Thesis abstract

Politics of institutional knowledge and exclusion: An inquiry into experiences of children from Dalit community

This thesis is based on a one-year qualitative fieldwork at a slum cluster, and a neighbourhood State-run primary school in Delhi. It is an attempt to study how the everyday experiences of the ‘Dalit children’ situated in the setting, shape their educational aspirations, willingness, possibilities and everyday meaning-making about the social world. The main concerns of this work include – the relation between the State and the margins, and the experience of exclusion and marginalisation in the context of institutional education. To situate the understandings in a frame, the study draws from the thoughts and works of Ambedkar, Gandhi, Illich and Veena Das. The study has been designed within the tradition or conventions of the ‘qualitative method’. This is not only because the questions being studied would have been better addressed in such a mode, but also because the problem itself was articulated in a qualitative frame. It was based on a belief that understanding or inquiring into ‘experiences’ is central in making-sense of marginalisation and exclusion, and that this would demand an immersion in everyday life in the field.

The fieldwork of the study involved engaging with children at a primary school, those at work and/or ‘out-of-school’, their parents and other adults in the setting, schoolteachers and the local NGOs’ staff, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan personnel, and some other informants (like employees at the local election office, post-office and police station). Participant observation was the primary method through which I made sense of the field reality. Conversations, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with the principal informants, were also critical in the process of collecting data concerning particular categories and experiences. For working with the children, the method of ‘storytelling’ was employed. The ‘stories’ were based on select Dalit autobiographies and narratives.
that could potentially facilitate discussions on experience(s) of poverty, caste, humiliation, conflict and childhood (in relation to school). The narration sessions were followed by group discussions, drawing and writing. During the fieldwork I also interacted with a group of children working as ‘ragpickers’ and documented their narratives about their work and experiences with the ‘others’.

The descriptions that were generated during the course of research have been organised into eight chapters, including an introduction and a concluding chapter (or an epilogue). The chapters trace the following broad questions in particular relation to the social group in focus (Dalit children in the urban slum): How is a State school situated in an urban slum context? How do the people living there perceive schooling and school? How is the everyday school practice shaped in the interactions between the teachers, children and community? What roles does a teacher play in this context? How are the children positioned in the school and how do they make sense of social reality? How does the school as a social and pedagogic institution shape the aspirations and worldviews of the children in the margins of an urban setting? The thesis structure logically tapers as it progresses towards the concluding chapter. It begins with developing the broader framework of the thoughts and perspectives which shaped the work, then presents the methodological approach and fieldwork, and then transits into introducing the field. The subsequent chapters pursue the three major categories of understandings from the field – beginning from the idea of school, then moving to the school practice (with a focus on teacher-student-community relationship), and converging into experiences of the children.

Broadly speaking, the findings of the work relate to the nature of everyday experiences in the margins of the city – with a focus on the children in the slum, and their aspirations and negotiations with the school (or an institution of the State). The explorations also bring to the fore the complication involved in understanding marginalisation in a metropolitan slum space, where one finds a confluence of a variety of identities and intertwined axes of caste, class, religion and gender. This aspect shaped the study in
significant ways. Although the study was originally set out to focus on Dalit children, in the process of the fieldwork, caste identity in the urban slum itself became an aspect of inquiry – particularly in relation to how it was involved in experiencing the school and the social relationships. In this context, the nature of ‘relational ethos’ between and among the various actors in the school and outside, became the most prominent aspect of this inquiry. Thus, the analysis in this work revolves around: the nature of everyday ‘politics’ in the urban slum context; purposes that the State school served there; the relation between and the aspirations of the teachers, children and community as structured within the State institution; and the nature of the school-space.