Chapter Eight:
Concluding Thoughts

In many ways, this inquiry evolved during the process of it being executed. For me (as a researcher), much more than the aspects related to a school context, it brought to the fore the complication of exploring marginalisation in a metropolitan space, where one finds a confluence of a variety of identities and intertwined axes of caste, class, religion, region, gender and disability. In this inquiry an attempt has been made to understand the everyday relation between a State school and the people living in a slum space in a metropolitan. What happens inside the school and how ‘school’ as a conceptual category is shaped in this process form the centrepiece of how the ‘politics of institutional knowledge and exclusion’ has come to be interpreted in this work. While in this exploration the Dalit experience may seem to have appeared prominently only in glimpses, the character of the geo-spatial location in which the fieldwork was set made it pertinent to the inquiry in a peculiar way. In this sense, this study in a way explored the ethos in the margins of a city through the system of education. In this section of the thesis, I present the broad outlines of the understandings that I drew from the work.

8.1. Perceptions from the field: The urban slum, anonymity and identity
The setting where I worked houses a population that has migrated from rural contexts in search of a ‘better living’. Despite being economically underprivileged, life in the city slum (and resettlement) offered some promise of ‘betterment’. This betterment in explicit ways was economic in nature, but in subtle and nuanced forms it was also social and cultural. For example, some of the informants felt that it offered ‘liberation’ from the explicit discriminations based on (or rather references to) caste as experienced in the village contexts. A certain degree of anonymity that the space provided gave (or may be created an illusion of) a psychosocial ‘safety’ by allowing one to either disguise or ‘hide’ identity or perceive it as immaterial.

However, the life in the slum also appeared to have a continuity with its rural or village roots. Those who were transiting to the site saw people from the same villages
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(specifically those from the same ‘community’) who had settled in the city slum/resettlement as models of better living or of cultural-economic “progress” and considered them as hand-holders. Through the accomplices already settled at the site, others could find their feet in the neighbourhood. In this act, these hand-holders gratified the need to relate to one's origin and created a mechanism to cushion isolation (and in turn vulnerability) that urban centres expose people to. In some ways it appeared to be one of the ‘strategies’ of negotiating ‘citizenship’ claims (Das, 2010) in the urban centre by maintaining a network of what was popularly called ‘jaan-pehchan’. This indicated a paradox where a desire to liberate coincided with a socio-political necessity to relate, and lent a nebulous character to the ‘community’ identity. That is, a situation in which anonymity and socio-cultural identity continuously interacted, and individual freedom and the community bond oscillated (or were trapped) between these. I say ‘trapped’ because anonymity and identity were also intertwined in a complicated fashion. There were instances in which the ‘community’ looked fragmented, and occasions where it appeared very strong and assertive. For example, in the case of the second hand cloth trade run by the Vaghri women, the community appeared to be the enabling structure on which a better livelihood unfolded. However, with the school and other institutions of the State, the parents from the same locality, caste and region did not negotiate as a ‘community’. They discussed schooling and choice of school, but did not intervene to improve what was available.

Although anonymity seemed to be precious for the people living in the slum (and resettlement) setting, from the outside it looked illusive. As discussed in Chapter 4, the geo-spatial setting, called the ‘urban slum’, in itself was patterned on class, caste and religion. This streaming constituted the common ‘knowledge’ about the people from the ‘slum’ among the ‘outsiders’ (including the teachers and the other functionaries of the State, who did not belong to these settings in the case in which I was inquiring). Therefore, the setting in itself ‘described’ to the outsiders the identity of the people who inhabited it. With the urban contexts appearing more homogenising (in terms of work, language and names), factors like income, locality, ‘hygiene’ and ‘willingness to go to school’, were used or employed by the outsiders to infer the
insiders’ identities. At the school, these identifiers worked as the foundations on which the relationship between the teachers and the children was framed and structured – where the teachers constantly referred to these to explain the pathos that their work involved and the worthlessness experienced in discharging the duty.

However, this inference was not neatly structured to (consciously) discriminate against particular social groups. It was only one way of ‘making sense’ of how one is positioned in relation to the other and of understanding one’s own power in the everyday negotiations (in both formal institutional and informal contexts) in subtle indistinct ways. With these, the disadvantage of being a Dalit and the collective memory and experience of discrimination did not weaken but appeared to be situated somewhere deeper in the implicit personal realms. In the ethos where I worked, caste based exclusion did not appear to be visualised by the people as a social reality that necessarily had to be critically talked about and subverted, but took the form of a taboo that must not be talked about in public (as seen in Chapter 4). In fact, the question of ‘discrimination’ inside and outside the setting was either avoided or rejected by the people – despite the explicit demographic structuring of the space and the variety of experiences that would reinforce such a feeling. I also perceived such denials as a function of the demography of the location. In a context where caste or socio-cultural identity constituted the lived reality, tracing its experience in specific instances and manifest forms was not simple (or maybe was naïve). In this situation, as a participant, I continuously understood ‘Dalit’ as an ambivalent conceptual category. I oscillated between its ‘narrower’ and ‘broader’ conceptions; that is, between restricting its meaning to caste and opening it up to include various forms of marginalisation (Das, 2004a).

Such character of the field made it challenging to continue to inquire without thinking about how the city spaces are geo-politically structured in the margins and the centre, and the relation or negotiations between the margins and the centre, which reflect in informal and institutional relations and processes. This is not to say that there were no

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1 For example, in claiming the monetary schemes and the various provisions made by the State (as described in Chapters Four and Five).
observable instances where the everyday politics of marginalisation got played out, but to indicate that such experiences constituted the banalities of life in the margins. One of the prominent observable forms where the issues of identity, anonymity and marginalisation came to the fore was located in the institutional contexts – specifically in the processes of claiming the various provisions and ‘schemes’ of the State, where documentary proofs become the instruments of negotiation. Although these schemes in general may seem conceptually ‘simple’, becoming eligible to avail them not only involved dealing with the ‘bureaucracy’ but also made it necessary to navigate through a variety of cultural-hierarchical relationships. In these processes, as was seen in Chapters 4 and 5, these documents defined the ‘eligibility’ conditions to seek a legitimate citizenship. The variety of institutions, including the school with which children directly engaged, were (or are) also situated in this context.

8.2. Purposes that school serves
The social composition of the setting also reflected in the school where I worked, where only five percent of the children were from the privileged castes, who also almost ‘by default’ were ‘better performers’. Thus, who accessed the MCD school and who would successfully ‘pull through’ it was not only unambiguous, but was also known to the teachers and the parents. The quality of schooling available in the context and the experiences inside the school, instituted the forms in which educational exclusion and marginalization took shape. This reality functioned as a backdrop against which a child was socialized, where such meanings were not explicit but involved in how she was positioned in the everyday life.

The parents who were in a position to afford private schooling, made a ‘choice’ to withdraw their children from the State school. There were others (in the squatters) who did not send their children to any school. Both these decisions were taken in the light of what the State school and schooling per se offered. For the former, the idea of affinity to the middle classes and their culture was central in defining the ‘better’. For the latter, the school made no sense as it did not appear to fit in with the nature of their lives. Even among those who sent their children to the State school, the ‘fact’ that the institution did not discharge its academic functions was known – almost in a
naturalized fashion. That is, that the school did not serve an academic function was common knowledge about the institution. While one tends to think that in these circumstances the school only worked as a certifying agency, the observations from the field indicate that this only explains the situation in part. The value of the public school, much more than anything else, was vested in its identity as an institution of the State. It was among one of those State institutions that was visibly there and more approachable when compared with the other institutions. Thus, by sending the child to the school the people made a ‘network’ with the State, or invested in a ‘formal’ institution. Enrolling a child in school was thus seen as an act of participating in a ‘valid’ or a core system of the State, and also as entering the legitimate, visible and legal realm of citizenship (from the illegitimate, semi-visible and supposedly ‘abberated’ margins). Thus, schooling was an ‘increment’ from the margins towards the core – and was a way of navigating through several other increments (Das, 2004).

The various schemes and ‘incentives’ that the school offered were the manifest forms in which this incremental politics could be observed. However, such incremental participation and politics were not as simple as they appeared.

As a public institution the school distributed ‘entitlements’, most of which were tangible or monetary in nature. However, in doing so a state of affairs was created where these ‘schemes’ appeared to restructure the everyday conception of ‘rights’. That is to say, the distinction between schemes, incentives or benefits, and political/civil ‘rights’ became blurred. The complexity of (or the pattern in) this chaos emerges when one takes into account the fact that the school was not delivering the children’s ‘right’ to education and continued to operate in a legitimate or ‘normal’ fashion. Rather, it was upgraded to the ‘Pratibha’ status for ‘performing well’. Thus, the schemes of the State that were planned to ensure that the people access the system appeared to restructure the meaning of the system itself – where most of the stakeholders (the teachers, the parents and the SSA personnel) visualised the school as an agency for distributing the tangibles. It was in this context that the school worked as a mechanism of negotiating the ‘minimums’ between the State and the people in the margins – where the psychology or the vocabulary of increments ‘at least’ got played out. For example, it created a general ethos of complacency or ‘inactivity’
based on the idea that ‘at least’ there was a school, at least it provided for a meal, at least the child got a uniform, at least there were regular teachers, at least it worked as a crèche, and so on. Although for the people in the margins this incremental progress was a ‘strategy’ of negotiating their citizenship claims not only in the schools but in general as well (Das, 2010), for the State it created a space where it became possible to hold back or only ‘maintain’ the given provisioning for the ‘right’. In several ways it appeared that in such ethos the beneficiary-benefactor negotiation was structured within a discourse on tangible schemes, and the school assumed the role of one mechanism that constructed such ethos.

8.3. Experiencing school in the margins: Children’s aspirations

Despite the fact that the school did not work as an academic entity, the children were there for five hours every day in which they experienced and made meaning – both in and about the institution. It appeared that the children’s location in a slum/resettlement context, accessing a State school and experiencing a relationship with the State functionaries (including the teacher, the police and the MCD employees) together sketched the outlines in which they made meaning about the Self, the ‘Other’ and the status of their citizenship. Among many other things, the meanings that the children made from this experience reflected in their aspirations from school education. The persistent silence among the schoolgirls on the question of what they would want to be when they ‘grow-up’, and the ‘inability’ of the children who worked as ‘rag-pickers’ to negotiate with the formal schooling, reflected the role that the school education played (or did not play) in their lives. The conditions at the school, instead of facilitating a child to aspire or hope for the self and for the community, lead to a situation where education seemed to take the form of a ‘ritual’ which did not have a meaning by itself.

In the case of the schoolgirls, it emerged that the experience at the school with the teachers alienated them from critically reflecting on their own life situations and lived experiences – or rather, silenced them. However, the children working as rag-pickers, while reflecting on their experience of interaction with the ‘big-people’ (*bade admi*) and the State agencies, appeared to ‘pathologize’ the social world around them. They
were also more articulate in examining one’s possibilities and setting realistic goals for progress, in which education did not matter. Although it took time to break the silences among the schoolchildren, from the work on the stories/narratives it prominently emerged that their assessment of the ‘worth’ of the schooling was nearly the same. The schoolchildren expressed how the life around them made them understand schooling only as a secondary or an ambivalent exercise in the process of becoming a ‘successful’ person (or bada admi). Therefore, the experience of school and work, in the case of the children situated in the slum contexts, made them assess their possibilities and probabilities in which their geo-spatial (and thus socio-historic) identities played a pertinent role.

While the perspectives of Gandhi (1953/1938) and Illich (1971) were directly relevant in making sense of the situation, it appeared that Said’s (1978) work despite having been written in a different context offers a frame to locate the children’s experiences and the field observations. The interactions with the children made me reflect on the notion of ‘otherness’ and how it may explain the experiences and social interplays in the field. Ambedkar’s idea of the ethics of fraternity also continuously reappeared as I analysed the relational ethos between and among the children, teachers and the others.

8.4. Teachers

As I observed the roles that the teachers assumed at the school and the manner in which they absolved themselves from their official role, what became a prominent question was – Who becomes a teacher? To understand this it became relevant to inquire into how the teachers justified or rationalised the roles that they assumed. The social reality that the caste and class gap between the teachers and the students in State schools are high has been explored in studies (as discussed in chapter 1) and it provides a frame to contextualise the question. It also provides a frame to understand how the state of affairs is justified by the teachers through the discourse of ‘unwillingness’ and ‘uneducability’ of the community that sends their children to the State schools. While the fieldwork reinforced the understanding about the state of teaching as a profession, it also brought into the picture the case of the people who despite being committed could not become teachers.
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The aspirants who were working for the slum communities in which they themselves were born and brought-up, were committed to the idea of ‘uplifting’ their community and were pursuing it too. Having a strong belief that their education made them upwardly mobile, they aspired to become teachers. Some were ‘teaching’ in the local NGO centres. Yet, despite being sufficiently educated they were ‘ineligible’ to become teachers and could not have in any way entered the State’s system of education as regular ‘employees’. For them teaching was the most desirable and paradoxically the most difficult profession to access or aspire for. This situation presented a contrast when compared to the case of those for whom it was ‘convenient’ to become teachers in the State school. This ‘convenience’ was not only framed by the ease with which their socio-cultural capital made the profession open for them, but also by how the same capital gave them the power to shape their jobs (or the profession as a whole) as per their personal interests, without being penalised. In the frame of such a contrast, the conception of the teacher as a meek dictator did not completely explain the scenario. However, it made one think about how the meekness of the teachers was constituted and what role the teachers played in its maintenance or reproduction. These observations also made it worthwhile to reconsider the purposes that the State school, as a political institution, serves.

8.5. Conflicting agenda
The question of why government school systems are grappling with the issues of quality of education has been a part of discourse in education. Such a discourse also takes the form of a comparison between the public and low-cost private systems of schooling (Jain and Dholakia, 2009; Tooley, 2009; Kingdon, 2009). These comparisons, however, need to be closely examined – not only ideologically but also with respect to their basic tenets. Firstly, the comparison between the public and private systems of education seems to be based on a particular idea of ‘quality’ and ‘education’. Through such comparisons it comes across that the standards for comparison are articulated based on the quality and education that is transacted in the private schools. Such an idea of standards not only legitimizes what happens in the private schools, it also distorts the meaning of ‘quality’ and ‘provision’ for quality
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education. It seems that in this discourse the concern for making incremental amendments in the present system takes over the more pertinent questions about the given form and nature of schooling. The examination of the State schooling in this study has been situated in this latter perspective as guided by the thoughts of Gandhi (1953/1938).

Secondly, the agenda with which the government and private schools work are in themselves different. So a comparison between the two does not add value to the understanding of these systems beyond a point. As established in the discourse, when one compares, it is critical to understand and analyse ‘who’ comprises these two systems. The matrix of class, caste and gender has to be centrally located in this analysis. The private school system, particularly in urban settings, comprises of a group of children, teachers, managers and others who are relatively homogeneous in terms of their ‘norms’ and agenda. However, in a public system (by the very nature of its composition) one finds a variety of conceptions of the purposes/agenda with which the children are ‘schooled’. Purposes with which a community sends a child to school and the idea with which the teacher teaches, are not only different but even at times contradict the attainment of each other. Similarly, the State’s agenda of education is different from what a teacher and a community would want from the school.

As one imagines a public system of schooling and the various stakeholders in it, the heterogeneity in the system comes across. The stakeholders vary from the higher level State functionaries with an obligation to discharge a function, an academia with its imaginations of what should be taught and how it should be taught, a class of officials who make the system work – irrespective of the agenda, a classed and gendered teacher cadre that asserts a legitimate claim for employment in the public system, and the marginalised who come to the school to negotiate with and participate in the system of the State. As a result the situation at the school comes across as that of an interaction between the State’s compulsion to draw larger numbers of children, the functionaries’ compulsion of discharging the mandates, the parents’ compulsion and aspiration to send the child to the school, and a ritual for a child to go to school. In interactions with the variety of the stakeholders, many a time I came across a situation
where one blamed the other for the conditions, which generated an appropriate atmosphere where the status-quo could be maintained. How such a system would infer and coalesce the meaning of ‘quality’ or of ‘education’ with such distinctions in the agenda, is a question that I grappled with. What is the purpose of public education and what would an ideal system of education comprise, were the questions that resurfaced in various forms. While the discourse on quality of education and its problems reflects on these, the questions about the ‘givenness’ of the ‘form’ of schooling are not frequently raised.

8.6. Culture(s) of children and school-space

The engagement with the children at the school and in the special training centres (of the NGOs) during the fieldwork provided an insight into how children think and make meaning – the nature of logic they apply, the expressions they choose, the relations they establish, and things that matter to them. More specifically, the interactions around the stories/narratives also gave an insight into the children’s ideas of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ – how they deciphered and negotiated them – and thus the nature of ‘ethics’ or the framework of values based on which they reached conclusions (where empathy and fraternity appeared to be a modality of relating). It emerged that although shaped by the categories of the adult world and experiences with them, the meanings that the children made were not completely subsumed under them (or were not their mere reproductions). On many occasions the children’s ways of making sense of the world appeared more fluid, abstract and ethically more sound and diverged from how adults make meaning (Stephens 1995, p. 24).

In such engagement, the school as a space appeared to be playing a particular role in the children’s lives. The children were using the space and time that the school made available to them as a legitimate forum where they could engage with those of similar ages and who shared meanings, norms and ethics2. The school was a space that was physically safer, had basic infrastructural provisions, and ensured a meal and free time to engage. Such spaces though available outside the school were neither as legitimate nor as organised, and thus were vulnerable. In this sense the school also appeared to

2 See Annexure 7(1).
be a setting where the children shaped their own ‘cultural worlds’. This made it pertinent to think about the form and nature of schooling available for children and how these spaces are constantly co-opted by the stakes or conflicts of the adult world. In several ways, the experience with the children made it worthwhile to imagine schools as spaces for children, which would involve learning from the cultures of children and working with them.