear your shoe.

When the child walked on ahead, Mrs. Joshi requested of me,

Please do not develop such habits [among the children]; they should not be touching teachers... they will develop these habits and things will become difficult for us; don’t disturb these things, we have trained them with a lot of difficulty.

Despite the teachers’ and the children’s gender being the same, and there being a considerable age difference between them, the physical distance was maintained. Children had internalised the rule and never touched a teacher or her belongings unless the teacher herself expressed the need to do so (like carrying the teacher’s bag from one room to the other). On occasions when children did so accidentally, they were reminded of their mistake immediately or they themselves realised their mistake and apologised to the teacher.

The degree of comfort that a child and a teacher share with each other also reflects in the physical distance they maintain. This is more so in the case of the primary school children, where a child may need some occasional physical care as well. The notion or the concept of a teacher gets constructed in this context, which in turn defines the concept of a student and a child’s self-concept. Despite the fact that the girls at the school expressed deep respect for the teacher and a common-sense belief that most things are for their good, there were zones where they were silent and could not explain the teacher’s behaviour. They were also unable to make sense of their own

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7 This is not to say that the children did not have any positive experiences at school, inasmuch as they say they loved their school. How children talked about their school and what they liked and disliked is presented in Annexure 7(1).
feelings and experience, which in turn appeared to be a space where ‘voice’ was
missing.

It appeared that a particular kind of power relation (that was explicit yet diffused, and
visible yet incoherent) was generated at the school in these interactions between the
teachers and the children. While one could fit it in the concept of reproduction of class
relations, the meanings appeared more subtle. Foucault (1977) explains this
complication when he talks about the exercise of control over the body. He says,

… this power is exercised than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege’… of
the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions – an
effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of
those who are dominated… this power is not exercised simply as an
obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it exerts
pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it,
resist the grip it has on them (p. 27).

It is relevant to note that Das (2004) also draws from Foucault’s works to situate the
‘biopolitics’ in the margins. She examines how the field of the State control expands
in the margins by bringing the ‘biophysical’ or the ‘life’ into the purview of the legal
and medical measures (for example through vaccination and sterilisation drives). This
may not be applicable in the case that I observed, but it may provide a perspective to
locate the observations in a State-margins frame.

Concepts like that of ‘streaming’ (Keddie, 1971) and hidden curriculum did not seem
to explain the observations. This was particularly because the relationships were not
‘hidden’ in curricular relations. The relations (or the ‘distances’) instead became the
rationale for not transacting the curriculum. Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of capital and
of habitus did enable me to situate the children’s responses and reactions in a
perspective. However, it did not completely capture how these responses were
generated in this ethos, and how the children experienced the relations at the school –
not in terms of how they talked about it; but in terms of how they felt about it. It
appeared that the practice at the school indicated a situation where there was ‘apathy’
towards or an ethos of not transacting the body of knowledge that is meant to be
transacted at the school. Instead, the teachers transacted the norms of ‘social’ relationships and socialised children in them. These were encircled in the politics of body that assumed the form of punishment, humiliation and serving. While in an explicit fashion caste did not appear to be involved in such interaction, it was implicit in the concepts like that of ‘cleanliness’ and ‘hygiene’. These concepts enabled teachers to clarify their doubt regarding and deciphering ‘who was who’. Such doubts and questions operated in the backdrop of the school routine and were expressed in a jargon of ‘the background’ (as described in the previous chapter).

Among one of the ways to understand how this was experienced and articulated by children was talking to them upfront. However, this would have required making the discussion ‘explicit’, which in turn involved three issues: 1) That the nature of ‘silences’ that the children maintained on such matters, their shying away or changing topics (as signified in the above instances) made it clear that they were not comfortable – about ‘talking’ about them; 2) ‘Interacting’ did not appear to be a reasonable approach to carry out focussed work with primary school children; and 3) It appeared ‘unethical’ to talk about a subject that was in general never made explicit – as it would have perturbed the lived reality (for better or for worse). It would have involved interacting with the children on particular concepts of caste and class and their understanding of these, which appeared to be neither logical nor possible. Also, at the time when I was in the field, the everyday reality appeared so messy and complex that even I was grappling to trace and qualify ‘patterns’ in what I was observing, in specific relation of caste and class. More than anything, I did not want to impose my ‘views’ on the children, which could have happened in general interactions. How my own identity would have intervened in the process was also not very clear. In the following section I present one such case where this complication emerged. It was during these instances that I thought about stories as a medium of engaging with the children.

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8 Some of these were also described in previous Chapters (Four and Six)
7.1.3. Intertwined meanings and identity
As I began working with the children, I came to understand that my social identity mattered to them. They attempted to understand how ‘distant’ or how ‘close’ I was to their social positions. For example, among the several other things that children wanted to know about me, my ‘surname’ was one with which they struggled hard. One of them asked whether I was a Hindu or a Muslim, while another said that my first name sounded like a Hindu name. My saying that I did not know, and asking them how I would come to know, triggered the following interaction:

Aarti: Which festivals do you celebrate?
I: I celebrate Diwali, Eid and Guruparv.
Aarti: How can you celebrate all? That can’t be [laughing].
Komal: Okay, tell me your full name.
I: My name is Gunjan.
Komal: No [with emphasis], I am asking you what you write after your name
I: After my name?
Komal: Yes, like she [pointing to a classmate] writes Singh
I: I only write Gunjan.
Anshu: You are lying… you must be writing something.
I: I don’t write anything.
Aarti: What does your father write after his name?
I: But what would you do with that?
Aarti: I would be able to tell you what you are.
I: What I am?
Aarti: Yes, whether you are a Hindu or not, and whether you are a Baniya, Gujarati, Sardar or Rajput.
I: If I say that I write Balmiki? (One of prominent castes in the locality)
The children stopped speaking and started smiling shyly. No one responded; when I asked again, Anshu said:

Anshu: You are lying; I know you are a Sardar or a Pandit.
I: Why do you say so?
Komal: Because you are fair.
Anshu: And the way you speak.

The children began with making sense of my religion, which in itself would have settled various matters about my identity. They were ‘somehow’ assuming that I was an upper-caste Hindu or Sikh. In this meaning making, they were relating my ‘body’ and the ‘language’ I spoke to my religious and/or caste identity. They were applying several kinds of categories together – caste, religion, language and body/class – to make sense of who I was. Why it was important for them to know this, is a question that remains dubious. However, it can be said that they were unclear about who I was, what I was there for and how I thought about their group.

In further discussions, one of them told me that some children wrote their surnames while others did not. Not “having” a surname was fairly common, but it had a meaning in itself – as the proposition that I did not have a surname was contested. However, the group then proceeded to ask questions through which my economic status could be inferred. Questions like: “Where do you live? How big is your house? Is your house very big? What does your father do? Which vehicle do you have at home? How do you earn and what work do you do?” Some of them also insisted that they ‘knew’ that I was a rich Hindu, and they got to know this by my appearance and the way I spoke. And some others were convinced that I was a Sikh because of the same reasons. I never revealed my surname or my socio-religious identity, which made me a source of interest among children as they then resorted to other ways of ‘knowing’ me (like – what do I like, what work do I do, how do I talk, what do I think about them and so on, which came across in the questions they asked and the way in which they behaved with me). Attempts to probe further into the questions of ‘how to know who a person was’ and whether this was involved in making sense of their experiences with someone, did not help in understanding how children made these meanings, beyond a point. This experience enabled me decipher that caste and class operated in their meaning-making and thus, these may also be implicit in how children made sense of their experiences at the school with the teachers, their relations with peers and in positioning the self vis-à-vis others.
7.2. Stories as a medium of relating

Why stories?

Such observations and conversations furthered me to think about ways in which I could interact with the children in a more focussed manner on their experiences and caste and class. Although the idea was to discuss and understand how children articulate these categories, being blunt and interacting in a direct/confrontational fashion was something from which I wanted to consciously refrain. This was primarily to ensure that these discussions were subtle and nuanced like they were in their daily lives, and that the children were not made vulnerable. It was while pondering on these lines and experiencing these processes, that I explored storytelling as a way of engaging on the categories. I communicated with the children by telling and listening to a variety of stories from the very beginning of the fieldwork at school. From these experiences, it emerged that the children had a more than ordinary interest in narrating and listening to stories of varied kinds. They also almost naturally assumed a mode of asking questions and discussing as I narrated stories.

In addition, the story sessions brought us on a same page, at least in some sense. Some characters from the stories and some situations (like flying elephants as described in Chapter Five) became a point of reference for us and frequently emerged in related and unrelated contexts, which helped me in understanding how children think and make meaning. I reflected on the other possible ways of inquiry (like conversations, drawings, discussions) but as discussed, they did not appear to suit the group with which I was working. Reading of works like those of Kumar (1996a), Roney (1989) and Mathews (1992) helped in reinforcing this understanding and in developing a way of working and corroborating the observations.

These experiences also made me revisit the autobiographical narratives of Dalit authors – who presented their silences when they voiced the exclusion or marginalisation they experienced during their childhood. I also visited and revisited certain contemporary narratives or cases that could facilitate discussions on the experience of poverty and the concept of the State, which in turn could enable a reflection on the nature of economic development and conflicts therein. I brought
some newspaper cuttings of cases where caste and class were the centrepiece of a situation and could support a discussion on ‘exclusion’. However, ‘childhood’ was another aspect that naturally emerged in these engagements. In many ways the stories were much more useful in understanding childhood than they were in making sense of how the adult world is experienced by children. In the following section, I present the work on five of these stories, where I was able to engage with children more intensively than the other stories.9

7.2.1. Children’s conception of caste, class and experience at school

Narrative 1: A case of an ‘untouchable’ dog: Children’s access to meanings

The purpose of this case was to understand if the term ‘Dalit’ was a part of the vocabulary or the everyday discourse among the children. If it was, then what were the associations they made with the term, and if not, how did they make sense of the narrative that was based in a caste context. A news item was printed in a Hindi daily (Appendix 7(1)) which I brought to the class for discussion with the children, to discern how they understood the term ‘Dalit’. This news item has been translated below:

A man in a village in Muraina, declared his dog achoot [untouchable] as a woman from a Dalit family staying nearby fed it a chapatti. When the owner of the dog came to know this [how he came to know this was not specified], he asked the Dalit family to pay Rs. 15,000 in cash for they had fed the dog, and to keep the dog.

9 Work and setting: The setting and the conditions of the school did not allow deliberating on the stories with a few children in a focus group discussion mode until the last phase of the work. Even when I was able to engage in intensive discussions, it was more coincidental than planned. The school had neither infrastructural conditions nor an environment where I could conduct discussions with a smaller group of children (with whom I planned to work). However, during the work on the select stories that are presented here, the school’s attendance had dropped as children were leaving for their villages before the summer vacation (in early April, a good number of children had left). Also, preparations for a function had created a disturbance in the school ‘schedule’. Many children absented themselves casually during this phase. Those who came to school went back before closing time. The stories presented in the following section were those around which I could work with the selected group of children due to such ‘chaos’ at the school. The narrations were followed by discussions, dialogue, writing and at times drawing. While narrating the stories, caste affiliations of the characters was never made explicit, as the purpose was to understand how children make meaning from the description and how they analyse the experiences of exclusion. After the work on the stories, I worked with the children on the construction of real-life ‘stories’ or instances which they had heard, experienced or observed – particularly in the context of exclusion from or within an educational context. For this, we used drawing as a medium to support abstract thinking. The girls with whom I worked were those who were fairly regular at the school, and with whom I developed a closer tie. Two came from the K Block slum, while the others lived in the sadhe-barah-gaj (described in Chapter Four). Some other children joined occasionally to listen to the stories at their own will.
The matter came to light when the Dalit family arrived before the zila collector and DIG for a jansunwayi [public hearing] with a dog. The Dalit family explained that it had fed a leftover chapatti to a dog, which was owned by a Yadav family staying nearby. The owner of the dog had demanded that the family pay Rs. 15,000 to him as compensation for the loss, and saying so tied the dog in their premises and left it there. The woman from the Dalit family said that the dog owner has threatened to kill them if they did not pay the amount. The poor Dalit family could not pay the money. They were now scared as to how they would continue to live in the village…

As I placed the entire newspaper page on a desk saying that I had brought something for them to see, the children gathered around it and jostled each other to find a space. Instead of directly asking them to read this news item, I asked them to read the various headings and share if they found something ‘interesting’. Komal, who had occupied the better share of the space at the desk, identified this heading and read it out aloud. The children giggled on hearing the heading of the story – ‘Dalit ki roti kha kar kutta hua achoot’, and looked at each other. Anshu asked Rinku to read the news aloud, but when Rinku could not read properly, Hema, who was known to be better at reading was called on to take over. While the piece was being read out, the children asked me the meanings of some terms like zila collector, DIG and jansunwayi. When Hema had completed reading the news item, I waited for a while thinking that the group would ask some questions. When the children continued giggling, I asked if someone could explain what the case was all about.

Rinku: … there was a dog that was very hungry… he went to an aunty’s house who gave a chapatti to it

Hema: And when she gave the chapatti to the dog, the dog became achoot
I: Achoot?
All Children: Yes, achoot ho gaya; it is written in it [pointing out to the text]
I: Meaning? [pause]
I: What is achoot?
[Children chuckled looking at each other as I repeated the question.]
Hema: I don’t know what is achoot
Rinku: I know, achoot is a bad thing [gandi cheez hoti hai]
I: Oh, is it? Which bad thing?
Rinku: Like garbage [jaise kooda]

Some children agreed to this response, while others were not convinced, and nodded their heads in negation or said ‘it is wrong’ – but did not answer the question.

I: But here it is not the garbage but a dog. Can a dog be achoot?
Rinku: Yes, if it goes into the garbage it can become achoot.
Hema: No it is not like that; you are a fool!
Anshu [agreeing with Hema]: All dogs wander in garbage, all dogs are not achoot. This dog became achoot, that’s why it is a khabar [news], nahin to akbaar mein kyun ata? [otherwise why it would have come in the newspaper?]

The deductive logic that Anshu applied and the manner in which she related her observation was convincing for everyone. There was a pause of a few seconds after which the observations were made. As the logic was very powerful and based on an everyday observation, it seemed agreeable; some children supported what Anshu had said by repeating it. All the children agreed and some asserted that this was what had happened and that I should crosscheck with the text if I had a doubt. It appeared that the children were ‘stuck’ with the text and were repeatedly getting back to it – even though they had not read the text themselves; Hema had read it out to them. The manner in which the other explanations were being crosschecked, and even attributed to the text, brings out the value that the children placed on the medium and also showed how powerful or maybe ‘sacrosanct’ a text was even if it was not a part of the school curriculum. Also, the logic that Anshu applied was in itself framed by the text:

I: What made this dog achoot?
Hema: Kyunki dalit ki roti khayi usne [because it ate the Dalit’s chapatti]
I: But how can a dog become achoot if someone feeds it?
Anshu: Because the one who fed it was Dalit.
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I: Who is a Dalit?
Anshu: The aunty [who fed the chapatti to the dog].
I: I mean, what does it [Dalit] mean?
Shabnam: The woman.
I: But the newspaper says Dalit ‘family’ and not the woman.
Hema: All in the family are Dalits.
Shabnam: Oh yes yaar; the family is Dalits.
I: But what is Dalit?
Anshu [confused, unable to articulate]: Kuch hota hai… samjha nahi
sakte [it is something… it can’t be explained]
Rinku: I know but I won’t tell

When the narrative was being read, in the first instance the children asked for the meanings of some (unfamiliar) terms, including Muraina, zila collector, D.I.G. and aiwaz [compensation], and stopped at various other points. However, they did not ask the meaning of Dalit and achoot. They read these terms as they were. However, later they were not clear if they had heard of the terms or not. Some had but did not know the meanings, while others had not – they said. Despite having known the meaning, they could not articulate what these meant. The word ‘jaati’ did not appear in their discussions immediately. The fact that the children neither sought clarification about the event nor expressed surprise on coming across the terms ‘Dalit’ and ‘achoot’ points to availability of these terms in the everyday discourse. However, the meanings apparently are more embedded than explicit in the discourse, or probably even taboo as reflected in the reluctance or unwillingness on the part of the children to either answer the question or engage in any discussion that centred on these terms.

Two inferences can be drawn from the linkage made by children between achoot and garbage. First of all, claiming not to have known the meaning, the children deconstructed the term achoot by associating it with ‘garbage’. Garbage brings out a sense of ‘filthiness’ associated with – it gives a sense of ‘revulsion’ or ‘pollution’ or of something being unworthy of physical contact. Later on, they could not explain how they placed the dog became ‘unworthy’ by coming in contact with the Dalit family. However, they clearly communicated that they knew the meaning of Dalit and
achoot, but denied explaining it. It was for this reason and based on the ethos of the discussion, that it seemed that the meaning making was not arbitrary. Secondly, the plain connection between garbage and achoot was not very convincing to all the children. Some thought that there is more meaning to the situation. In part, this was because of the inability of the argument to support the text, and in part because it did not match what was observed in everyday reality – that idea that all dogs may wander in garbage but do not become achoot. Therefore, the connection with the garbage was contested through observation, logic and generalisation. This logic was based on an implicit meaning of achoot. However, the children did not speak about the relation between Dalit and achoot.

When the discussion was curtailed by an outside intervention, the children resumed it by describing some instances that matched the situation in the narrative in the newspaper. For example, Anshu referred to an instance where a family was asked to pay a fine for drinking water from the ‘thakurs’ tap. Rinku went on to say that in her village a ‘samaj’s hukka-paani’ was stopped because of some reason. Hema described how a ‘poor’ person was asked to pay fine because he had used water from ‘somebody’s’ well. These descriptions were constructed without using the terms – achoot, Dalit or jaati. During interactions, the term that got articulated in this process was bhed-bhav (discrimination). Although the children were not able to explain the term, they furnished examples to demonstrate its application. Shabnam presented an example and said: “When you give somebody less than others for some ‘wrong’ reason.”

In this instance, it appeared that the meaning of achoot and Dalit was implicit in the consciousness of the children. However, it did not get articulated in the form of a clear category or a concept that can be applied readily. It however did arouse a sense of discomfort (and probably fear as well), and hence led to a reluctance to engage with. Further, it was intriguing that the term ‘jaati’ did not emerge in the class even once during this discussion. These observations seem to be at variance with the findings of some of the studies that explored Dalit children’s experiences (like: Nambissan, 2009; Subrahmanian, 2005; Ramachandran, 2012), involving talking to
children about the discriminations they were facing at the school due to their caste identity.

It might be that as the text in itself did not bring out the word *jaati*, the children did not refer to it. The term was embedded in the subtext and it appeared as though either the children intuitively knew that the usage of the term is a kind of taboo and therefore refrained from using it, or they were confused whether it could be used in the context or not. This might appear to be a generalisation that I am making based on insufficient evidence; however, the manner in which the term surfaced in other stories (presented in the next section) would help in understanding this idea. With such work on the case, I got insights about the peculiar manner in which caste is understood or conceptualised by the children. Despite the fact that they understood caste, their ‘concept’ of caste was ambiguous. It appeared that the children had a sort of fluid conception of caste – they could understand caste, but could not be particular in their articulations. In fact, many concepts that I explored appeared to be fluid in the children’s conception as compared to how I or other adults thought about them.

7.2.2. Experience of humiliation at school

**Story/Narrative 2: Om Prakash and his village school**

I referred to *Joothan*¹⁰ (Valmiki’s 1997, 2007, pp. 1 – 9) and compiled the author’s narratives about his childhood, family and socioeconomic situations, experiences of school, relationship with teachers and peers, and added information about his life as an author and activist. Without mentioning anything about Om Prakash’s caste, I narrated the ‘story’ of his childhood and school (for some selections see Appendix 7(2a)). I ensured that I do not use the terms *jaati* or *Dalit* at any point.

**a. Experiencing humiliation**

What stimulated the children the most in this story was the behaviour of the ‘others’ towards Om Prakash. They constantly empathised with the author and consistently referred to how they would have felt placed in Om Prakash’s shoes (where one way in

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¹⁰ As referred to in the Chapter One of the thesis, *Joothan* is an autobiography of Om Prakash Valmiki, a well-known Dalit writer and poet. Refer to Chapter One and Appendix 7(2a) for details.
which the children ‘experience’ started coming to the fore). This was the first story where children applied the term or brought in the concept of ‘jaati’ to explain the experiences of Om Prakash. The following is a selection from the discussions on the life and experience of Om Prakash:

Shabnam: This is a story that makes me sad most of the time…
Rinku: …but I liked the end a lot, when Om Prakash becomes a writer and writes his own story,
I: What upset you?
Shabnam: Everybody behaved very badly with Om Prakash; Master ji made him clean the whole school and still didn’t let him sit in the class with the others
Rinku: He had to sit near the door where he couldn’t even see the ‘padhai’…

Other children also agreed that this was the “worst” part of the story. What mattered to the children the most was the experience of humiliation that Om Prakash went through as a child, in the school. Though his experiences outside the school were similar, they were not referred to. The battering by the teacher and the amount of work that Om Prakash was subjected to at school and the humiliation it would have caused left a significant impression on the children and became a reference point for rest of the discussions. All the children were talking about this incident as if they could vicariously experience it. Rinku says, “Kisi bhi bacche ke sath aisa nahi karna chahiye” [this should not be done to any child]. The children were empathising with Om Prakash.

Exclusion from the classroom process and the gross discrimination with Om Prakash were the primary reasons that made the group conclude that the master ji’s behaviour was discriminating. Drawing from Narrative 1, Shabnam applied the concept of ‘bhed-bhav’ as she felt that the beating and punishments could not be justified on any ground. Regarding why they thought master ji behaved that way, even if unjustified, the children started speaking simultaneously: “He was dirty… wo kala tha [he was dark]… wore torn clothes… He was poor and stayed at a dirty place… he was in mud from head to toe…”

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Additions to this list of reasons stopped when Anshu said, “…because he was a *neechi jaat*, the *bade admi* [big people] hated him.” There was a pause, after which some expressed agreement while others remained silent. I asked:

I: What is *neechi jaat*?
I [repeated the question]: What does that mean?
Anshu: I can’t explain, it is something.
Shabnam: *Wo ek gareeb jaati hoti hai* [it is a poor *jaati*]

Having heard this most in the group agreed with Shabnam’s explanation. However, none could explain the meaning of *jaati*. Rinku intervened and diverted the discussion:

Rinku: He should have left the school… in his place I would have run away from the school.
I: Maybe he could have joined another school.
Anshu: But even in a new school people would have done the same; everybody in the village was like that…
I: Probably, the teacher and children would be different.
Shabnam: When the village is the same then how will people change?
I: What if some relative of Om Prakash was a teacher and he went to that school?
Aarti: All Om Prakash’s relatives were very poor, *wo to padhe-likhe nahi the, wo thode hi teacher ho sakte hain* [they were not educated, they can’t be teachers].
I: May be the children at a new school would be better; you find different people at different places, don’t you?
Anshu: Children learn from adults; *wo to wahi karenge jaisa bade log karte hain* [they will do as the adults do].

The manner in which the idea that the nature of discrimination was all pervasive, and that the situation would not change on changing the school, indicated that the children were able to make a connection between the social context and school environment – and infer that the schools in a similar social context would be the same. The two ideas that a poor family (in which Om Prakash was a first generation learner) could not
have had a member who was a teacher, and that children of the village would learn from the adults and therefore be the same – along with the very explicit logic – brought to the fore a particular manner in which the group was making sense. They seem to be ‘thinking sociologically’ and making connections between the social positions and probabilities of Om Prakash. They were also locating children in a broader social matrix – as a social group which had less voice and control over their situation and learning. In fact, Anshu’s argument was based on the ‘experience’ of the way in which children learn from adults. Further, the idea of how ‘exclusion’ happens – what kind of experience would lead a child to dropout, withdraw, abscond and feel psychologically troubled – was articulated by the children, and in this practice of exclusion the attitude of the teacher towards the child was central. In this discussion it emerged that the children could apply the concept of *jaati* and were aware of it. However, they continued to avoid talking about it and communicated that it was something about which one should not talk.

**b. Punishing the teacher**

The discussion continues:

I: Then what should be done?

Shabnam: The first thing is to call the police and punish the master *ji*;

if he gets caught people will feel scared and not behave like him

The idea that master *ji* should be punished was agreeable to all. It was expressed that the story would have been much better if the teacher was punished in the end. The teacher was clearly the ‘villain’ in the story – punishing him by handing him over to the police was an ideal solution to begin with. The power that the group attributed to the ‘police’ was unparalleled. The idea that the police can ‘discipline and punish’ in a legitimate fashion was deep seated – and as said earlier that could be a reason why most children aspired to become policemen/women (as described in Chapter Five).

Regarding whether or not any one had seen or heard of a similar experience of a child in any school or their school, Aarti explained:

Aarti: Our school is very good; all teachers are very good; they never scold us or beat us.
I: But I have seen many teachers scolding all the children many times…
Aarti: No, its not like that
I: But I saw that yesterday Rinku got a scolding
Aarti: Oh that? That’s their [the teachers’] style of talking to us
Aarti’s usage of the term ‘style’ made the others in the group laugh. The same narrative as I had described in the section on punishment in this chapter, resurfaced almost undisturbed. Despite being in a situation to decipher that what had happened to Om Prakash was categorically wrong – that what his teacher did was discriminating and thus needed to be punished for it – the girls were unable to compare and reflect on their own experiences. I do not intend to say that what happened at the school could simply have been understood as discrimination against Dalit children; instead, I intend to make visible how the children refrained from even thinking about their own experience of punishment at the school despite having critiqued Om Prakash’s teacher. The manner in which the children entered the denial mode was intriguing. To understand the denial I continued:
I: But they speak to each other softly, why do they speak to you in a different style?
Rinku: That’s because they are all teachers; we are all children; they can speak in any fashion to us.
I: Don’t you feel bad about it?
Shabnam: I feel bad when punished in front of others but when it is for our good [hamare bhale ke liye], I do not feel bad.
I: Didn’t Om Prakash’s master ji also do so for his good?
Shabnam: No, he was very bad… he wanted to keep him from doing ‘padhai’… he did not let him sit in the class after he cleaned the school… he used to beat such a little child.
I: But does padhai happens in your school?
Hema: But the teachers do not keep us out of the class.

A primary difference in the children’s teachers and Om Prakash’s teacher was that the latter kept the child outside the class (excluding him from the classroom processes
that were being provided to other children). The teachers of the E-5 school themselves
did not come to the class (instead of keeping one child of the class); therefore, they
did not ‘discriminate’ against any one child. However, Shabman’s description of the
humiliation she felt when she was punished in front of others involves a feeling of
being isolated from the group, and indicated that there was a difference in what she
felt and what she said. But in a general sense, the children didn’t consider the
teacher’s scolding and beating as ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ – rather, they justified it while
accepting that it causes humiliation.

Although the detached context of the story enabled them to identify poverty and caste
as the reasons for the ‘bad behaviour’ with Om Prakash, and that these were the main
causes of his exclusion, the children could easily distance their experience at school
from that of Om Prakash’s. As said earlier, I do not intend to claim that the two cases
were the same (as they were not). The fact that this was a ‘story’ and that a ‘story’ is a
construction, and therefore it does not have a bearing on everyday reality, also
intervened in this situation.

c. The hero and the victim

During discussions, it emerged that the girls liked that part of the story the most in
which Om Prakash’s father fights with the teacher. They said that it was Om
Prakash’s father who was the most ‘heroic’ or the best character of the story. They
explained, “…his father was so brave, despite being afraid he fought with the master
ji when he saw him doing wrong with Om Prakash…”

Strangely, the children did not agree to the proposition of Om Prakash being the
‘hero’ in the story. He was a good character though. It appeared that the ‘victimhood’
presentation of the protagonist did not fit into the children’s schema of a ‘hero’. The
courage and ability to assert and fight against ‘wrong’, in their imagination, were the
traits of a hero. When I asked why Om Prakash wasn’t a hero, Aarti said, “He was
very weak; what could he have done? He didn’t even have the courage to tell his
father until his father himself saw it.” Meaning of ‘weak’ or ‘marginalised’ therefore
essentially involved an inability to challenge and resist, or lack of a ‘voice’. This was
manifest in Om Prakash’s not complaining to his father and suffering in silence. Thus, the strength to ‘resist’ and ‘act’ not only for oneself but also for others (or an ability to ‘rescue’) were essential traits of a hero; whether or not these attempts were successful did not appear to be very consequential. The children appeared excited when Om Prakash’s father intervened to counter the child’s exploitation.

d. A grown-up victim

Regarding Om Prakash’s life as an adult, the children felt that he was now happy as he had become a known writer. Shabnam says, “… mujhe sabse acha laga ki Om Prakash lekhak ban gaya hai” […]what I liked the most was that Om Prakash has become a writer]. However, in their descriptions no one in the group stated that Om Prakash had become a bada admi, despite the fact that they had used it in discussions (see item a.) to refer to ‘the others’ who misbehaved with Om Prakash. I refrained from myself bringing in the term, as it would have influenced their responses. I asked them if they thought that Om Prakash was now successful and happy, in the context of which they expressed that going to a city and studying were ‘good things’ that happened to him. But at the same time they felt that he must still be feeling ‘bad’, remembering what used to happen with him in his village and because he was away from his native village. It appeared that the sense of deprivation that children attributed to Om Prakash did not allow them to relate the concept of bada admi with his life as an adult. When I decided to introduce the term and asked them if they thought Om Prakash had become a ‘bada admi’, Aarti said [with pun intended], “You yourself said that he is a grown-up now and is old enough, why are you asking?” Everybody laughed at this gag. The bada admi in this case was related only to age. When the children and I discussed whether this story could be real or not, Rinku said, “You told us that Om Prakash is still alive, so it is real”. Shabnam adds, “Stories are stories; can they be real or fake!” [kahani to kahani hoti hai; wo bhi koi sach ya jhoot hoti hain!]

(Some selected drawings and written notes of the children are presented in Appendix 7(2b)).
7.2.3 Class, caste and structure of schooling: Experiences of solidarity

Story/Narrative 3: Little Dadasaheb

I narrated the story of the childhood experiences of Dadasaheb Morey\textsuperscript{11} (2001, pp. 16-21, 54-56, 102) keeping in mind the lines on which I had narrated Valmiki’s story (some selections are presented in Appendix 7(3a)). The difference between the two stories, as I understood from my reading of the two autobiographies, was that in Valmiki’s narration one sees an explicit ‘violence’ of caste, whereas Morey’s writing sketches a picture of a situation where caste is present in the backdrop of everyday experiences and constitutes the life situations (including class position) of the protagonist. I have described this to some extent in Chapter One. As I engaged with the children on this narrative, I found that the children could also grasp this context. In this section I focus on describing how the children made-sense of Dadasaheb’s experience and situation vis-à-vis that of Valmiki.

a. A dear character

The children found the story of Dadasaheb much more appealing and ‘understandable’ than that of Om Prakash. I sensed that Dadasaheb, in a few days, became a dear character for the children. They wanted to know more about his life and referred to him when other stories were being narrated. At times their questions were so specific that I wondered if they thought that I had personally known Dadasaheb. Some questions that the children asked were: “To which school did he go – is it nearby somewhere?” “… did Dadasaheb’s mother cry when he was at his grandfather’s home?” “How was his grandfather – did he beat him or behave well with him?” “How many marks did he get in Class five? Do you know his teachers in the city school?” They continued to ask me to repeat the story, and at times I overheard them discussing Dadasaheb in their groups. I also saw Shabnam narrating Dadasaheb’s story to her friends from another class. One day when I went to her house, she shouted out loudly to her sister in order to introduce me, “… she is the one

\textsuperscript{11} Dadasaheb Morey, a Dalit writer, has described his experiences of education comprehensively. He belonged to a community that lived a nomadic life and culturally practised begging (Refer to Chapter One). I described to the children Dadasaheb’s life conditions and everyday events of his life, his oscillation between being in school and out-of-school, his teachers’ behavior (which was not tyrannical as in the case of Valmiki’s (2007) teachers), and how the ‘other’ children made fun and did not engage with him.
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who narrated Dadasaheb’s story”. While I used to narrate other stories, I involved Dadasaheb at some point or the other to make it more interesting.12

Why the children associated with the story so much, was a question that I continually reflected upon and still ponder. From the discussions that followed the story, it appeared that the imagery of Dadasaheb’s social context, his familial ethos, his socio-politico position in the family, the behaviour of the ‘others’ and his appearance, captured the children’s interest. Dadasaheb’s life world, particularly his location in the matrix of social relationships as a child, was similar to that of the girls. This was something that they could assess. Rinku says, “…when I am upset, just like Dadasaheb I never tell my parents; I feel that if I tell my parents then they would feel sad…” The group with which I was doing the work comprised only of girls. The self-control, silence and resilience that Dadasaheb demonstrated as a child, resembled the actualities of the lives of the female children. Therefore, despite being a male a character, little Morey could potentially represent the lives of the girls. However, was it not similar in the case of Valmiki’s story, was a question that demanded a reflection.

What was utmost critical to this description, which was ‘captivating’ for the children, was the fact that I had described Dadasaheb as a very young child [bohot chota baccha] and narrated his journey from the age of four to the age of ten years more lucidly than the other sections of his life story. The children used these descriptions almost as they were while framing sentences, making drawings, asking questions, narrating the story and the like. They also added their own descriptions to the story in a much more involved fashion than in the case of Valmiki’s story.

While discussing the unjust behaviour of ‘others’ with Dadasaheb, Anshu said, “He was very small and was extremely poor therefore children used to trouble him… the rest of them were rich, they were older and healthier.” How the children explained made it evident that in the narration of the story and even in the original section in the

12 For example, when I narrated ‘Hathi jab udte the’ [‘when elephants used to fly’] (Kumar, 1996a) for the second time, I improvised it using the idea of a group of elephants flying over Dadasaheb’s school, to which children added further detail (see Annexure 7(2)).
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autobiography (pertaining to his school experience), only the children in the story ‘explicitly’ misbehaved with and discriminated against Morey. The adults, specifically the teachers, although strict, did not discriminate against in an overt fashion. The teachers in the story were not tyrants but more patronising, and wanted Dadasaheb to study (even though it was based on an idea of the ‘uncivil’ and ‘barbaric’ other). To corroborate these understandings, it was important to understand the differences seen by the children in the two stories from their perspective. Some selections from the descriptions that emerged are presented below (see Appendix 7(3b) for some select written notes and drawings made by the children).

b. Comparing Dadasaheb and Om Prakash: In the words of the children

i. The descriptors

…both were small children, both were poor, both were good, both had parents, both lived in huts, both were in the village, both moved to the city, both grew older, Dadasaheb became a bada admi and Om Prakash became a lekhak [writer].

ii. Teacher’s expectation

Rinku: … Dadasaheb wouldn’t have run away from the school because the teacher was good and he wanted him to study and become bada admi

Shabnam: … it was only the children who used to tease him, and some elders… but all elders were not bad.

Aarti: He was very intelligent and master ji was very happy with him… his school was good

The children liked Morey’s first school a lot, while they expressed a strong dislike for Valmiki’s school despite the latter being infrastructurally much more sound than the former. This was definitely because of the better Master ji, but in part also because it was ‘different’ and ‘open’ (in access and in structure) than their school (that resembled Valmiki’s school). The children’s idea of a good institution, particularly

13 Morey describes his first school as the one which was set-up under the shade of a big tree. Valmiki’s school was run in a separate building with a porch and classrooms.
the school, came across here. The girls described how a school that is set-up in open, would be better. Some of them made drawings of Dadasaheb’s school (see Appendix 7(3b)).

### iii. Poverty not caste

Anshu: … his *dera* shifted from one place to another and the school was at one place… his father had very little money so he could not bear the expense of studies.

I: But still he could have gone to a school; couldn’t he?

Anshu: No, even if he would have enrolled in some school then again when his *dera* would have moved he would have to leave it. His father was poor, so he could not stay at one place […]

Aarti: The main reason was *gareebi* [poverty]

I: What about Om Pakash?

Aarti: … his teacher did not want him to come to school, because he was a *neech jaat* [lower caste], but Dadasaheb was poor; not a *neech jaat*.

### iv. Caste: Maybe, maybe not

I: How do you know he wasn’t from lower *jaati*?

Aarti: I don’t know; cannot explain

Rinku: *Ho bhi sakta hai, par pata nahin* [It can be; but don’t know]

I: But you had told me that the reason for bad behaviour with Om Prakash was his *jaati*, don’t you think Dadasaheb’s story was similar?

Shabnam: No, Dadasaheb was poor; that was why children behaved badly with him

Hema: … because he wore torn clothes and was dirty and hungry; so the good children of the school hated him; but *master ji* loved him

Rinku: But it can be also; one can’t say

I: How will one get to know?

Aarti: What was his full name?
I: Why do you ask that?

Aarti: Wo kaun tha pata chal jaega na [Will get to know who he was]

v. Why was Dadasaheb so dear?

Rinku: Because I also think like Dadasaheb; he is just like me.

Aarti: I earlier used to move with my family from Punjab to Delhi and could not study; now I live at my nana’s place and my mother also comes sometimes.

Shabnam: Dadasaheb’s story is like my story.

I: Why?

Shabnam: My school, my mother, teachers are all like that.

The fact that the adults, particularly the teachers, did not ‘misbehave’ with Morey and despite being strict wanted him to study – that is, indicating that they wanted to ‘include’ him in the institution (and not ‘isolate’ or exclude him) – seemed to be one most important distinguishing factor for the children. Only Morey’s peers teased him in the school. Therefore, unlike Valmiki’s case, the concept jaati did not explain the situation. The idea of adult involvement in the context of caste was essential in the children’s understanding. As they said, children learn from adults, so could not have discriminated based on caste without other adults in the story doing so. Why Morey’s peers behaved badly with him was explained by his physical appearance and economic condition. This distancing also resembled their real life experience in the peer circle at times (between the ‘good children of the school’ and other children (as described in Chapter Three), where there were some differences in the ways of dressing, quality of their belongings, physical strength and appearance, their lunches and in the teachers’ liking for them. Also, the children’s conception of ‘isolation’ as a ‘punishment’ and a ‘bad’ practise – that emerged from their experience (as described in the first section of this chapter) – seemed to be at work here in their meaning-making. While on the one hand, Om Prakash continued to be ‘isolated’ (and hence punished) in various ways by the school master; on the other Dadasaheb’s teacher (as per the autobiography) felt sad when the child withdrew from the school.
Further, the difference in the nature of expression that Valmiki has used in his text brings out his experience of exclusion very strongly, where at times the style becomes confrontational. Such a style clearly articulates the feelings of pain, humiliation, sense of deprivation, injustice and resistance – so much so that a reader does not have to struggle to draw inferences. Whereas, the style of narration that Morey follows in most part is a recollection of his experiences with a sub-text situated in the conjugality of caste and class – and therefore most meanings have to be inferred. This lends a quality of ‘anonymity’ and provides a cushion to the meanings in the text and the identity of the characters. In various ways, the children underlined that the main challenge in Dadasaheb’s education was the conflict between the cultural-occupational reality of his family – they were sure that a life that demanded shifting from one place to another, and the structure of schooling that did not ‘move’, were the core challenges. However, they could not connect ‘cultural-occupation’ to decipher something about ‘jaati’. The urban context in which the children are located did not provide them adequate equipment to formulate such a link.

Despite the fact that both the authors engaged in writing and in articulating their life experiences, the children understood one as a bada admi and the other as a popular writer. The sense of deprivation that was associated with Om Prakash’s life as a child and as an adult, and the connection with the notion of ‘neechi jati’, did not allow him to be recognised as a bada admi. Morey’s subtle way of developing the context of caste, and narrating it through cultural conditions of poverty, ensured his anonymity. Also, the idea that Morey’s teacher wanted to ‘include’ him in the institution of school and saw some merit in his abilities, was an indicator of his access to the conditions of becoming a bada admi (which was contrary to the case of Valmiki). These conditions taken together gave the girls the space for imagining an upward mobility in his case.

The close relation that children could see between Morey and their own lives would have enabled them to project their own aspirations to become a ‘big man’. When I asked the children why they thought that Morey became a ‘big man’, Rinku explains: “… he went to school”, “his master ji helped him”, “he was very sharp, his master ji had said”, “he must be rich by now”. She contradicted my proposal that Morey may
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not have been rich by saying, “No, he is rich now and nobody teases him, now he can do whatever he wants to.” Rinku had fitted the image of Morey in the schema for the bada admi. (I had described the concept of the bada admi to some extent in Chapter Five. I will shortly describe it in some detail in the following sections).

7.2.4. Work, childhood and experience
Story/Narrative 4: Maxim Gorky
A narrative about the childhood experience of Maxim Gorky based on his work My Childhood (Gorky, 1915) (see Appendix 7(4) for selected excerpts) was developed with an idea to understand how children made sense of poverty and work. I also wanted to understand how the children qualified the experiences of work and how they saw ‘schooling’, which is usually (and debatably) presented as an alternative to it. The purpose was also to understand the institutions of work and schooling, as they operate in the imaginations and in the world of children, and through this analyse the ‘either/or-ness’ between them. The part of the fieldwork with children who worked as kabaadis or ‘rag-pickers’ encouraged me to select this narrative. Although, the girls who came to the school did not themselves ‘work’ in the popular sense of the term (though they worked at home to substitute their working mothers at home14), they were situated in a context where a child going to work was common.

a. Mixed feelings
The children listened to the narration very carefully and reacted at the high points in the story. Having heard the story, they didn’t have anything to say; there was silence in the class for a while, until Rinku says, “I found the story to be very strange...” and other children also tended to agree.

I: Why did it appear to be strange?
Rinku: I liked the story, but I don’t know whether to be happy or sad
Aarti: Same with me; felt happy also, sad also; it felt strange [ajeeb sa laga]
I: Like?

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14 By the time a girl child was 10 years, she could manage the home like their mothers did – cook meals, clean the house, do the local market work, sew and stitch, and take care of younger siblings.
Aarti: Like I felt good when he [Gorky] gets money for collecting the items
Rinku: Yes, he becomes so happy when he gets the money…
Aarti: But then he is so poor that he has to do so much work
Hema: Yes, and his father isn’t there; mother has got married to another man

The children gathered the ethos that the story presented. With such sharing, it became clearer how the children read the undercurrent or the sub-text of the narration, though, they were struggling with its expression.

b. Parents, poverty and access to school
The children felt that not having a functional family was the main cause of Gorky’s poverty and lack of ‘access’ to (or ‘willingness’ to access) institutional education.

Komal: Why did Gorky not like to go to school and start working instead?
Anshu: How could have he have liked going to school? People teased him for being a rag-picker – and his father wasn’t there…
Shabnam: Even if he went to school, he still had to work; nobody would like to study like that. My brother [cousin] stopped going to school when he started working.
I: Is it so?
Rinku: Yes, look at my cousin Sanju bhaiya. His mother died and his father left him at his nana’s [maternal grandfather’s] home. Even when he was put in school he was not able to study. He felt bad all the time – he had to take money and food from nana. Mama [maternal uncle] then started taking him to work; now bhaiya has his own shop.

Anshu [intervened and connected with the prior discussion]: Gorky was doing so much work; he had less food to eat… bohot mehnat hogayi… [too much of hard work…]… his mother also could not take much care of him; father wasn’t there
‘Parents’ (or a functional family) were being seen by the children as a ‘guardian agency’, which ensures that the economic compulsions of schooling are met. In the case of loss of the parents, a child may lose some material resources like money, food, and access to schooling. But for the children, loss of ‘dignity’ was more significant. The manner in which Rinku related the case of her cousin, brought out how she visualised the conflict that he was facing – not in terms of loss of opportunity, but in terms of loss of ‘freedom’ from dependence. She also presented ‘work’ as a way of regaining dignity, even in the case of loss of parents.

Further, the group was more ‘open’ in the assessment of the nature of work that Gorky did. No one in the group deemed the work as unethical, wrong or problematic. For example, the girls did not consider the timber theft by Gorky as being unethical – they rather went beyond the narrative to qualify it as ‘work’. Rinku was of the view that in the situation in which Gorky was ‘trapped’, there were not many options; and that had his parents been there, he would not have had to do so. Shabnam also highlighted how the story narrates that in the place where he was living, everybody was suffering the same plight – so everybody survived through theft. Thus, they could decipher that it was a ‘norm’. While on the one hand, this was contextual thinking, on the other the children were also generalising and ‘speaking broadly’. In such dialogues with the group of children, it appeared that there are possibilities of engaging in varied kinds of social (or maybe sociological) analysis with children in primary classes.

c. Bada admi

It was intriguing to see how the children used the concept of bada admi in various situations. Each application of the term differed from the other.

Anshu: … but yes later on he [Gorky] became a bada admi
I: He became a bada admi?
Anshu: Yes, you said that he became rich afterwards – he became a neta and he gets educated and becomes a writer [While concluding the story I had said that Gorky gradually went on to become active in politics in his country but did not use the terms rich and bada admi]
The construct of *bada admi* emerged here in relation to some particular idea of success. Despite the fact that these details were not mentioned in the narration, the children were able to develop these meanings. The idea that Gorky had become ‘rich’ was constructed by Anshu on her own. This construction was based on two details about Gorky’s success – his being able to study and his becoming active in politics. The notion of a person becoming active in ‘politics’ generated the image of a rich person (I could not explore this connection in detail). However, as the discussion proceeded, it appeared that schooling was vaguely placed in the idea of *bada admi*. That is, schooling was not central to the process of becoming a ‘big man’.

I: But you remember he later says that his real school was not the one which taught him writing and reading [*likhaee-padhaee*] but the experiences that he had while working and on the streets?

Komal: Yes, I remember… but without *padhai* [studying] he would not have become a ‘big man’.

Rinku [to Komal]: It is not like that. Sanju *bhaiya* is not very educated, but he is now becoming a ‘big man’ – everybody listens to him – even the neighbours and *nana*.

Aarti: And my father’s friend is *anpadh* [illiterate] but has a very big shop and an Ecco [a car]

After this, the children began sharing real-life cases where someone they had known had become a ‘big man’ without having been to school. All the descriptions were about males. As I probed further, the following narratives emerged:

Anshu: Many such people stay in my neighborhood… Kuki’s father had never been to school but he is a *bada admi*

I: I don’t know him; who is he?

Anshu: He is a big *kabaadi* and owns a big house; he has just bought it – *kisht pe* [on instalments]

Rinku: *Aise hi thode hi ameer hogaya* [he become rich just like that], he established his own business [*apna dhanda jamaya usne*]

I: Can one become a *bada admi* by going to school?

Shabnam: *Ban bhi sakta hai, nahi bhi* [may or may not]
It is also important to note that the notion of bada admi never came up in the stories I had narrated with women as protagonists. Also, the schoolgirls never used ‘bada admi’ to express their aspirations from school education. The gendered nature of the phrase played a role in this, and so did a lack of availability of a counterpart ‘phrase’ that could represent the aspirations of a girl child. These discussions presented a need to re-analyse the notion of bada admi.

What emerged from these narratives was that schooling was not seen as an essential condition for becoming a big man or a ‘successful person’. It was not unimportant, but its placement was vague or even debatable. Although, there is a traditional image of ‘schools’ that builds on the rhetoric of bada admi, this rhetoric didn’t match the reality that the children observed. The people around them seemed to have ‘gained’ more from work than from school education. However, this ‘work’ was of a special kind, as it involved ‘ownership’ and investment of entrepreneurial resources. However, in the girls’ conception schooling and work were not mutually exclusive. In their view, they both should or could go together. All in the group confirmed that they had known people who had become ‘big men’ while working along with studying. However, studying was only of secondary importance, while ‘apna dhanda’ or ‘apni dukaan’ were essential.

_Bada admi_, was much more a ‘class related concept’ than one that involved a moral element. What the children were referring to as a bada admi could well be understood as ameer [rich] admi. In fact, the children appeared to be using these terms (bade admi, ameer admi, bade log and ameer log) interchangeably. However, the notion was neither very clear nor too nebulous – it appeared to be ‘fluid’; it took different forms and changed meaning depending on the context in which it was being used. (Another form in which it was used is described in the last section of the chapter). While being rich was the main constituent in the concept, there were several other indicators that could be present or absent (like education, a high post, a respectable status, or a job). I often thought that it would be better described as a notion than as a concept. This differed from Sarangpani’s (1997) explanation of the same category in a rural context. This could be because of the rural-urban difference between the two
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7.2.5. Class conflict: Fraternity, collective experience and expression

Narrative 5: Tata Nano

I took a picture of the Tata Nano printed in a commercial, and asked whether the children recognised what it was. Most children shouted and said that this was Nano gadi. One shouted at the top of her voice, “…in a house in our lane there is one such car – isi rang ki hai [same colour]... kisht pe hai.” The other remarked, “… he has purchased it for trading goods.” Some had seen it on television and called it “lakhtakiya”. The meaning of this term they could not decipher though. We discussed this car at some length and then I asked if they wanted to listen to a story related to it, to which they happily said yes. I narrated the story which involved class and politics.

A summary of the ‘narrative’ is presented in Appendix 7(5). The purpose of the narrative was to explore how the children understood a case of conflict (involving two kinds of social class positions), and how they made sense of the State action in the situation. However, more than that the discussions explicated the manner in which the children made sense of a ‘collective’ action – in which a value was placed on the idea of fraternity in the collective. This came across through the way in which the children ‘empathised’ with the ‘aggrieved’. Another aspect that emerged prominently related to children’s conceptions of a ‘real incident’ and a ‘story’ – and how in these the boundaries between the real, true and fictional were intertwined or blurred.

a. Truth or story?

By the time the story had come to its end, the children had drawn closer and were staring at me as if this was the most sensational or scandalous narrative they had heard. The ‘sensational’ nature of the case presented the children with a dilemma regarding the ‘authenticity’ of the content. It sounded very real, particularly because I had narrated it that way. For example, saying that it’s a very recent incident and bringing the picture of the Nano which the children were familiar with. But the fact that I had called it a ‘story’ confused them. Had I presented it as a news item, (like in the Narrative 1) this dilemma might not have arisen:
Rinku: Is it a story or a real incident [asli ghatna]?
Anshu: It is real incident, because Tata Nano is real and the photo is real
Aarti: Yes, Gujarat is also real, my village is in Gujarat
Rinku: If it is real then it must have come in the newspaper; did you [to me] read it from the newspaper? Where is the newspaper?
I: I heard it on TV; I don’t have a newspaper
Rinku [very seriously]: Have you made-up things from your side also?

The case content did not sound like a ‘story’. Rinku had applied two tests to verify the status of the narrative. One was identifying the ‘real’ elements in it – Nano and Gujarat. And the second was that they asked about the ‘source’. They felt that if the case was real, its content makes it a subject worthy enough to be reported in a newspaper. The involvement of the ‘sarkar’, police, political leaders and strife, were the associations that children made with a newspaper. Further, the idea that because I had narrated the incident as a story there was a possibility that I had modified it was also clear to the children.

I: But why do you ask if it’s from the newspaper?
Aarti: It has police in it and people fight.
Komal: Sarkar ki baat to akhbaron mein aati hai na [Matters related to the government are reported in newspapers, aren’t they?]
I: If it wasn’t there in the news, then would you believe me?
Aarti: You said you were telling a story.
I: So?
Aarti: You didn’t say this was a khabar [piece of news].

This case did not involve any content directly related to a school, children or everyday life. It involved adults and their politics, violence, conflicts and world. This is not to say that other stories that I narrated did not involve these. However, the manner in which this case presented the categories for an open discussion and opinions in the classroom did not seem believable to the children. It is not to say that incidents

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15 It is important to note that the children did not doubt the ‘truth’ of stories. I will discuss this shortly.
pertaining to explicit conflict are not available to them. However, the idea of debating a conflict of the adult or political world was new for the children (Kumar, 1996b).

b. Fear, empathy and decision-making

On convincing themselves about the ‘reality’ of the content, the fears associated with it emerged:

Komal: What will happen now? My grandfather stays in Bagalia [a village in Gujarat].
Anshu: Can they go to any village? My village has a lot of vacant land.
Komal: Can they come here?

It was clear that the children were putting themselves in the shoes of the villagers, and not analysing the situation from a neutral standpoint. This fear of something going ‘wrong’ in the same way in the villages where the children’s families were staying, or where they themselves were residing, appeared for the first time in discussions. They had a variety of questions to ask. They asked if there were news items in Hindi, which I could bring for them to read. One child wanted to know if the Sarkar was bribed, and another wanted me to tell them what would have happened if people had forcefully occupied the land and had kept the money as well.

A major part of the discussions involved engaging with the queries that the children had, many of which stretched beyond the expanse I could have imagined. For example, they wanted to know how the Nano factory looked from the inside, and whether or not I had seen it – if I hadn’t seen it then how did I know how the car was made. They also wanted to see a conveyor belt, even if it was only in a photograph. The discussions with the children moved further, to seeking their opinions on the positions of the varied parties involved in the case.

Rinku: All such things are wrong.
I: Which things?
Rinku: Taking land from people and then not returning it, and fighting on top of that.
I: But the compensation had been paid.
Aarti: Then what? At first they [the people] would have thought that everybody is giving their land, let us also give; but when people thought later, their minds changed; they now don’t want to give the land.

I: How can you change your mind later? I think it is wrong.

Some started arguing saying that I was wrong, and that this happens. To explain the rationale of this argument Aarti made me “empathise” with the people in the situation. “If someone wants to buy your house and then says – give me your house I will give you money; you first agree but later you talk to your people and don’t want to give, then should he not return your house?” she argued. The idea that decisions change in consultation with community and that decisions may be ‘influenced’ when thinking individually, was at the core of this argument. It is important to note that this argument was being made in the context of an asset which is materially important and emotionally dear to people. Therefore, there was greater faith in collective decision making than in action taken individually. At the same time, the manner in which they explained the situation from the people’s perspective left no space for counter argument or debate.

It also came across that the children had removed the category of ‘political instigators and others’ in the allegory that they had drawn. Probably they had subsumed it under the category of ‘friends’, but an analysis of the discussions revealed that it was less likely to be so:

I: Was it not because political leaders [neta] instigated the people?

Anshu: No, the people must have thought later on about all things.

It appeared as if the ‘others’ involved in the case were ‘invisible’. Neither did any of the children mention the instigators in the entire discussion, nor did they respond to my efforts of introducing them. They focused only on the people’s perspective, constantly putting themselves in the shoes of the people and building on how they would be thinking or experiencing the situation. There were many arguments that were made one after another: “Whatever the Sarkar did was wrong, absolutely wrong… it should listen to people… not to Tata…”, “Tata is already a bada admi, he can do anything”, “… he is so rich he can set up such a big factory… he can do
anything… I have seen in serials and in films.” Here, the usage of bada admi exemplified one more way in which children applied it. This further corroborated the idea that being rich and powerful (being able to do “anything”) was central to the construction of the notion or concept across contexts.

Further, the children wanted to know how many people were hurt in the incident, or whether someone had died. We discussed the violence in this conflict. The group did not describe the reasons for the conflict in detail but underlined the following:

Rinku: But there will be ladai [strife]…
I: Why? Can’t things be resolved by peaceful talks?
Rinku: Nobody listens peacefully… even among brothers and sisters we don’t listen peacefully.

Much more than the class conflict these interactions brought to the fore, how the idea of the ‘collective’ was situated in childrens meaning-making. Empathy with the ‘weak’, ability to identify discrimination, qualifying that with sometimes violence may have to be resorted to make the voice heard and arguing within this ‘moral’ framework were some aspects that emerged from the story. Although I wanted to explore these aspects in a greater detail, the discussions could not continue on this case due to some external interventions. Sometimes the interventions looked contrived, particularly when I was called over without any substantive reasons. As I approached this story, the schoolteachers expressed their disagreement or problems with my ways of working at the school. They thought I was spending too much time with the group, and I was asked not to disturb things as I would not be staying in the school forever.

7.2.6. Stories and children

Invariably, the children were able to reconstruct and gauge the spirit of the narratives. To study a story (or a text) they pursued questions like: How would a character be experiencing a particular phenomenon? How would he be feeling? In his place what would they have felt? That is, they followed the method of empathy, and of relating the text to their own observations and experiences, to understand the situation that the narrative presented. At the same time they continue to add meaning to it. The main
purpose of our engagement in these narratives was to explore how the children articulated certain categories and how they made sense of an experience by projecting it on a character. However, the stories, much more than other things, provided insight into the logic and imagination of the children. The stories looked like a world of characters where the children participated intensely, irrespective of it being logical or not (Kumar, 1996a). The children would find a way to explain inconsistency and establish logic whenever I made logical gaps in stories visible; but they did not contest the logic of a story – they asked clarifying questions or discussed what happened and why it happened, in detail – without questioning the facts of the story. They constructed logical or imaginary bridges wherever the gaps existed. It appeared that the rule was to explain the story and not to contradict it.

Though they did not believe that stories were ‘true’, they had as much faith in them as they would have in a ‘truth’. While on the one hand they distinguished between ‘real’ incidents and stories, on the other real and fictional were intertwined in a complex fashion in their conception of engagement with the stories. In fact, the categories of ‘true-false’ and ‘real-fictional’, appeared to be inapplicable in the context of stories. When I tried to corroborate what I had learnt from the children about stories and the rules, I came across the works of Bruner, who has analysed the nature of narrative construction and the pedagogy of storytelling. Bruner (1991) says,

> Unlike the constructions generated by logical and scientific procedures that can be weeded out by falsification, narrative constructions can only achieve “verisimilitude”. Narratives, then, are a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and “narrative necessity” rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness, although ironically we have no compunction about calling stories true or false. (pp. 4 – 5)

Another critical ‘rule’ about stories was that they could be narrated only by an elder person to a younger one, or by an adult to a child. Among themselves, children only narrated what they called ‘real incidents’ that they had either heard or experienced, or passed on a ‘story’ told to them by adults. These narrations also included renditions
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and constructions of the child narrating the story/incident. Therefore, the primary sources of stories were adults – and the ‘testimony’ of an adult was of a greater value. Grandfathers/grandmothers narrations were much more powerful than that of a teacher or the parents, irrespective of the style of narration. The story in this sense seemed to serve the function of a repertoire of ‘knowledge’ that was transferred from the older generation to the younger ones. Stories also, in this sense, appeared to be tools for socio-cultural reproduction and adult hegemony/dominance or at least interference, in the children’s lives and cognition. As Bruner says,

…we organise our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative — stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on. Narrative is a conventional form, transmitted culturally and constrained by each individual's level of mastery and by his conglomerate of prosthetic devices, colleagues, and mentors. (p. 10)

Furthermore, the stories gave an insight into a particular method that the children applied to make sense of a situation or understand the experiences of others. They constantly used empathy (that also involved introspection) as a way of ‘relating’ to a character. Empathy appeared to be the major method to reach a judgement about what would be right (or wrong) in a situation. These stories appeared to be more as cases that involved thinking about all sides and making a judgement, for which an agreeable value system was needed. It appeared as if the children carved this value framework through the principle of understanding the point of view and the experience of the aggrieved and the victim. In this context, ‘fellow feeling’ that was discussed in Chapter Two with reference to Ambedkar’s (1979) work, appeared to be a useful aid to understand the meaning making.

For the children, along with the method of empathy, experiences of the ‘body’ were also critical in making sense of a situation. The children referred to punishment, humiliation, pain, hunger, poverty and dignity based on how they are refracted through (or manifested in) bodily experiences. The effort of Gorky, the pain of Valmiki, the ‘dirty’ body of Dadasaheb, and violence in the case of the Tata Nano,
were among the prominent instances in the narratives that appeared to have been registered by the children and referred to again and again to explain the condition or case.

The work with the schoolgirls, around the stories and in general, leads to an understanding of how children’s groups are constituted and how they engage in collective meaning-making. It also leads one to understand that though children’s experiences are shaped by the axes of the adult world, they maintain an independent cultural sphere as well. Hirschfeld (2002, p. 615) says, “Children not only live in the cultural spheres of the adults with whom they share a life space… but they create and maintain cultural environments of their own.” Similar observations about childhood become of interest in the domain of the anthropology of childhood, where there is a growing consensus that children through their experiences know something, or many things, that adults do not – particularly because the adult’s experiences are more compartmentalised while the children’s are not just hybrid but fluid (Stephens, 1995, p. 24). This fluidity becomes visible in how they explain the categories of the adult world.

In a broader sense, while the children were able to identify caste as being the core constituent of ‘experience’ in the cases where there were overt intonations; their meanings were more flexible when the messages were implicit. The nature of ‘censorship’ on the category of caste in an urban context in itself shaped the ambivalence in meanings – where children thought that caste could be one constituent of the experience, but focussed on what was visible or what could be said for sure (poverty). Also, the aspiration from schooling was a matter that was unpacked in this context. Although children placed value on school education, there were no role models who could affirm this valuing. At the same time, there were several people in their social context in whose life school education was only of secondary importance. However, this is not to say that the school was an ‘unworthy’ enterprise for the children. In fact, the children liked several things about their school. But they valued it differently from how the adults did (see Annexure 7(1): The children’s liking for the school).
A different set of ideas emerged, when I engaged with the children who worked along with studying. However, their work was more central in their everyday routines. These children’s worldview was based on their experiences with the ‘others’, and was expressed in the vocabulary of ‘us’ and ‘they’. Their experiences of work and struggle they undertook enabled the children to express resistance and talk on a variety of matters on which the school children appeared confused or silent. Their critique of the ‘bade admi’, the police and the MCD, along with the narration of the everyday challenges of their work, emerged prominently in these interactions. In the following section, I present these accounts.

7.3. Children at work: A worldview

During the fieldwork of this study, I came across several children who were engaged in some kind of economic work. I interacted with many of them but worked more intensively with those engaged in one particular work – it was the visibility of this work that led me to inquire into it. In all the slums that I visited in the process of site selection, I found significant proportions of families and children who were completely dependent on this work. The outskirts or the outer periphery of the slum clusters were places where its concentration or visibility was maximum. I was told by several informants that the work was growing and expanding day-by-day. A substantial proportion of children from the clusters were being increasingly engaged in it. This work related to what is known as ‘rag-picking’. In 2001, waste-picking was covered under the hazardous occupations in the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 (GOI, 1986). Nevertheless, a considerable number of children from the slums of Delhi are engaged in this work, and the studies indicate that this number is rising. It is estimated that in Delhi, at least 30% of the waste pickers are children (from around a total work force of one lakh) (Chintan, 2009, p. 7). As per a survey done by the NLF in Sitapuri, the children from the cluster who were engaged in the work were primarily Dalits and Muslims (particularly the migrants from Bangladesh). In Sitapuri, around 90% of the families were engaged in this work. While the parents did the sorting, the children were sent to collect junk. The parents supplemented their family income through this work, to which all members of the
family could contribute. In some of the slums I visited in the initial phases of the study, I was told that this was an upcoming ‘business’ and was gaining popularity among the people as a regular source of income.

I attempted to communicate with a group of children engaged in rag-picking to understand the nature of experience that they had while doing this work. However, it was very difficult to interact with them as they moved from one place to another throughout the day. To talk to them one had to follow them, which in turn disturbed the everyday life of the children and made them conspicuous. The only possible way in which I could access the children was through the NGO. The NLF, which was ‘mainstreaming’ the children from the community who were engaged in the work, facilitated my interactions with them. Along with several informal conversations with the children that happened during the period I was visiting the NFE centres and the community, I participated in four FGDs facilitated by the NLF and conducted a few discussions independently. These FGDs were held with the same group of children. There were thirty-five children in the group, with whom four community workers and I engaged as we spread out in smaller groups (of seven children each). The groups included girls and boys between the ages of 7 and 15 years, some of whom were Dalits and some who were called ‘Bangladeshi Muslims’. All the children had been at the NLF’s centres for the past six months and were now beginning to attend regular government schools. Along with discussions, the FGD also involved making notes, and writing narratives and short incidents (see Appendix 7(6)). I present certain selected descriptions from these discussions under certain broad categories.

7.3.1. Nature of the work

a. Children’s work and routines

The ‘rag-picking’ work that the children do is often equated with that of garbage collection. However, even a peripheral observation would reveal that the work primarily involves locating, sorting and selecting particular items (or ‘junk’) from the waste scattered around a particular location. The children identified their work as that of ‘selecting junk’ [kabaad beenanaa or kabaad Chunanaa] and distinguished it from that of garbage collection. They called themselves kabaadi and distinguished their
identity from ‘koodeywala’. One child says, “We pick kabaad; those who collect garbage are different – they only help their parents but we work… still they [others] think that we are the same.”

The work was a part of the everyday life in the slum, where the children lived, and came ‘naturally’ to the children. In most cases even the parents could not tell when their children were initiated into the work. The child usually began by accompanying friends to work or bringing things home while roaming around. Zahid (principal informant, NLF community worker), who was working with the community and himself lived there as a child says,

Each family has several children – even 10 in several cases. Almost 95% of these children work as rag-pickers – and sell the garbage they gather to the three bade kabaadi [junk dealers] situated here. From a very early age, about 6-7 years, they are introduced to the work – they see that the work is happening around, it is easy, they can also do it and therefore start doing it to earn… even before that age they assist parents at home in sorting the garbage. Actually, they grow up amidst the heaps of garbage. They play with the waste as they do not have anything to play with... it’s their toy.

He said that the work becomes rigorous as the children transit into adolescence. The boys, particularly, start looking up to it as a source of upward mobility and try to pave their way to other allied areas. Some adolescents who have been engaged in this work since childhood, he said, have ‘progressed’ to being recognised as ‘chote kabaadi’ – who have their own carts and go to localities or markets to deal directly or they gradually come to work closely with the dealer kabaadis.

The daily work involves getting up at 4 am in the morning and approaching the vicinities (by 5.30 am) pre-decided by the parents or the dealer kabaadis. The children usually begin with the garbage dumps around the residential clusters, and then move to the markets. The aim is to fill up the empty sack that they carry on their backs. The earlier the sack is filled, the earlier a child returns home and goes to another site, or stays at home, or goes to school. All the items collected are brought back home, and
the entire family (at times along with a few neighbours) sort the items. After this, these items are taken to the local middlemen (bade kabaadis), where heavy bargaining takes place. In some cases the junk dealers have a ‘contract’ and that saves the bargaining time.

Families keep some items for themselves if needed, especially clothes, shoes, bags and valuables discovered serendipitously (like electronic items, gold/silver items). A child’s adeptness is judged by his sense of discipline – in the sense that many children once out of the home pay less attention to collection and ‘digress’ to sitting in parks, playing, sleeping, or whiling away time. Each child, in the group with which I was interacting, knew what he/she had to select and discard. S/he also assessed the condition of the items before selection or rejection. Employing their imagination ‘to’ the waste was an important part of the everyday work, and it brought a good deal at times. From this experience the children had come to recognise a variety of items, particularly metals and their forms and uses. In an FGD, they described the variety of items they select while on the job:

*Panni* [plastic bags], plastic, paper, bottles, *loha* [iron], *tamba* [copper wire inside cables is a common source], *peetal* [brass], silver, PVC pipes, milk bags, Bata [shoes], hair, clothes, bags, pencils and pens, geometry boxes, alcohol bottles, magnets, glass, *guddi* [used in flying kites], nails, rope, stiff white plastic, *ranga* [an item found inside car batteries], CFL bulbs, watches, earrings, buttons, cardboards and food items… and computer parts, mobiles and mobile batteries. [see Appendix 7(6a)]

Among these ‘hair’ gets a much higher price – as high as Rs. 1300 for a kilogram – if it is in a particular condition. The next ‘high paying’ items are computer parts, batteries, technological waste and PVC.

Although the work came across as an easily accessible economic opportunity, it involved varied kinds of threats to the health, life and psychological well-being of the children (see Appendix 7(6b): The challenges in the work). For example, walking and carrying bags on the backs the whole day, and bending and sorting junk from the
scattered waste. Parting with the bag or putting it down and sleeping was a strict ‘no’ for them (unless they leave it in a friend’s custody) – as there were good chances of the things getting stolen. There were instructions to do the collection and return as early as possible. However, the work usually took 6 to 8 hours. At times the children did not get food for all this while. Sabir (9 years old) said, “…At times we faint or feel dizzy, especially in summers; we sweat so much that we are all wet… once we were checked by a doctor at NLF school and he told us that we have anaemia [khoon ki kami].” They had to rely on the thrown food or request for it, from people who ‘look kind’

The nature of the work made the children feel varied kinds of pains (particularly in the spine), which became unbearable at times. This was amplified by the amount of travel the work involved. Along with several explicit physical struggles, there were other kinds of challenges. Suraj (10 years old) said, “Ilaaka tay karna sabse bada kaam hai” [delineating the territory is the toughest work among all]. “We have to travel, argue with the local kabaadi, at times fight with the children already working there, we also don’t know the place well, and where we would find what.” Jameel (13) adds another description of a less recognised but important challenge,

    We become used to bearing the sun… but as people like me become chota kabaadi we have to shout and call people… my voice has become so hoarse that my sisters make fun of me… I sound like a loudspeaker; I used to sing so well.

b. Experiences of body: Bodily fears
As I engaged with the children, it came across that they also recognised the dangers involved in their work. Their experience tells them that food items are among the most hazardous things that they come across and that they can potentially cause death. Most of them had experienced falling ill on consuming such chocolates or sweets. Recently two children in the neighbourhood had died due to food poisoning and lack of medical care, after consuming such food. Lalit (9) tells me,

16 All the children thought that young women are kindler and buy them eatables, which they appreciated; but didn’t like asking for food.
I throw the chocolates as soon as I see them, and also tell others to do so. But there are some children who eat it even when mummy tells us not to. Like this Savita; she had one in the morning just today... she is an idiot, she will die someday.

Savita (9) contests, “The one that I had was packed and a didi gave it to me.”

Apart from food poisoning, they identified several dangers and problems that they face in everyday life. The children described how their work demanded them to ‘dirty’ themselves. Suraj says, “We become dirty very soon... hands, feet and body become dirty and black, not for one day but forever.” Others resonated and repeated the experience, and described how dirty their clothes become by the time they have finished their work. Jameel adds, “We have to put our hands into the naali [small drainages] for things and sometimes have to get down a drain to pick-up some item... we all look dirty.” The children felt that rich children, or the children of *bade admi*17, making fun of them, and people hating them was attributed to looking dirty. The children also felt that staying ‘dirty’ made them more vulnerable to diseases and falling ill frequently. The rainy season is particularly bad for them. I had started visiting Sitapuri during the rains, when many children were suffering from skin allergies and infections. Rashes, boils and prickly heat were common and not even considered significant. Along with this, the children described their vulnerability to accidents. Sonu (7) says, “Because we have to cross the roads and be on the road the whole day, there is a danger of accidents.” The most well-known incident among the children was about a boy who was hit by a bullet-motorcycle and suffered a head injury. Lalit said, “Isse uska bheja kharab hogaya” [his brain was affected due to this] and that he succumbed to the injury and died. He further emphasised, “Rupees 1 lakh were given from the government’s side, but it won’t bring back the boy.” Accident is a part of everyday life for the children, and so is death due to accidents. Savita wrote,

Mummy and papa think that their child has gone for work. Children start from home thinking that they would do the work and return home

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17 The usage of *bade admi* by the children, corroborated the idea of big men as ‘rich men’. The children were using the terms *bada admi, bada log* and *ameer log* interchangeably and frequently.
in the evening, but they die at times on the road. I had also thought that my brother had gone for work…

The accidents encountered included falling from heights, falling while carrying heavy weights, slipping during the rainy season, and falling into drains. The most pronounced fear was that of getting hurt by sharp objects (particularly broken glass) while sorting and selecting. Many of them wrote about incidents that involved injury or death in the accidents that occurred during the work.

Along with these, the children explained how they are much more likely to become ‘addicts’ [charasi and nashakhor]. Lalit described, “… When some children feel hungry and thirsty they drink leftovers from alcohol bottles; those who work with older children also start taking charas-ganja with them… many older ones make cigarettes of these and smoke.” He shared with me that older children tell the younger ones that pain goes away when they smoke and drink. While such older children helped in some ways, they created more trouble for the younger ones. Deepali (10) told me, “They do not collect [waste] on their own; they wait for evenings when the younger children are returning home and snatch their bags…” The younger ones, when more in number, stood for each other, offered a good fight, and usually won because they were not under the substance effect. But when fewer, each one was for his or her own self. While the older children were one set of troublemakers, many ‘others’ made life difficult.

7.3.2. Experiences with ‘others’: Contested terrains

a. The children and the animals

Insects and reptiles were another source of danger that the children identified. Wasps, bees, ants, lizards and scorpions bit children every now and then. However, they were troubled the most if these bites were on the face, particularly on the eyes or lips. Savita described how a ‘poisonous lizard’s’ bite led to a swollen arm for days and then hospitalisation. The children were all the more prone to such bites and infections while they went for defecating in the open, particularly during the rains.
Dogs and bulls were two other ‘enemies’. 35 out of the 40 children had suffered dog bites, and many were hurt by bulls. Sonu articulated everybody’s voice by saying, “All dogs only bark at us, as soon as they see us coming for work they get together and start barking till we move into the market area…” The stray dogs did appear to behave this way with the children. During observations it emerged that instead of going away from the garbage heaps when the children approached to sort and select, the dogs barked until the children threw stones and chased them away. This was a daily ritual. Suraj says, “They think we will take away their food.” The children too were at war against the stray dogs and played a variety of pranks on them, whenever they substantially outnumbered the dogs.

What was more peculiar was that at the home and in their neighbourhood the same children shared a friendly relationship with the dogs. They freely touched the dogs, played with them and fed them. These local dogs were called by names; Sabir says, “Ballu and Banga are my brothers.” The love-hate relationship with the dogs was a fact that the children registered. Lalit goes on to describe, “…we only fight with dogs at work and they don’t harm us otherwise when we are without bags”. However, the pet dogs of the ‘bade admi’ were petrifying for the children.

The case of the bulls was different. Children said that the bulls were not afraid of them. Lalit says, “They are ‘arrogant’ and want to control the waste”. The children explained that once anyone is hit by a bull it is impossible to get back to work before a week. Most left a dump if they saw a bull around. Sabir said,

> There is a way of approaching the waste if you see a bull around. It is more dangerous when cows are also there. Stick around for a while and see how they are reacting, and only then act. Sometimes they don’t do anything… actually all these dogs and bulls trouble the younger children much more than us.

However, the younger children differed and narrated incidents of the animals “biting and hitting” the older ones as well. The younger children felt that it was a strife for the waste, as Jameel described “…we win over the dogs usually, and the bulls win over us and the dogs.”
What was peculiar here was that the children used “they people” [wo log] to refer to these animals. It appeared as if the line between the animal and human world became blurred in these narratives. How the boundaries between the children and the stray animals overlapped in the city waste – and the geo-spatial position that a city ascribes to both the groups – was an aspect that I as a researcher and a person living in the city understood through this narrative.

**b. How bade admi treat the children**

Deepali tells me,

… the ones who do [rag-picking] have to bear a lot of problems. *Bade admi* scold us, shoo us away, make fun and hate us because we are dirty, we wear dirty clothes and don’t go to school… but now that I go to school, bathe and wear my uniform then also they do so. [see Appendix 7(6c) for an account written by another child (Shivani) for Deepali]

The idea of ‘filthiness’ that was tied to their identity was registered by the children. The rich people, the children said (particularly pointing towards ‘aunties’) shoo them away. They shouted at them if they or their bags touched them, or if the children wandered around these people’s houses. To explain, Jameel articulated, “*Ameer log dadagiri karte hain.*” [Rich people engage in bullying] (Appendix 7(6b)).

Safia (9) described how once she was picking up a fallen guava from a tree outside a big house when a woman started shouting at her and the woman’s child chased Safia away to a distance. She described how scared she was, started running, how she fell with the bag and hurt herself. What the children argued against the most was the ‘bad way’ [*“gandi tarah”*] in which people talked to them, and how they changed when they wanted to get some work done. Lalit said,

An aunty shouts at me every day if I go near her shop, but when she has to dispose large wastes, she calls me with affection and addresses me saying ‘*beta*’ [child]. When I refuse to take the waste, she promises tea and biscuits.
He adds, “I will not pick up her waste, I have decided.” Suraj described a peculiar incident in which he got hurt. He said,

One day a woman shouted from her house on the second floor to take some items from her. She said she would throw it from the balcony in a bag. As she threw it, a corner of the bag hit my head and I started to bleed. She didn’t even say anything and went inside… usko sorry to bolna chahiye thi? [She should have said sorry at least?]

The ‘bade admi’ often stole or snatched (or forced the children to give) some item from the waste collected which would be of use to them. At times the bade admi even asked them to do petty jobs for them. Sonu, says, “I was doing my work, when a woman shouted from her balcony ‘Oh ladki, hamara toilet saaf kardegi? Bees rupay denge.’” [Oh girl, will you clean our toilet? We’ll give twenty rupees.]

On a different note, Deepali described how afraid she was of the “bade log”. Most of the children had on some occasion or the other got a beating from the ‘rich’ men and women whom they encountered in their daily work. They told me how much they wanted to hit back and that one of them did hit back, as a result of which he was handed over to the police. The group narrated incidents in which servants or children of ‘the rich’ let loose their pets on them. The focus was on the struggle involved in escaping from the situation. Savita said,

One day a child let his dog loose on me, I ran with my bag… as I ran things started falling from my bag. If I would have slowed down the dog would have caught me but my things were falling. I ran, threw my bag… finally I bumped into a didi who held me and shooed the dog away. I was shivering and crying so she gave me water… my life was saved with great difficulty. I lost all my collection that day and got a good beating from father but was saved from the dog at least.

The discussions, particularly with the adolescent girls brought forth how they were molested and sexually abused by young men (including those from their own community) while they worked and how this became the primary reason for leaving
the work that they were doing as children. The younger male children also described being caught by ‘scary’ looking men and being assaulted. Their descriptions were such that they did not say things explicitly, but the hidden meanings that they wanted to communicate came across clearly. The children referred to the acts like these as ‘ganda kaam’. This was another category of men which the children called “gande admi”.

Children also narrated their fear of people offering them food with sedatives and kidnapping them. The younger children described their fear of such kidnapping ending with stealing their kidney, or deforming their body to make them beggars. Although none of them had experienced this, their parents had specifically asked them not to consume food that ‘men’ offer them when they were alone. However, the children felt that market places were safer, and also thought that among all the young women [‘didi’] were very good to them and helped them at times. That was why the younger children and the adolescent girls were mostly assigned to market places.

However, the homes were also not ‘safe’. One of the adolescent girls, Shivani (14) says, “… there are dangers at home too. Sometimes fathers sell their young children, especially daughters… they don’t even listen to the mother.” Lalit also brought forth this experience saying,

… my neighbour sold his little son to someone in the hospital but told us the next day that the child was stolen… but none of them cried, nor did they complain to the police… so my father got it that he has sold him.

However, the children also thought that it was not only in the poor families that children are unsafe; they are unsafe everywhere. Sonu wrote,

A van from a hospital comes and drops things every evening. We run after it to collect the items. One day it dropped a plastic bag and some children rushed to pick it up. When they opened it there was a dead girl child in it.

Sabir describes another incident:
Once a car was throwing garbage from the window and some children were running after it. In a while, another car came and started throwing things, so they started running towards it. Then I saw that from the first car instead of garbage, someone threw a child out. All the neighbours saw this and we called on the 100 number. The police came. It’s a two year old incident. [see Appendix 7(6d) for the same incident noted by Lalit]

Similar incidents were narrated by several children. However, it came across that informing the police (most of the time) put the informant in trouble. In fact, the police and some other State functionaries (or institutions) were also identified as prominent ‘troublemakers’ by the children.

c. The most difficult: The police and the MCD

The police and the MCD were beyond comprehension for the children. The children did not understand why these two agencies were after their livelihood. They felt as if they were there to trouble them. The police was the most troublesome in all their understandings. All of them listed the police high in their list of challenges they negotiated in their everyday work. Around 36 out of 40 wrote or narrated stories where the police was involved in troubling them. Ashish said,

… sometimes we don’t know that a heap of waste is private waste. When a child starts searching, people think that he is a thief. Then they call the police… younger children are spared with one or two slaps, but the older ones are taken to the station. How much ever you plead, they won’t listen… they want us to plead.

Sonu told me,

Once my father went for the picking… the police picked him up thinking that he is a Bangladeshi. They asked us to show our ration card or janampatri which we didn’t have. They were asking for big money; we didn’t have it. They freed my father after 8-9 days.

The children opined that the police ‘conspired against’ the poor people who do the work of junk collection. They said that the police troubled and harassed them by using expletives, pushing them away and by not letting them enter the market areas. They
asked them to empty their bags every now and then saying that they wanted to check if they had stolen something or if they were carrying a bomb. Zahid, the NGO worker, confirmed that the police and the MCD could more legitimately do so with the people living at Sitapuri, as many ‘Bangladeshis’ stayed there.

Lalit says, “They call me Bangladeshi *musalm*n but I am a Hindu *jaat*; my village is in U.P.”. As described in Chapter Three, Sitapuri’s population consists of people who migrated from villages in Bengal and the Bangladesh-India border. Some are ‘legitimate’ refugees – who were much better placed than the others as they had some documentary proofs. The life of those who couldn’t produce proofs were worst affected. Those migrants from other States who were living on rent in the cluster were also identified as *Bangladeshi*. Though the children did not very articulately register such contradictions, yet they experienced a discomfort. They constantly observed the struggle that the NLF staff had to face to enrol them in the regular schools and for facilitating their access to various agencies of the State, specifically in the absence of citizenship documents. Sonu told me, “My fake *janampatri* was made with great difficulty…without it the teacher was not enrolling me in school…” Zahid (community worker at NLF) explained when I asked him later,

> Actually the status of these people is unclear… some of them are Bangladeshis, some are Indians. Because of this it is impossible to get their certificates made, especially when they are Muslims. If they have to be made the right way, it would require people to go back to their villages, negotiate with the Panchayat or the local agencies to get an affidavit made… this is so impossible. These people have left their villages and have nothing there.\(^{18}\)

The children experience these processes and construct the meaning of the ‘legitimate’ and what a State deems legitimate. As per a survey conducted by Chintan (2009, p. 7) the rag-pickers save almost 14% of the municipal budget annually, in Delhi. The survey reports that if the work stops, the weakness of the formal waste management

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\(^{18}\) Das’s (2004, 2010) analysis of documentary proofs (as discussed in Chapter Two and Five) appeared useful in this regard.
system would be highlighted. Despite the work being hazardous for children and illegal, it continues in the city. At Sitapuri, the MCD seized the waste every now and then but was not intervening to ‘reform’ the situation. In this scenario, the people (including children) encountered or rather lived with a constant threat to their ways of livelihood, posed by the MCD. Deepali elucidated,

When the committee ki gadi [MCD van] comes, everyone starts feeling scared. Everybody starts struggling to save their carts. At times some are hurt in this process, others are beaten-up [by the police]. In the process of saving themselves the ones who haven’t done wrong [begunaah] are also trapped without reason. Children get crushed in stampedes and get hurt. [see Appendix 7(6c) for a narrative written for Deepali by another child]

To ensure that she is taken seriously and that its gravity is understood she says, “some children die in this”, which didn’t match the descriptions by other children and people from the community. Sumit describes the same incident:

…usually the committee ki gadi arrives when we have gathered all our sacks at one place for sorting. Once they came when things were assembled outside my house. Our neighbours started rushing around and pulling the sacks into their homes. But the committee people came to our houses and pulled out the sacks and pushed them into their van and went away.

The children register this conscious de-legitimating of their work and sources of livelihood by the State, and make it problematic. Sabir says, “… why are they after us? We aren’t stealing anything, we are only selling waste. Cleaning the city. The ones who steal, they let them go after taking money from them.” […] ye kyun hamare peeche pade hain? Hum koi chori thode hi kar rahe hain, kabad hi to bech rahe hain. Sheher ko saaf kar rahe hain. Jo chori karte hain unko to paisa lekar chod dete hain.

7.3.3. Making sense: Nature of expression

a. ‘I’ and ‘we’

When I analysed the notes that the children wrote and my notes of the discussions that I had had with them, a particular feature of their narrations emerged. The children
used ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ all through, whenever they articulated their experiences. For example, saying, “… we have to get down into the drain at times”, instead of saying “I have to get down into the drain at times”. They also framed their sentences in a way that the use of ‘I’ or ‘we’ was minimal. For instance saying, “get hurt several times” instead of saying “I/we get hurt several times”. Wherever it was necessary, they chose ‘we’ over ‘I’. Where they narrated ‘incidents’ that were distinct, ‘I’ was been used. Not just the text, but the dynamics within the group, the body language and the degree of comfort the children shared with each other, all indicated that they were seeing and articulating themselves as a group, a collective or a ‘community’. They also knew each other well as they lived, worked and studied together – and therefore could clearly note the commonality in their experiences.

However, what is central to this articulation of ‘we’ is that it captures a strong sense of assertion and explaining to an ‘outsider’ about the challenges of ‘their’ work and life. While referring to themselves as ‘we’, the children were also engaging in an act of resistance against something that they were unable to articulate, yet communicated it in different forms through their narrations. This was a resistance against the perception that the ‘outside world’ created about ‘them’. This was also an act of ensuring that their voices got noted by me.

b. Experiencing a ‘social pathos’: ‘Us’ and ‘they’

The kind of picture of the social world that is created from the standpoint of these children, appears to be different from how it is represented in schools, textbooks and institutions of education. These children visualise the axes of inequalities and the distinction between their world and that of the ‘elite’. They face and articulate the conflict between the way they are treated by ‘the people’ (the mainstream) and the moral pathos of the ‘bade admir’. They constantly encounter facts that go against the concepts of justice, equality and democracy, particularly in the messages that reach them from the institutions of the State – the way the State institutions discriminate between them and ‘the big people’. How the children articulated the collective experience of class and how they understood their social position and roles came across in such instances.
The ‘us and they’ dichotomy scaffolds a politics of exclusion and deprivation. As Said (1978) says, “The privileged gains his privileges by objectifying the other by - making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, teaching it. And thus, depriving and marginalising it”. The children from this slum community experience this at an implicit level, yet the tension it creates is seen in visible forms of aggression, addiction, depression, or resistance, or a struggle to change the situation by coordinating with the standards of the authority. The children share experiences of the everyday events in the geo-cultural space in which they are situated. In general, apart from the struggle they undergo for the necessities of life, their daily lives are constituted by socio-psychological conflicts involving issues relating to morals, values, freedom, dignity, and worthiness of existence and experiences. These conflicts become even more intense when the psychosocial influences of their caste, religion and gender are taken into account. In the everyday negotiations that the children make with the others/outsiders, their deprived status confers the guarantee of a loss, which not only generates conflicts and frustration but also has a bearing on how they visualise themselves and their realities, and that of the Other.

c. Between school and work

The group of children, whom I interacted with, were those who had just started going to the regular State school. They were still in the process of making sense of the institution and adjusting to it. Yet, they were able to write about it more critically (see Appendix 7(6e) for a narrative presented by an adolescent girl in the group). The school and work routine kept the children busy to such an extent that they felt completely drained and lethargic. The children liked their uniform and the food they got at school, but could not describe experiences beyond this. However, adolescent girls felt ‘safe’ in the school, and thought that they got some time there for themselves. Yet, ‘a school’ or an institutional space had a lasting impact on their lives. The experience of learning at the NLF centre that had flexible timings and teachers from the community had enabled them to articulate their experiences and document them. In fact, the children’s writing and verbal expression were better than that of the girls and boys I interacted with at the E-5 MCD school. This is not to say
that the NGO was doing a better job than the State; but that the nature of the two ‘schools’ was different from the standpoint of how they were structured.

The children who were with NLF had a different kind of experience of the world (through the work they did) that refined their expression. Along with this the NLF performed the function of making children literate, with the help of educated youth from the community. The presence of a role model like Zahid (who himself was from the slum community) was something that ensured that teaching-learning happens, and that the social distance and ‘revulsion’ do not completely take over the ethos. Zahid and some other community workers also understood the children’s context well and wanted to ‘reform’ their ‘own community’. The NGO school was located inside the slum and ran in several shifts so that children could come at a time that suited them; and when a child didn’t come, the community workers went to his/her home. The community also knew what was happening in school and found the community workers much more approachable and trustworthy.

It was in this institutional space that the children articulated their experiences of work and the world. Despite the fact that the quality of formal education (at the NGO and school) available to them did not facilitate a critical construction of the experiences of marginalisation or of life, the children used the conditions to make meaning by themselves. All through the work I felt that a well-trained cadre of teachers who could understand the community and the children, and had a stake in their education, could potentially convert classrooms into spaces where an interaction on such social experiences happens. The State’s responsibility for schooling is not limited to providing institutions and enrolling children in it, but of ensuring ‘dignity’ and ‘a dignified future’. Thus, the teacher training and the structure of schooling form an essential core of the provision for ‘right to education’.

This chapter has attempted to present the varied experiences of the children whom I interacted with during this study. Although, as I began the study I had set out to focus on Dalit children, the observations and experiences made me wonder how relevant such an intention was. It appeared that the experiences of the children in the ‘margins’
or at the sites where I worked were indistinguishable on the criterion of caste. The
nature of experiences of all the children seemed to be similar. However, the social
setting in itself was constituted in such a fashion that caste was an undeniably
significant aspect of the demographic pattern. Most people residing there ‘happened’
to be Dalits, and seventy percent (or more) of the schoolchildren ‘happened’ to belong
to marginalised caste groups. Thus, what I thought was ‘indistinguishable’, appeared
to constitute the context in which I was working. At Sitapuri the case seemed to be all
the more complicated where not only caste and religion but the ‘belonging’ too was
‘ambiguous’. How were these ambiguities constituted also appeared worth pondering
on.

The discussions in the chapter have highlighted that the school in the margins serves
the role of an institution where two different kinds of experiences and social agenda
interact. On the one hand the community in the margins (as located within the
framework of its experiences and worldview) has a particular kind of hope, aspiration
and demand from the school; on the other, the teachers and the functionaries of the
State who belong to a particular social class/group have their own agenda.

The children do not experience this ‘interaction’ (between the two kinds of
aspirational fields) only at the school. Instead, this interaction shapes their
experiences outside the school as well in their everyday negotiations with ‘the Other’.
However, the school comes to become a formal institutional space where conditions
for such experiences are created. That is, it comes to be an agency that reinforces the
agenda and conflicts between the community, the State functionaries and the State. It
came across that the school, and the idea of school, do not generate an experience
which can lead the children in the margins to formulate ‘hopes’ and ‘aspirations’ of
their own.