Chapter One:
Introduction

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. Along with this, the thesis also represents the process in which I began to learn about and engaged in doing research in the area of study called education. Both the above aspects are documented in various sections of the thesis. This section attempts to introduce the study and presents my location in the process of working through it. It begins with a presentation of the context in which the work was situated and explains how the idea of the study emerged. While doing so, it takes the reader through the times, the events, and the literature that facilitated in formulating this work. Then, it touches upon some aspects where, as a researcher, I continue to sense a lack of resolution. This is followed by an overview of the structure of the thesis and the subsequent chapters.

1.1. The context of the times
The study was situated at a juncture where the right to free and compulsory elementary education, and the questions pertaining to quality of State schools were at the centre of activity in the area of school education in India, in both policy and academic circles. The Right to Education (RtE) Act, 2009, was in the process of being implemented. It was being seen and propagated as an instrument towards a more equitable, non-discriminating, and responsible provisioning and/or distribution of education. A framework for curricular and pedagogic shifts in the school education had already been proposed (NCERT, 2005) and the State agencies and institutions were carrying out the work on its ‘implementation’. It was also a time when the centrally sponsored flagship programme for universalisation of elementary education, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA), was nearing a ten-year term, and a similar programme for secondary education was being geared up.
While this was the broader direction of the State’s policy in school education, some fluxes could be seen in practice. On the one hand the State implemented the RtE Act 2009, that at least apparently had emerged from the constitutional framework of rights and values of justice, equality and fraternity, and that had a deeper meaning for economically weaker sections (EWS). On the other hand, there were contestations to it. One contestation came from a private unaided schools’ society – on the particular matter of their inability to bear the financial burden of the EWS quota. The second came from the scholars and activists, who analysed the draft of the RtE Act. The draft was critiqued and opposed for restricting (in a ‘strategic’ manner) the ‘guarantee’ that the constitutional framework would have otherwise provided (Sadgopal, 2010). Some also debated the ‘compulsoriness’ of the ‘right’ (Singh, 2009; Sood, 2012).

It was a time when the State was highlighting (or celebrating) the near achievement of universal elementary education (UEE) through its centrally sponsored scheme. In particular, the enhancement in enrolment of children from Dalit and other marginalised social groups was being underscored, as if the problem was on the verge of being resolved. However, some aspects looked confusing when one closely examined the data provided by the same State agencies. This was particularly so when the dropout rates of SC and ST children were considered. In 2007-08, at the national level, 68.42% of SC children and 76.85% of ST children (who enrolled at school) dropped out by the end of class ten (MHRD, 2008, D 102-103). In the particular case of Delhi, the dropout rate of SC children from class one to ten was 61.4%. It was higher in the case of girls (65.05%).

Further, amidst these talks about the achievement of the UEE, some non-governmental agencies (Pratham, 2009; PROBE team, 2011) were highlighting the poor quality of education in the government (primary) schools, particularly in relation to teaching. They also noted that the gaps between school enrolment and attendance were considerable. In these contradictions, the ideas of low cost schooling, the voucher system, school choice, Public Private Partnership (PPP) and the debates on the EWS quota, were also floating. These were contextualised in the much ‘talked

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1 Society for Un-aided Private Schools of Rajasthan versus Union of India & Anr [WP 95 of 2010]
about’ withdrawal of the low income-group parents from the State schools (Tooley, 2009). Though not contradictory, this looked somewhat paradoxical when seen with the State’s ‘obligation’ to provide quality education for all and the concern for the inclusion of the marginalised social groups (Dalits, girls and minorities) in schools.

These fluxes, among many other things, highlighted the functions that the schools perform (or are expected to perform) and the roles they assume in a society. In that, the identity of schools as social institutions, and not just as those which discharge a pedagogic function (Beteille, 2005), became all the more prominent. It also came across that, in a way, the pedagogic and academic agenda of the school revolve around its identity and capacities as a social institution; and that, its social functions are much more contested even when the debates appear to concern only the pedagogic aspect. Further, the nature of the debates (and standpoints), that arose around the RtE, indicated how the politics in education (particularly where it concerned the interests of the marginalised) was developing in the contemporary social, political and jurisprudential scene in India. It was in these contexts that I was beginning this inquiry and sought to explore how the children from a marginalised social group are placed in a public school context and how they experienced the institution. In some way, as I thought about the ideas of rights, entitlements and ‘inclusion’ of the marginalised, the reflection on exclusion formed the centrepiece of thinking. The literature that I surveyed facilitated such thinking and enabled in situating and formulating the problem.

1.2. Situating the problem

The idea of this study emerged from a familiarity with the literature, which may be organised under three categories. One of these categories deals with questions pertaining to ‘school knowledge’ and the purposes that the schools come to serve. While ‘institutional knowledge’ (an aspect of the topic of the thesis) has a somewhat different connotation, I arrived at it only as I became familiar with the discourse on school knowledge. The second category relates to the existing research studies on the

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2 Although, school knowledge/official knowledge and institutional knowledge are sometimes used interchangeably, there is a difference in the ideas that they communicate. School knowledge generates an ethos
experience of social exclusion in the school context, with a focus on Dalit children. The third category comprises of autobiographical narratives of Dalit authors, specifically three selected works that lay a special emphasis on school experiences and make problematic the concept of school and the nature of the institutional knowledge and experiences. In the following pages I give a brief account of these works to explain how I positioned my inquiry in relation to them.

1.2.1. School knowledge and functions of school

The idea of this study and the formulation of the problem, as the title may suggest, was situated in the area of sociology of education – particularly where it concerns questions about knowledge, ‘culture’ and representation. The familiarity with literature in this area led to the initial conception of the problem. The works that were particularly significant in this process were that of Kumar (1991, 1992) and Apple (1993). The central thesis of these works revolves around the political character of official knowledge and education. How the worthiness and legitimacy of school knowledge are shaped is the subject of concern in both these works. Kumar outlines the questions pertaining to school curriculum by exploring – What is worth teaching? How should it be taught? How are the opportunities for education distributed? How is school education (in India) socio-historically shaped?

Apple considers similar questions (from a different vantage point though) as he presents educational policy and practice as political acts resulting from struggles by powerful groups and social movements, “to make their knowledge legitimate and increase their power in the larger arena” (p. 10). While these works engage with the questions pertaining to the character of official knowledge, they also reflect on the nature of school as a socio-political institution. In that, despite raising critical questions on institutional politics – including what is taught at school and how, these works maintain a critical faith in schools. More particularly, Apple’s (2009a, 2009b) works argue that the schools could potentially be used as spaces for critical/subversive

that relates to the political economy of knowledge and cultural hegemony, whereas institutional knowledge locates a ‘problem’ in the idea of institutionalisation as well (an aspect that I will address later). School knowledge has come to have a lucid association with the curriculum studies, while the latter is not very frequently encountered in the literature.
and democratic practice, particularly because they have performed other ideological functions as well.  

The form of analysis where ‘school knowledge’ came under a scrutiny of sociologists studying how the social asymmetries are maintained through schooling, began with the works of Manheim (1970). It became popular through the work of Young (1971) and evolved in seminal theories like that of ‘classification’ and ‘framing’ (Bernstein, 1971), and those explicating the role of school relations in the reproduction of societal structures (Bourdieu, 1990). ‘New sociology of education’, as these works were popularly referred to, brought about an intersection between the sociology of education and sociology of knowledge, and examined the ‘received’ view or the ‘given’ nature of the social reality that gets represented in the school processes, relationships and knowledge. The central premise (that brought about this convergence) was that the reality is socially constructed and that knowledge must always be knowledge from a certain position (Berger and Luckman, 1966, p. 22). Such developments in the area of sociology of education have been analysed by scholars; and though well established, the basic tenets of such thinking have been critiqued particularly for a ‘relativist’ position on knowledge. In fact, Young (2008), in a later work, himself revisits and reformulates his earlier position by presenting what he calls a ‘social realist’ account of knowledge.

While probing on these lines in the area of sociology of education, I was introduced to ethnographic studies based in schools that explored the ‘experiences’ of the schoolchildren in the context of the institutional relationships. Willis’s (1977) work was prominent among those that I explored. The question that his work pursues – ‘how working class children get working class jobs?’ – defined the problem of class and its reproduction in a way that suggested that working class boys do not simply take up the falling curve where the better-off kids leave off (p. 1). Studying the ‘counter-school culture’ among twelve schoolboys (‘lads’), Willis highlighted the fact

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3 Apple (2009a) states that a common curriculum should be built and not imposed and that schools are significant institutions and should stay in the society if transformation and ‘repositioning’ are to be brought about. Sadgopal (2006) also in some manner argues in a similar paradigm, where despite existing problems schools are considered to be institutions of crucial significance in society and a means of education.

4 Whitty (1985) and Flinders (2009)
that class culture comprises of experiences and relationships that structure particular ‘choices’. Although I engaged with this work only after I began visiting the field, it helped in refining several aspects of the study, particularly the method and the manner in which I had articulated the questions. However, at many points it appeared that the meanings and ‘choices’ about schooling were operating differently in the context that I was studying – particularly as I could not apply a single frame to make sense of the ‘reality’ that I was observing.

Another school-ethnography, Chapman (2007), that studied the cultural context of a desegregated school in America, was specifically helpful in thinking about the inquiry. Using the critical race theory frame, the study problematised the multicultural classroom environments in urban districts with a focus on teacher-student relationships and students’ ‘willingness’ to engage in classroom activities. For me, this work underlined the meaning of ‘ethnographic’ methods and the ethos that a researcher would need to construct while exploring school relations through the lens of race/class/gender or caste. Chapman called his work a ‘critical ethnography’ given the frame in which he situated the work. I do not intend to communicate that the work I did was a ‘critical ethnography’. However, it seems relevant to share that his approach made me reflect on how the research (or probably the act of research in general) would contribute to the context that I was studying.

Such explorations (in the area of sociology of education) helped in making problematic the taken-for-granted or ‘received’ view of school knowledge, in understanding one way of examining the relation between the socio-political structure and the school, and in thinking about the purposes that schools serve. Such engagement also helped me in broadening the understanding of school knowledge beyond the text and the official curriculum, and situating it in social relationships, attitudes and dispositions, educational choices and willingness. Admittedly, while I engaged in fieldwork, I also realised the potential bias of this frame of thought. Matthews’s (1981) idea that ideology is a closed system, which has all answers and only looks for questions, was exemplified in such experiences. This experience
enabled me to critically examine my own subjective and ideological positions during the work.

1.2.2. Exclusion in the educational context: Positioning the frame

Education and exclusion is among the better-explored areas in the Indian context, where there are quantitative as well as qualitative researches that focus on children from the marginalised social groups. However, here I only present the works that enabled me in understanding the situation in the field and gave a direction to thinking. The purpose is not of reviewing the relevant literature but of situating the work that I did.

The studies like PROBE (1999, 2011) and Jha and Jhingran (2002) explained the situation of elementary education in the villages in selected Indian states (with the latter specifically focusing on the marginalised groups). They also brought to the fore a general perception among the teachers (and the others) that the ‘poor’ are uninterested in or lack a ‘willingness’ for ‘educating’ their children. On the one hand, both the reports contradicted this perception, indicating an increased demand for education from the disadvantaged families. On the other they made visible the attitude of the teachers towards the marginalised. However, Jha and Jhingran indicated ‘diversity’ in the responses or willingness of Dalit parents and children towards schooling. They explained this by suggesting a correlation between poverty and social marginalisation that aggravated the educational deprivations among the Dalits. While doing so, they laid emphasis on child labour as a reason for non-enrolment or dropout, particularly in the survey villages that had a feudal ethos.

However, PROBE signposted that child labour may not necessarily keep the children away from school. The study found that in a fairly large proportion of families where the children were engaged in assisting their parents, the nature of the work was such that it wouldn’t necessarily be mutually exclusive with, or lead to a decision against, schooling (p. 28, p. 60). In a more nuanced fashion PROBE unpacked the perception that (among the marginalised social groups) child labour is the major reason for non-enrolment or dropout, and suggested a need to re-inquire into the nature of child
labour and its relation with education. In fact, this also indicated a need to inquire into what constituted the ‘choice’, decision or willingness to go to school.

In this respect, PROBE also talked about the stark differences between the caste profiles of the teachers and the children at the State schools (in the survey villages), which shed light on the socio-political-cultural context of elementary schooling in the country (p. 54). In this specific context, the works of Majumdar (2004), Ramachandran, Pal and Jain (2005) and Ramachandran (2012) further elaborated the practice of what may be called the ‘social distances’ at schools. These works investigated or highlighted the composition of the population that attended government schools and how ‘distanced’ the teacher cadre was from this group in terms of caste and class. Ramachandran et al. (2005) stated that it is now “officially accepted” that a majority of children attending government schools are from very poor families – mainly from socially disadvantaged sections and SC and ST communities (p. 11). On the one hand, this highlighted the complexity of the school-classroom contexts and the relationship between teachers and children, and indicated the increased vulnerability of Dalit and Adivasi groups in the institution. On the other hand, it also reaffirmed the poor quality of schooling that is accessible to these social groups and the lack of ‘motivation’ among the schoolteachers to teach. Majumdar’s study, based on the mapping of caste distinctions between teachers and children in government and private schools, also explored the ‘public image’ or the popular perception about the State schools. The picture that she presents appeared like that of ‘streaming’\(^5\) of the disadvantaged social groups in particular kinds of systems, which further constituted or shaped their vulnerability.

Nambissan (2009) and Subrahmanian (2005) further explicated such vulnerability. Subrahmanian\(^6\) highlighted how the teacher’s perception about the educability of the children from Dalit and Adivasi groups becomes an impediment in meeting the demand for education from the social groups. Similarly, Nambissan drawing from her

\(^5\) Keddie (1971).
\(^6\) In this article she draws from and extends an earlier work on Dalit and Adivasi children in schools (Balagopalan and Subrahmanian, 2003).
previous works, engaged in an analysis of various ways in which discrimination is practised and experienced in schools in a rural context. She also brought to the fore the need for a systematic attention to institutionalised response, in the absence of which measures for inclusion would not address the situation of inequity and exclusion. While these works clarified several aspects pertaining to exclusion at school, they also led me towards a cognitive or an intuitive disequilibrium.

As I explored the works (except the first two reports) I felt that the explicit presentation of ‘caste’, though explaining exclusion in meaningful ways, made ‘Dalit’ appear like a neat or clearly constituted category – as if the experiences of Dalit children were clearly distinct and identifiable (vis-à-vis the others in the same context). They also indicated that Dalit children and parents could very specifically articulate, categorise and ‘talk’ about their experiences of caste based marginalisation. Also, the manner in which the inquiries were conducted, involved identifying the Dalit children, and interacting with them (and their parents in some cases) around specific questions pertaining to caste experiences. Although these inquiries have maintained the spirit of critical research and have contributed to the understanding of exclusion in their own ways, they did not seem to bring to the fore the subtle fashion in which everyday experiences of marginalisation are constituted. This was also because the studies purposefully followed a qualitative survey mode with an intention of interacting with the specific group in focus.

A commonality between all these works was that they were based in rural settings in India. Although their analysis was useful in understanding marginalisation and education, the narrations from the field did not appear to explain urban situations – where talking about ‘caste’ and encountering its practice in overt manifest forms was not usual or common (inasmuch as I understood from observations at schools before

7 Nambissan (1996, 2006)
8 For instance, Nambissan (2009) says, “…respondents were asked whether the life and work of Ambedkar was discussed in school. Most respondents said that they had not hitherto given much thought to the issue of whether Scheduled Castes or their own communities were absent or present in ‘official school knowledge’. However when urged to look back, some of them felt that it is rare for the text lesson to highlight, or the teacher to draw attention to Scheduled Castes, their lives or leaders. Reflecting on this a few went on to say that if they were taught about a leader, such as Ambedkar, and if his life and achievements were discussed in class, it could inspire Dalit students as well as raise their self-image” (p. 10).
9 With exception to Subrahmanian (2005) that also included in its sample a few urban locations.
the research began). Here I do not wish to indicate that rural settings are more discriminatory as compared to the urban contexts. Instead, (without engaging in a comparison) I intend to highlight the character of exclusion and marginalisation – which assumes forms that are more unnoticeable than manifest – in urban spaces. Such character of exclusion in urban spaces is explored in the discourse in the area of sociology of cities and/or urban geography\textsuperscript{10}. Furthermore, these ideas about the nature of exclusion (with respect to Dalit experience) were affirmed as I surveyed the genesis and contours of ‘Dalit’ as a concept. It emerged that the term is neither very neatly defined nor universally agreed upon. In the literature, while on the one hand one finds the category being applied in the context of the ex-untouchables, on the other there are broader interpretations of it to include converted minorities, tribals and even women (Das, 2004a). ‘Who comprises or qualifies as a Dalit’ in an urban context is even more debated (Das, 2004a).

Thus, diverging from the works on exclusion and education that I surveyed, I attempted to situate my work in everyday situations – where I did not group or select children based on their caste profiles, nor did I specifically began with talking about caste or Dalit experience. Instead, I attempted to engage in the context as it were. To a considerable extent, the Dalit autobiographical narratives aided this process of making sense of how Dalithood is constituted – and the varied ways in which it is articulated or experienced. The sections in the autobiographies where the authors narrated their experiences in the village and urban schools, were specifically insightful in this regard. Although not usually referred to in educational research, the autobiographies enabled me in understanding the experiences of children from Dalit communities at school. In fact, these works facilitated a reflection on the meaning of the Dalit ‘community’.

1.2.3. Experiencing exclusion

The ‘Dalit autobiographical movement’ has had a significant influence on the Marathi and Hindi literary tradition. This is despite the fact that its primary agenda was not

\textsuperscript{10} While exploring ‘geographies of exclusion’, Sibley (1995, p. xiv) highlights how the urban spaces are shaped and how they foster exclusion/marginalisation in unnoticeable ways. A similar ethos comes across through works like that of (Legates and Stout, 2003).
‘literary’. The ‘movement’ has had a clear political intention of intervening in the social circumstances of the Dalits. For this reason (though debatable) the narratives are seen as assertions of a community or a social group. In fact, the Dalit autobiographies are analysed not as the life accounts of individuals, but as an expression or a voice of a community, articulated by an individual (where ‘I’ and ‘we’ are intertwined in a complex of shared experiences) (Kumar, 2010). In this sense, the movement is also seen as an attempt towards (or a calling for) a consolidation of the Dalits. Working in a concerted fashion (at least on the matter of exclusion) the literature has posed a challenge to the narratives of ‘justice’ and ‘equality’ in the post reservation context in the independent India. In this process these works also point out towards the ‘illusion’ of ‘modernity’ that the mainstream institutions and their environments create – schools being prominent among them. Across the autobiographical accounts one finds that apart from emphasising the role that the tradition of caste continues to play in the Indian social scene, the authors present their experiences of exclusion in the ‘modern’ institutions of the State.

I surveyed several Dalit autobiographies but more closely engaged with the works of Valmiki (1992), Morey (2001) and Pawar (1980), which developed an interest in understanding Dalit experience in the school context. In these works, the schools and the process of institutional education assume the central place in the authors’ descriptions of the experience of exclusion during the formative years of life. The authors have narrated how the institution called school shaped their childhood and the course of their life. The authors have laid a special emphasis on how their families took the decision for schooling them, how it was negotiated in the schools and the village, and how the institutional experiences shaped their ideas about the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. While the authors felt that school education changed their lives economically and socially, it generated peculiar complications as well. The authors explicate the political character of the institution when they present how the social relations (with peers, teachers and the staff) at their schools were ‘organised’ to ensure that the historical ‘traditions’ are maintained.
All the three authors have stressed the role that their teachers played in this context. A comparison of Valmiki’s and Morey’s accounts of their experiences with their teachers brings out how exclusion and oppression may take various forms in the teacher-child dyad. For example, while Valmiki’s schoolteacher resorted to punishing, beating, abusing and silencing him, Morey found teachers who were ‘patronising’ in their ‘kindness’ and ‘generosity’ towards him. Other social relations, including those in the city schools and institutions, were also structured in this fashion. In fact, reading of the two authors’ works together may lead to understanding how exclusion is ‘experienced’ and ‘articulated’ differently by individuals and the shades that it may reflect. While, Valmiki’s narration clearly makes ‘caste’ problematic, Morey in a more subtle way creates a picture of how the economic conditions, the dispositions and the possibilities are culturally determined. While the former focuses on voicing the state of exclusion, the latter develops a context in which oppression is constituted.

Apparently, these writings may seem to narrate experiences of humiliation and exclusion only. Yet, a closer analysis brings out the questions implicit in these voices. For instance, Valmiki (1907/2007) raises critical questions on the character of institutional knowledge when he asks, “how come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word on our lives?” (p. 23), and also when he says “‘Ah, ye gram jeevan bhi kya’ (how wonderful village life is)... each word of the poem proved to be artificial and a lie.” (p. 39). Another form that such exclusion takes comes across through the work of Pawar, specifically where he delves into how the school experiences and the official curriculum made his own life and culture appear inferior, uncivilized and barbaric. This developed a feeling of guilt, shame and alienation, particularly as the education did not generate conditions through which he and others like him could find an acceptance in the kind of lives that schools (and other institutions of education) represented or made them aspire for. Therefore, the

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11 This comes across in Pawar’s (1980) narrative, where he says:

But one thing became clear. Because of my increasing familiarity with the bookish world, day by day I continued to part away from my experiences of my basti... people of Maharwada were living lives of animals. Their lives also had a resolute philosophy. But I was developing a hatred for them. On the other side those whose lives appeared to be ideal, were not ready to accommodate me. I was encircled amidst a mysterious puzzle like this. (p. 43)
author explained how formal institutional education, though economically empowering, made him feel emotionally ‘stranded’.

These descriptions indicated how the institutional experiences followed a ‘selective tradition’. Instead of simply qualifying educational exclusion as a problem of access, poverty and ‘willingness’, these narratives located it in the politics of such exclusive institutional ethos. The authors also highlighted how the nature of this experience differed in the urban context. They indicate (and at places state) that discrimination/untouchability rarely took manifest forms in the city schools. It came across through these accounts that for the authors the migration from villages to bigger centres rendered explicit discrimination weaker12. However, marginalisation took subtle forms. Pawar (1980) in his work portrays how the infirmities within the civil society permeated with caste and class distinctions specifically in the urban centres. In a similar sense, Chauhan (2002) called caste a bramharakshasa that followed him like his shadow wherever he went.

This expression can be better appreciated when one considers the fact that the ‘autobiographical movement’ itself started when an urban educated class of Dalit thinkers began articulating their voices and reflected on their experiences in the ‘modern’ contexts. Although in large measures the movement (specifically in Hindi) that spurted in the 1980’s was driven by a confluence of political and literary developments of the times, in some ways it was also an outcome of forty years of reservations which had created a Dalit middle class who could assume the roles of authors and readers of this new literature. In this, the feeling that even a positioning in the urban middle class did not convert into emancipation from the implications of caste was central (Beth, 2007). In the three works that I explored, the authors touched upon their feeling of being marginalised even in the urban centres, but did not explore or explain it (at least as intensely as they presented their experiences in the villages).

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12Pawar (1980) shared how his upper caste friends in a taluka stole his non-vegetarian lunch, but made sure that he did not stay hungry and got their vegetarian lunch. He writes:

The difference between my village and the taluka immediately became clear. These upper caste friends maintained a relationship of equality with me...I could move around anywhere in their houses freely...on top of this even after my friends came to know about this they continued eating. I realised this later. (p. 69).
It was in these processes that I developed an interest in understanding Dalit experience in the urban context. The works lead me to think about how the politics of official institutions and knowledge functions, the manner in which it leads to exclusion, and the form in which it gets articulated by those who experience it. However, refinement and reformulation in these concerns and interests continued as the research work progressed.

1.3. Dilemmas and naiveties
It would be relevant to state that at the stage when the work was conceptualised, I felt a sense of direction. However, this feeling coexisted with a nebulousness in the thoughts and ideas, which increased with the progress in the fieldwork. The naivety in the formulation of the problem (and the title) also started coming to the fore. In fact, I continued to reflect on the appropriateness and better alternatives to the title of the thesis (even as I concluded the thesis). This was particularly so when at several critical junctures the observations did not appear to fit into the conceptual schemes that the literature provided. For example, the literature made explicit the fashion in which exclusion works inside the classrooms or in the formal curricular interactions between the teachers and children, but the situation that I observed at schools didn’t seem to (at least apparently) indicate the same.

In this process, one of the central concepts in this work, ‘institutional knowledge’, had to be rearticulated to some extent because I was studying a school context where there was an absence of ‘formal’ teaching-learning. The situation at the school appeared to be much more ‘complicated’ or nuanced with respect to what ‘knowledge’ was institutionalised, or being constructed and transacted there, than how I had initially conceptualised or imagined (despite having been familiar with the relevant body of literature). What comprises ‘institutional knowledge’, what would exclusion mean, how is it played-out in the educational context and in children’s meaning-making, and how does institutional politics gets defined in such ethos, emerged as questions. ‘Community’ was another aspect in the study that demanded rethinking, given the character of urban spaces and the particular setting I was researching.
Similarly, as stated earlier, the Dalit identity in itself came-across as a complicated conceptual category and the literature in education apparently did not enable me to make-sense of the situation. I continued to grapple to understand how the Dalit experience is constituted, specifically at the field site where poverty was ‘intertwined’ with or embedded in the social identity of the community living there. This experience further led me to explore areas like urban sociology, and development and modernity, to make sense of education, marginalisation and urban life. In search for frames to understand these aspects, I was introduced to the works like that of Nandy (2010), Pathak (1998), Legates and Stout (2003), and of Said (1978). Although I do not delve in these works in this thesis in depth, they provided a frame to clarify my own positions and ways of thinking/making-sense. The works of Sen (2000) and Kabeer (2000) were also useful in understanding the contours of the concept of ‘social exclusion’.

Further, the above questions and confusions did not emerge at one go. These and similar problems were a part of the process of researching, in which the existing literature at times appeared apt while at other times looked insufficient. Even these notions and the feeling that literature is ‘insufficient or apt’ underwent a change as I engaged further in seeking meanings in the field and theory. It was in a gradual and a two-way (or a messy) engagement that I was able to make sense of how literature, theory and practice are related and how they guide a research. Much more than other things, I intend to emphasise here that neither a pre-determined kind of framework nor pre-conceived categories for analysis, appeared to guide the inquiry as I engaged in the field. Instead, these continued to evolve or unfold (or maybe were fine-tuned) as the field engagement deepened. The problematic of executing of a pre-designed research in a qualitative frame came forth with this experience, and so did the idea that research is not a technical exercise. I would further describe this process in the chapter pertaining to the method and fieldwork.

The process in which this inquiry developed not only provided a space to reflect on the idea of research in general, but also in making sense of research in education in

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13 I will explain this aspect in Chapter Three and Four
particular. This process of development was not prosaic and linear. Instead, it was messy and iterative. Writing and presenting an account of how this study was conducted and the ‘findings’ was challenging for these reasons. The organisation of this thesis does not therefore follow a chronological sequence and may not adequately represent the iterative process in which this study was shaped. However, I would be signposting these processes at relevant places. I will also make use of vignettes and annexure to facilitate this process. The section that follows describes the organisation of the thesis, with a focus on the chapter outlines and contents. The rationale for the organisation will be revisited in the end of Chapter Four.

1.4. Organisation of the thesis
This thesis is organised around a set of broad questions formulated in particular relation to the social group (the Dalit children in the urban ‘slum’) in focus: How is a State school situated in an urban slum context? How do the people living there perceive schooling and school? How does the everyday school practice look like? What roles does a teacher play as situated in the context? How are the children positioned in the school? What is the nature of the teacher-child-community relationship? How do these shape the children’s ideas and meaning-making about the self and the other? How (if at all) is ‘caste’ involved in this context and experiences? Through these, I attempt to inquire into the following question – 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?

Along with these the questions continued to ‘evolve’ (or become nuanced) as the field engagement deepened and transited from one phase to another, particularly in relation to the socio-spatial context where the fieldwork was situated. The spatial and conceptual category called ‘the urban slum’ (or rather the urban space/city as a whole) came to assume a significant place in the inquiry – as it appeared to contour the experiences/ lives that I was studying. For example, although the study was originally set out to focus on Dalit children, in the process of the fieldwork the caste identity in the urban slum itself became an aspect of inquiry, particularly in relation to how it is involved in experiencing schooling and social relationships as situated in the setting.
As the thesis unfolds, these questions will be highlighted at the relevant spaces. I will also signpost the process in which the questions became further nuanced and refined.

This thesis is organised into eight chapters, including an introduction and a concluding chapter. The chapters have been framed keeping in mind the questions/aspects in which this inquiry engaged in depth. It is patterned to communicate how I as a researcher would explain the understandings I draw from the work. The structure logically tapers as it progresses from the first chapter to the last. It begins with the broader framework of thoughts and perspectives in which the work is situated, then presents the methodological approach and fieldwork, and transits to introducing the field setting. The chapters that follow pursue the major categories of understandings from the field – beginning from the idea of school, then moving to the everyday school practice (with a focus on teacher-student-community relationship), and then converging in the experiences of the children. The style of writing assumes a subjective mode. Some sections, more specifically the chapters concerning the method and the introduction to the field, are written in an autobiographical form while others follow a more conventional style. An outline of the chapters is presented below.

The major thoughts and ideas around which the key concepts/concerns of this study are pegged are presented in Chapter Two of the thesis. It addresses three major concerns of this work – the politics of the relation between the State and the margins, the question of exclusion and the experience of marginalisation, and the context of institutionalised education and its character. This chapter begins with the thoughts and works of Ambedkar (1979) to draw the meaning of exclusion and experience. Following this, the chapter explores the relation of the State with its margin, to situate the understanding of the categories of exclusion, experience, the ‘institutional’, and the margins. I pursue this through the works of Veena Das (2010, 2004, 1989), particularly the ones where she has explored the State-citizen relation in the context of urban slums. In order to situate the ‘politics’ of institutional education and knowledge, the chapter then refers to Illich’s (1971) and Gandhi’s (1938) socio-philosophical scrutiny of ‘modern’ education (or the modern way of life itself) as situated in the
larger framework of their thoughts. This enables in positioning the broader questions that this study inquires in relation to the purposes that schools serve.

In Chapter Three, Method and fieldwork, I outline the methodological approach (or the approach to research) by sharing the manner in which it evolved, deepened and got refined. In doing so, I also locate myself as a researcher in relation to the process of inquiry and how this relation unfolded. I attempt to bring-out the dilemmas, the confusions and the experiences that I went through in the process of doing this study. Along with this I present the research design, selection of the field, an initial sketch of the field, the rapport and relationships, and the ‘techniques’ followed in this study. The intention is not only to describe ‘what I did’ but also to reflect on it retrospectively.

Chapter Four of this study, Understanding the field, revolves around the field. The purpose is to develop the context (or reconstruct the field ethos) in which the descriptions in the thesis may be understood. In a more subjective sense, this chapter attempts to explain the process in which my own ideas about the field were shaped in the interactions with the informants. This was central to the process in which I was oriented in the process of making sense of the social world from a standpoint of the people in the field. In this chapter, keeping in mind this experience, I present a description of the field and life of the people, and certain contextual ‘meanings’. Further, I describe the field from two perspectives – that of an outsider and an insider; not with a plain descriptive purpose, but with an idea to bring-out a picture of the standpoints about life in the social setting. In this mode the chapter presents how the margins that I explored were constituted spatially and socially in relation to the city.

It is crucial to note that from Chapter Five onwards the thesis begins to focus on the ‘school experience’. While on the one hand, the chapters (that follow) have been organised based on the prominent categories of observations, on the other it has been a challenging task to separate them from each other in a ‘coherent’ fashion. As a result, a reader may experience a certain degree of ‘messiness’ in the organisation of the data. However, the pattern of the organisation follows the logic of presenting all
those accounts at one place, which help in substantiating or building a theme. These themes include – idea of school, the school space and schoolteachers, and the children’s experiences and worldviews. I will further elaborate the rationale for the chapterisation at the end of Chapter Four.

Chapter Five, Idea of school, revolves round the everyday understanding about school and schooling, and the aspirations/expectations people (parents, children and teachers in the field) had from it. Though the chapter explores a broader context, the focus is on the concept of the ‘worth’ of schooling from the standpoint of the community, and on the functions that people saw schools performing in their lives. It is organised in three broad sections. The first section seeks to explore the narrative of the unwillingness of the community. It begins by introducing the manner in which I was introduced to this narrative while working with the various educational functionaries in the field. The second section locates the school in the community, and presents some ways in which the people negotiated with the various institutional demands. The third section attempts to briefly outline some prominent expectations of the community from the school that are shaped by the ‘traditions’ associated with the institution. The section also presents the children’s aspirations from school education and how their ‘hopes’ were framed in the institution.

Chapter Six, The teachers and the school space: Work, relations and life, revolves around the school as a workspace – with a specific focus on the roles that the teachers played there. It explores how the teachers are situated in the institutional space and how they construct or shape it. While on the one hand the focus is on the teacher, on the other the chapter constantly draws from the interactions of the teachers with the other actors (the schoolchildren, the parents and the State officials) in the school context. The aim is to describe the relational ethos or culture of the school, in framing which the teachers appeared to be playing the most prominent role. In doing so, the descriptions touch upon some aspects of the lives of the schoolchildren and their parents. Through this the chapter examines the variety of roles that the teachers assumed and develops a picture of the work ethos of the school – while delving into how the teachers visualised themselves and their position in relation to the work they
did. In this process it attempts to make sense of the nature of the agency that the teachers attributed (or attribute) to themselves, and how their predicaments were (or are) constituted and experienced.

Chapter Seven, Experiences of the children: Meanings and worldviews, presents the work with children that was spread over the entire period of fieldwork. It 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. 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 (based on Dalit autobiographies and some other cases) 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 they present some select accounts from the fieldwork with a group of children working as ‘ragpickers’. The purpose is to introduce the children’s experiences of a particular kind of work. The description tries to develop a picture of the social world that emerges in this experience.

It is relevant to note that ‘Dalit experience’ is spread across all the sections of the work and is brought together in Chapters seven and Eight. The thesis concludes by tying up the broad understandings that I draw from the work. The final section delves into the nature of the urban setting in which the inquiry was located and the dynamics of identity and anonymity that I perceived as operating there. It reflects on the role of the school in the margins, and the varied stakes that shaped the practice at the school, while highlighting the gaps in the findings and the ideas that have remained tentative.