Chapter Three:
Method and Fieldwork

In this chapter I attempt to outline not only the method and the fieldwork, but also to locate myself as a researcher in relation to the process of research. In pursuit of this objective, I will present how I began the work, the approach to research, the selection of the field, an initial sketch of the field, rapport and relationships, and the ways through which I ‘collected data’. Along with this, I will attempt to bring out the dilemmas, confusions and experiences that I went through during this study, and some aspects of how I engaged in and learnt from this process. The intention is not only to describe ‘what I did’ but also to make explicit the subjectivity inherent in the work.

3.1. Beginning the work: ‘Designing’ and conceptualising the inquiry

The study was designed within the tradition/conventions of ‘qualitative method’. This was not only because the nature of the problem that I was studying would have been better addressed in a qualitative mode, but also because the problem itself was articulated in a qualitative frame of understanding. It was based on a belief that understanding or inquiring into ‘experiences’ is central to making sense of marginalisation and exclusion, and that this would demand an immersion in the everyday life in the ‘field’. While thinking about the ‘method’ of the work, two questions that persisted were: How would I know the ‘real’? How would I know that the meanings that I make are ‘true’/ ‘correct’? These questions may not be fully answerable, and probably most qualitative researchers would encounter them. However, in the process of doing research they were central to propelling the inquiry; they constantly motivated me to delve deeper. These questions brought out the meaning of ‘thick description’ and its position in social research. Retrospectively, these questions now appear to me as more naïve versions of the dilemmas that ‘social researchers’ (as researchers who engage in studying the social world attempting to systematically ‘unpack’ social ‘reality’) grapple with – What is ‘true’? What is ‘evidence’ or a pattern in the social world? What would be the nature of evidences or patterns when knowledge and production of knowledge appear to be inseparable from
questions of values and politics? And in that would these be ‘true’? (Pascale, 2011, p. 4).

While dealing with these questions, pragmatic constraints (particularly that of time and ‘opportunity’) also had to be kept in mind. It would not be wrong to say that nebulosity in the methodological framework and the broader questions about social inquiry in general, continued to persist during the course of the fieldwork. However, there was a relative clarity regarding the ‘techniques’ that I would essentially follow for executing the inquiry. Yet, I learnt their methodological spirit and substance only when I engaged in the work. In these processes, the method and techniques evolved iteratively through interactions between the theory that I referred to and my deepening engagement with the field.

In many ways, the process of inquiry made it necessary to seek a balance between the broader questions about social inquiry and the pragmatic constraints, which I thought was in itself an essential experience in learning to research in a qualitative tradition. As Pascale (2011, p. 23) puts it,

All research is anchored to basic beliefs about how the world exists. For example, to what extent is the world objectively real? Subjectively constructed? What is the relationship of the unconscious to social life? The answers to these, and other ontological questions, constitute the foundations of social inquiry. Yet dominant social science protocols generally direct researchers away from such philosophical pursuits and towards more pragmatic concerns of systematic data collection – as if data exist independently and need only to be collected properly.

It was in these negotiations between the pragmatic and the philosophical that the method of this study evolved. However, the pragmatic and the philosophical were not neatly separable.

What would the fieldwork of this study be like? How much work would it involve? What would I observe? How would I ‘select’ data? What would constitute data? Where should I start from? How would I talk to people? Who should I talk to? Would
people engage with me? How do I begin data collection and note taking? How would I know I have enough data? All these and many more questions persisted until the initial phase of work in the field. While in the beginning these sounded like pragmatic doubts, as the work intensified I realised how these questions relate to the manner in which I perceive the social world and the mode in which I inquire. These questions generated anxiety and fear of a lack of quality to begin with. The fact that I wasn’t formally trained in sociological methods was a greater source of self-doubt and it continues to be so, particularly when I consider the prosaicness that the sociological researches convey in the context of method.

As Srinivas (2002, p. 28) says, “Anthropologists usually write reports which are impersonal…the reports convey a sense of objectivity which they do not, and in my opinion, ought not to have”, the works that I had surveyed presented a clear (and linear) picture of the process of fieldwork (Sarangapani, 1997; Thapan, 2006; Chapman, 2007). While I read through these and similar works, it appeared as if the field developments were very rationally designed, delimited clearly and carefully, and were executed in the way they had been planned. Whereas, except for the major questions – which underwent refinement during the study – most of the aspects of ‘method’ were not very clear in my mind until I progressed through the initial phase of the work. If I think retrospectively on what I had planned while writing the proposal, it emerges that except for the field and the nature of the inquiry, almost every aspect of what was proposed as the ‘research design’, became more fleshed-out, nuanced and logical as I struggled to enter the field and engaged in the process of research. The nature of the experiences that I had while researching also made me realise what ‘messiness’ in the context of a qualitative inquiry may mean and how it constructs the ‘systematicness’ of such inquiries. Qualitative researchers (like Whyte 1943; Geertz, 1973; Srinivas, 1976; Law, 2004) have presented this character of qualitative inquiries. However, what they intended to communicate in itself came across only when I myself underwent such an experience.

Admittedly, what a research design means or what is involved in ‘designing’ a research and the complexity of the process of research became meaningful only as I
immersed in the field. At the same time, I also came to understand how every qualitative researcher’s experiences would lead to a different meaning making in the context of these categories. In this light, it would not be wrong to say that this doctoral work was not as much a process of researching as it was a process of learning to research a problem. It explained and made meaningful for me the debates on the methods, the questions pertaining to subjectivity, validity, generalizability and the depth, along with underlining a researcher’s location in this process. This is not to say that the study followed an ‘anything goes’ mode, rather, it is to indicate that designing a method and executing it in a linear fashion in itself appeared problematic when the work for the study began. In the following pages, I attempt to present the research ‘design’ of this study or rather the approach to the inquiry, while highlighting this experience.

Originally, I had sought to design the study in an ethnographic frame. The research proposal that I had developed, presented the idea of locating the work in an urban slum and at a school, where I could focus on children both in the school and in the community. I had proposed participant-observation, conversations, discussions and story-completion/construction as techniques of inquiry. When I look back, it comes across that although there wasn’t an explicit ‘divergence’ in what I did, there is a realisation that there was naivety, tentativeness and lack of articulation in what I had proposed. The ‘design’ that I had proposed continued to become more nuanced and detailed as I progressed through the work.

As I began to think about the categories of observations and the theoretical framework, it appeared that some initial fieldwork would be essential. This initial inquiry in itself propelled the research, wherein the serendipity and the spontaneity implicit in the nature of the inquiry emerged. And so did the idea of how a field may guide a research and the method, rather than a predesigned model guiding the fieldwork. In these processes, the categories for inquiry emerged and continued to get

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1 While explaining such character of social inquiry, Law (2004) states, “… what happens when social science tries to describe things that are complex, diffuse and messy… it tends to make a mess of it. This is because simple and clear descriptions don’t work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent. The very attempt to be clear and simply increases the mess” (p. 2).
refined until the middle phases of the work. Somewhere after the initial three months, the work became rigorous and focussed – which became evident through the nature of field-notes that were being maintained.

3.2. Selecting the field
As described earlier (in Chapter 2), the idea of this study emerged from the reading of literature, some brief discussions with ‘out-of-school’ children, and the reading of autobiographical narratives of Dalit authors. In the light of these interactions the topic was framed as ‘politics of institutional knowledge and exclusion’. The title and these initial pursuits led to a relatively clear idea regarding where the fieldwork was to be situated. Since the aim was to research with the people (particularly the children) who comprise the margins of the urban social set-up, the nature of the site where the work would be located was relatively clear. I had thought of locating the work at an urban slum where I could understand the people’s perspective about institutional education and knowledge, engage with children (those who work and those who don’t; those who attend school and those who do not), and become familiar with the aspirations with which the people sent their children to school. In this process I wanted to understand how they relate to their social experiences. A part of the work was to be situated in a government school in the neighbourhood of the selected locality, so as to understand the institutional practices and how they interact with and shape children’s experiences. Although these things happened in due course, they didn’t happen neatly. There were several situations of confusion, phases of flux, difficulty in decision making and changes – some of which will come across in the following sections of the chapter.

3.2.1. The rural-urban dilemma
Although the work was conceptualised based on observations made and questions framed in the context of urban life, whether to locate the work at a rural or an urban centre emerged as a confusion. On several occasions (particularly involving informal interactions with peers), a need to think about the rural-urban setting emerged. Peers with whom I interacted opined that it would be more plausible to focus on a rural setting wherein it would become more relevant to study educational experiences of
children from Dalit communities from the standpoint of the autobiographical narratives I was reading. While reflecting on these questions, I realized that there were several aspects of the study which I would have to think through while I make this choice. I wondered whether the choice that I had made was founded only on initial thoughts, or if it had a meaning in itself.

Thinking through this, the process of exploring literature which could contextualise the category of ‘exclusion’ began. A survey of the literature indicated that although there were several qualitative works in the area in rural contexts (as mentioned in Chapter 1), I could trace fewer works that explored Dalit experience in urban spaces. There were several writings and research studies that explained ‘caste’ in the rural context (notable among them being Srinivas, 1976; Dubey, 1968), and those which explored the relation between experience of caste based exclusion and education (Jenkins and Barr, 2006; Nambissan, 2009; Krishna, 2012, and the like). However, more focussed and experiential account of schooling, caste and childhood emerged from the Dalit autobiographical literature (as described in Chapter 2). These autobiographies also indicated a need to explore urban life in connection with caste. While these works very explicitly narrated the experience of caste in the rural context, the experience of exclusion (which the authors implicitly felt and noted) did not come across very clearly in the context of urban lives. The authors highlighted (though not explained in-depth) that a migration from a rural set-up and an ‘earned’ affiliation to an urban educated middle-class did not convert into emancipation from caste². Although, not elucidated, these further highlighted some peculiarities of urban life which did not match the political assertion of urban educated environments being (or evolving as) more egalitarian and equal or ‘modern’ than the rural.

In a sense, if one reads the Dalit autobiographies (particularly Valmiki, 1997; and Chauhan, 2002) in the context of their everyday experiences in cities, they appear to be attempting to make problematic the narrative of ‘development’ and equality. Along these lines, the work of Das (2010) further strengthened the need to explore urban

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² The same may not apply to an urban slum context but these narratives generated questions about nature and forms of exclusion in urban spaces as a whole.
spaces, particularly in the context of State and citizenship relationship. Furthermore, works like that of Antony and Maheshwaran (2001) and Stalin (2007), highlighted the case for inquiring in the character of caste in an urban context.

In this context, the idea based on which I intended to situate the work in an urban context was refined and was articulated in the form of a rationale. What became clearer through this pursuit was the social group with which I would engage during this study. As a student of education, to me it appeared critical to engage with people who experience exclusion in an urban space. This became important in the context where the State system of education is being geared up to implement an Act guaranteeing the right to education, through which apparently (or debatably) the marginalised can claim access to State schools. This is happening at a time when inequalities among the institutions are becoming more pronounced in terms of who accesses which schools, particularly in urban spaces where a variety of layers in all kinds of schooling are visible.

3.2.2. Selecting the site and entering the field

The selection of the site for fieldwork took much more time than I expected. It was also because I had to work in several situations: with people in the community, children in school and outside, and teachers and parents of schoolchildren. The work had to be thus situated at ‘multiple-sites’ (even within a locality) – the community, the school, and the workplace of children. Working in a setting where I could engage with families and children who were out of school demanded that I explore the demographic profiles of various disadvantaged locations in Delhi, including JJ colonies, resettlement colonies, and unauthorised habitations. The records, which could describe the demographic data that I was looking for, were neither maintained by any agency nor were they available in a locality wise disaggregated form. Moreover, the data available was not comprehensive, and census records were 10 years old. An idea about this could only be developed through in-person visits and

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3 Anonymisation: Keeping in mind the implications that the thesis could have on the lives of the people living at the sites that were selected for the fieldwork, the names of the places, people and institutions have been changed to ensure confidentiality. However, the name of the city (Delhi) and some selected broader markers that were essential to communicate the ethos and develop a context in which the meanings could be situated, have been retained. This has been done in a manner that would not adversely implicate respondent confidentiality.
engagement. I had started visiting various JJ clusters and resettlement locations in Delhi for the purpose of being able to begin the fieldwork. Most of these visits were made with the help of friends and acquaintances who were residing or working near the locations. These visits began towards the end of April and continued during May 2010. Through these, I could observe the ways in which people were living. I also learnt how I ought to ‘behave’ or ‘be there’ during the visits, and about my identity and the impressions of class, caste, gender and age it bore. I also got a sense of some of the demographic features of the locations that I had visited, and these appeared to be much more meaningful than those which were available in the records (electoral records, city development plans, and data from earlier censuses). However, these visits brought a realization that such ‘visiting’ was not equivalent to ‘accessing’ the locations and the people. I was faced with questions like – What should I do while visiting? Why would people talk to me? Even if they do, what should I talk to them about and how? All these questions were converging into one broader category: At the site that I select for the fieldwork, how would I justify my presence to the people living there? I started thinking about and discussing the question of access to the sites, in a manner that would appear justified to the people living there and to me as well.

a. Approaching NGOs

It was here that it appeared that approaching the insiders or the NGOs working in these localities would not only enable understanding the demographic details but would also facilitate entering the field. In part, the fieldwork also had to be situated in a school. Therefore, a similar access to a neighbourhood school was also needed. I was looking for NGOs which not only worked in the area of education but also visited the community regularly. Given these requirements, I approached some NGOs working at the sites where I thought it would be meaningful to situate the work, given a rough sketch of the demographic profile that I had developed based on my initial visits and interaction with people. I approached eight organisations of which only four responded. The NGOs that responded to my request were at advanced stages in their

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4 That is, what should I not do, how should I not begin a conversation, how not to dress-up, how do I find routes, how do I escape dogs, whom do I approach to find out something, and the like. Along with this I also got a sense of the physical and emotional strength such work would demand, and the nature of the problems that it may generate.
interventions. The work that they were doing was situated in the local community, but did not involve regular visits to the community or interactions beyond what they were doing. Furthermore, most of the organisations were assuming that I would make a few visits, talk to a few people and go away. Prolonged work did not sound reasonable to most.

With the help of some acquaintances, I was able to convince two NGOs, New Light Foundation (NLF)\(^5\) and PRAKRITI\(^6\), to facilitate my work. The former was working in several settings in the NCT of Delhi (and I wanted to work at one particular site) but the project coordinator suggested that I work at Sitapuri. PRAKRITI was situated in Rabindra Garden and was intervening in M-Block, Shiv Puri and K-Block – my independent visits led me to understand that these three sites in terms of demographic features were more suitable for this study (as I will be describing later). What was peculiar about PRAKRITI was that it was introduced to me as a ‘government NGO’ – which meant that it was relying on government funding to begin with.

Both these organisations were more receptive in facilitating a prolonged inquiry. This was particularly because I had approached these through the insiders working in the organisations and therefore there was a certain degree of ‘trust’ in the association – at least apparently (which later did not turn out to be the case with one of them). I worked at both the sites for a little more than a month, beginning from late June 2010. From this experience I was able to gather a sense of the profiles, particularly educational profiles, of the two sites. However, ‘caste’ profiles were still unclear or rather I should say that caste itself was a confusing category with regard to both the sites. People working in both the NGOs said that they had ‘no conclusive evidence’ about the caste profiles of the people. However, they could tell that the sites where they were intervening had many more people from the lower castes. How they (and

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5 NLF is a 25 year old organization and receives its grants from 3 non-governmental sources. It works primarily in the slums in East Delhi situated on the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh border. Its Sitapuri project was among the relatively newer ones (three years old) and its office was located in a Government Girls’ Senior Secondary School, in one section on the first floor.

6 PRAKRITI was a relatively new organisation (6 years old) and had started its community outreach project only a year back. It hadn’t been very successful, and was therefore finding difficulty in getting funds from the government. It relied completely on the government for its funds and hadn’t yet received its FCRA certificate and was thus unable to get funds from other sources. (I have written the name of the NGO in capital letters as the original name was an acronym which when expanded contained the phrase ‘urban rehabilitation’ in the title)
many others with whom I interacted with during the work) ‘intuitively’ made sense of the caste profiles, was a question that emerged in this context.

i. **Sitapuri**

Sitapuri was inhabited by people who were often referred to as *Bangladeshis*. However, most people living there called themselves migrants from Bengal who had migrated to the city – some claimed that people from their villages had come to the city during the 1947 partition. The reason for migration cited most often was search of better economic opportunities. There are roughly around 2000 households situated in the locality. Most of the houses were semi-permanent dwellings and some were *jhuggis*. Junk dealing appeared to be a major source of family income. As per the estimate of the NGO workers around 90 percent of the people from the colony depended (at least partly) on three local unauthorised *Kabadi* (junk-dealers) for their incomes. The NGO workers told me that almost all children worked as rag-pickers and were increasingly growing-up to become small peddling junk-dealers (*chote-kabadi*). Somewhere around 70% of the people living there practised Islam, and the remaining 30% were Dalit Hindus, though no official records were available.

During this one month, it also emerged that the NLF had a strong presence in the locality. The NGO had been intervening there through its workers from past three years and had set up two learning centres, which were called NFED daytime and NFED afternoon. The organisation was ‘mainstreaming’ several children from the community into State schools. Through a powerful door-to-door campaign, in which they employed members from the community as well, the organisation had convinced almost all parents to send their children to the NFED centres. The campaign appeared to be so strong that in the initial days I found that there was a complete match in what children, families and the NLF workers had to say about the organisation, education and schooling – even the expressions were the same.

The NLF workers did not see much meaning in my presence and always treated me as a ‘researcher’. They were forthcoming in sharing a variety of information ‘about the people’ with me, but they acted as filters in my interactions with the community. It
seemed that they were not comfortable with my engaging with the people on my own. They ‘warned’ me about the people and their criminal associations, addiction, lack (or absence) of cleanliness and disease, and most importantly about my safety as a woman. The NLF workers also ‘asked’ some senior people and women from the community to ‘explain to me’ the dangers involved in visiting the locality. In many ways, in due course, it appeared that much more than facilitating my fieldwork the NLF was acting as a gatekeeper who regulated my access to the people. It also came across as an authority over the people and their interactions with the ‘outside’ world.

The case with the NGO, PRAKRITI, was more ambivalent. In fact, its own status and the roles it would assume were themselves at a nascent stage. It had started working only a year back and had not been able to establish a relationship with the ‘community’ of concern. It was still in the process of mapping and generating a dependable database for the site through the newly appointed fieldworkers. PRAKRITI, after a lot of negotiation and ‘lobbying’ (as Ms. Kavita, the project incharge, told me), had found a space (a room and a porch) to run its centre in a Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya situated in an elite neighbourhood. Ms. Kavita was herself working as a guest teacher at the school (an offer she said she had made to the school “to place a foot in the premises”). In such situations, there was considerable chaos and a sense of urgency within the organisation to produce some tangible results to justify its presence. Although, it was difficult to locate myself amidst this, such a situation also prepared a space in the organisation where someone ‘new’ could have been accommodated. In this process, I began interacting with the people in the NGO and was able to understand and be a part of their daily work.

How I engaged with the NGO was more complicated and may not be meaningful to describe here. However, it is relevant to state that in this process the people at the centre (particularly Ms. Kavita) came to regard me as a human resource in their pursuits and began making use of my presence for their work. It appeared as though they had begun to count me as a community worker and were expecting me to perform some functions. They did not probe about my PhD, apart from what I had told them. In a way I also realised that in the phase they were passing through, as an
organisation, their stakes/identity would not have been challenged by my presence. Given this context, it was easier to engage with the people in the locality while working with PRAKRITI. It was because of this nature of association that I could develop deeper relationships with people and in due course find informants, at the M Block, K block and Shiv Puri, and could gradually begin working more independently. Since the centre was located in a government school, I also began accessing the school.

ii. **M-Block**

What was popularly identified as M-Block was relatively diverse with respect to the regional and religious profile, with a relatively mixed concentration of ‘migrants’ from Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. A study (GOI and CES, 2008, p. 8) based on a sample survey of the slums located in the zone and the NGO, both stated a high concentration of SC population (around 80%) in this setting. The occupational profiles were also mixed, with a variety of vocations being practiced by the people. It had adjoining areas of K-Block, Shiv Puri and Saraswati Park, which looked like one huge location without any physical separation that stretched over a little less than 2 kilometres and merged almost unrecognizably with another similar setting at the other end. It ran across one section of the Najafgarh drain, which had a special place in the life of the people living there (which I will describe in chapter 4). It comprised of 2 JJ colonies, 3 resettlement colonies, and several unauthorised squatters (including footpath dwellings). There were children who were not attending school or had dropped-out early. As per the NGO’s estimate there were around 5000 children in the area who were either not accessing the school or had dropped out.

After working at both the sites for about a month, it became clearer that it would be more meaningful to situate the work at M-Block, Shiv Puri and K-Block (though I continued to visit the other site as well to corroborate the data). Only after about a month I began to understand the demographic profiles of the areas in a manner in

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7 These included: daily wage workers in service sector organisations, contractual labour, blacksmiths, cobblers, carpenters, contractual MCD staff, plumbers and rag-pickers. A significant proportion of people were vendors and put-up stalls in the daily morning market (from 4 am to 8 am). Many women were involved in the work of exchanging new utensils for used clothes.
which I could think about the suitability of the site. I continued to visit Sitapuri and M-Block simultaneously over two months, until I arrived at a decision about the site, and then focussed on the latter and made visits to the former. During this process, I also developed an acquaintance and rapport with the community workers and with some people from the community as well. It was during this phase that I met most of the people who became my principal informants in due course – this was another crucial element in deciding the site.

**b. Entry in schools**

I continued to visit the locality comprising M-Block, Shiv Puri and K-Block (which I would henceforth refer to as the field) with the NGO, and this comprised the major part of the work done from May 2010 till mid-July 2010. This primarily involved mapping the area and recording the nature of dwellings, pattern of establishment, routes, languages spoken, regional affiliations, religions, local markets, occupations of people, attitude towards schooling and the like. I was able to develop relations with some people from the community. Having progressed this far, I was also beginning to focus on ‘education’. I started feeling the need to begin the work in the school as well. Entering the school later, that is, after beginning to interact with the people (or community) in the context of their ideas about education, was a conscious decision. This was guided by the aim to be able to understand the school from the perspective of the people. Instead of engaging with people on the line of observation made at the school, it appeared more viable to be able to understand the people’s aspirations from, perceptions about, and attitude towards schooling to begin with – and then begin exploring the life at school and everyday experiences of the children from the community there. This approach helped in contextualizing school in the lives of the people and making-sense of it as a State sponsored public institution. In that, in due course of time it brought the State-citizen relationship in the margins as a dimension to the fore.

Accessing the school was much more difficult than approaching the NGO. I experienced a strong ‘gate-keeping’ function being played by the various actors at the school. There were difficulties in getting permission to work in the school, not at the
Method and Fieldwork

administrative levels but in the school from the teachers. I began the work in the Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya, Rabindra Garden, where the centre of PRAKRITI was also located. The Principal of the school allowed me to work there. However, my presence caused a ‘disturbance’ among the teachers, an aspect which would be more appropriate to discuss in the chapter on teachers (Chapter 6). I did not get permission to talk to the children, nor did the teachers allow me to observe their classes. My being in school and observing them during the lunch breaks also did not sit well with teachers. There was some discomfort that the teachers of the school experienced with the idea of ‘research’, and they expressed their disapproval in explicit ways. For example, a teacher asked (though politely), “Why do you come to the school? If you have some work with the NGO, you should do that and go; it’s a school and not a research institution.” Until I engaged with teachers during the course of the study, I was unable to understand the displeasure that the teachers of the first school communicated and experienced – particularly when I consciously ensured that I presented myself in a non-intrusive fashion. It was emerging that it would not be feasible to continue the work at the school – as the purpose of visiting the school was not to disturb the daily routine but to participate in it.

However, I continued to work and simultaneously attempted to explore for other schools. While working in the school, which had classes from VI to XII, I also realised that it would also be essential to engage with a primary school. This appeared necessary to be able to understand the early experiences of a child at school, which would help in making sense of the home/community-school relation. While I was thinking about the primary schools in the neighbourhood where I could locate the work, I met a Consultant working with the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Delhi), Mr. Mehta, at a workshop where I was presenting a paper. He was interested in understanding the work that I was doing and offered to help in accessing some MCD schools. He also suggested some particular questions that I should investigate and

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8 One question related to how enrollment of children at school took place in practice vis-à-vis what the guidelines suggest. The second related to the problem of teacher motivation – he asked ‘How do we motivate and inspire our teachers? All attempts seem to fail’. The third was a broader question which matched the question I was pursuing – ‘Why, despite so many provisions and schemes, do children not come to school?’. All these questions were critical to my study. Not in a sense that I was attempting to find immediate solutions to these or had them in mind from the beginning (excepting the third question), but these were the lines that emerged later on during field immersion and
share with him, as he personally wanted to understand them. I had also been engaging with the SSA (national) on work relating to quality improvements in government schools. This enabled both of us to relate to each other professionally. Mr. Mehta was one of the principal informants for this work, who not only interacted on various matters (at times debating extensively on matters), but also facilitated the fieldwork. Through his assistance, I sought permission to work in the MCD school, E-5 M-Block, Ward number 22. The teacher in charge of the school also permitted me to do the work, when I approached her through Mr. Mehta. Among the two other MCD schools I explored in the area, I found it more meaningful to work in this school as a significant number of children in this school came from the resettlement and JJ clusters I was visiting more frequently and where I was able to develop connections with the people (especially women) living there. This MCD school operated in two shifts, one in the morning for girls and the second in the afternoon for boys. I observed both the shifts in the initial phase of the work. However, later on I focussed on the morning shift school for intensive engagement with children and teachers. My being a woman enabled me to develop a rapport with those in the morning shift much more easily (where all teachers were women and was a girls school) than in the afternoon shift (where all teachers were males, excepting one – who was seeking a transfer to another school).

**Box 3.1. E-5, M Block, MCD school: Profile of a “good school”**

The E-5, M Block, Ward No. 22 school, was a “good school” as per the account of Mr. Mehta, NGO workers and some women in the community. ‘Good’ meant that teaching-learning happened, the children scored good marks, there was less corporal punishment and English was taught in the school. The school was recently given a ‘Pratibha’ status and English was taught in the school right from the first class. There were 622 children on-roll and most came from sadhe-barah-gaj⁹ – a

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⁹ It is known this way as each house was built on twelve and a half yards (sadhe-barah-gaj) of land. The official records call it E-5 Resettlement colony, while the sadhe-barah-gaj is a name that the people had given. A school child’s (Shabnam’s) grandmother told me that the people were given this land when they were removed from another site (around 20 years ago) in Delhi. She says, “When these people came here they occupied the land, fighting with each other over every inch of it.” Not that anybody residing there had witnessed this, but this narrative went around and was talked about.
resettlement colony. The classes I to V had three sections each and an average of around 40 children in each section. However, classes I and II were seeing a steep increase in enrolment during the course of this work. There were around 50 children in each of the sections of classes II and I. Out of the 622 on-roll only around 350 attended the school regularly (more than 50% of the school days). There were two sections of ‘nursery’ classes in the school that were supported by the UEE Mission.

The fieldwork in the school continued over seven months, and I went to the school on all working days (excepting a few occasions). I continued to stay back intermittently for the second shift of the school – at least thrice a month. I shall further describe the school and the work that I did there in Chapter 5.

3.3. Rapport, relationships and roles

The process of approaching and working with various agencies and actors in the field was not very easy. In retrospect, it appears to be the most challenging aspect of the entire fieldwork. While my professional identity as a ‘researcher’ made the NGOs and the school ‘sceptical’ about my agenda, my social identity as a ‘young middle-class woman’ generated confusion among the people from the community. It was relatively easy to relate to the children at school to begin with, but tough to refrain consciously from coming-across as a ‘teacher’ and deepening the relationship. The naturalistic character of inquiry became prominent through the roles that I assumed (NGO worker, informative function, writing assignments for the schoolteachers, acting as a proxy teacher, relationship with the children, working for SSA) in the field to justify my presence and to develop a relationship. In the following pages I will describe this process, and will introduce (through boxes) some of the principal informants.

a. Relationship with the NGOs

I had described the purpose of my study to the NGOs I approached. Neither of the two organisations was interested in my research work beyond a point, primarily because it was focussed on the community and did not involve ‘interfering’ in the everyday work and institutional ethos of the organisations. However, the coordinators of both the NGOs, and the community workers, initially doubted whether I would ‘complain’
to the authorities or ‘leak-out’ information related to their work to an external agency. Therefore, at one of the NGOs the chief executive clarified the ‘code’ I should observe or in other words what she wouldn’t expect me to do. However, as I continued the visits and became a regular feature, such fears faded away. In some way my explicit interest in talking to the children and the community and engaging in dialogue on matters relating to the community, made it clear that the NGOs were not my primary interest. While at NLF I was continuously looked upon as a researcher who has been ‘obliged’ by the institution\footnote{This was evident in the manner in which the coordinator interacted with me. She did not meet me directly but had asked her assistant to deal with me. Most of our interactions were in a stock taking mode, where she would want me to tell her what help would I need from. She never refused to oblige me and was very forthcoming in her approach, appearing as a ‘patron’.}, at PRAKRITI I was soon seen as another community worker. Because their community outreach programme had been already successfully completed, NLF’s work was limited to running the NFE centres and teaching the children. They interacted with the community only when a need arose. For these two reasons, my involvement at NLF was much more clearly delineated as that of a ‘researcher’, who was there to observe children and whose work the organisation was facilitating.

In the process of interactions at NLF, I was able to develop a more informal relationship with some of the fieldworkers. One of the fieldworkers, Zahid, became a principal informant – particularly because of the similarity in our educational background and affiliation to the University of Delhi as students of the social sciences. I helped him in identifying books for his master’s degree in Social Work. He took keen interest in my work, and shared his experiences of work and understanding about the community.

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<th>Box 3.2.: Zahid</th>
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<td>Zahid is a 27 year old man who has been working with the NLF for a little less than three years and was well regarded in the organisation. He joined the NFE centre as an assistant and graduated to become an indispensable employee who ‘managed’ the centre and did a variety of jobs for the organisation. He was found more in the main office of the organisation than at the centre, and unlike other employees could...</td>
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<td><strong>Note:</strong> This was evident in the manner in which the coordinator interacted with me. She did not meet me directly but had asked her assistant to deal with me. Most of our interactions were in a stock taking mode, where she would want me to tell her what help would I need from. She never refused to oblige me and was very forthcoming in her approach, appearing as a ‘patron’.</td>
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directly interact with the chief executive. By the time I had completed my work he got promoted and was transferred to another project of the same organisation. He was from a relatively better-off socio-economic stratum as compared to the other employees of his rank, with his father working as a contractual employee in a government institution. He had consciously decided to pursue a degree in social work after he joined the organisation, and the organisation provided him space to complete his degree. He expressed his commitment to work for the community and uplift people from their plight. According to him poverty was the main reason for the state of the community and he saw education as being the only way of intervening in the situation. However, he felt that the community took on very little onus for change. What helped in relating us better was a shared vocabulary, given our academic and professional interests. I found him much more reliable than other NGO workers because he appeared to be critical of his own work. He shared the problems that he saw in the community candidly, and his discontent for the work he did vis-à-vis the salary he got.

As described earlier, at PRAKRITI the experience was different. The Gyan Jyoti project required more people but a shortage of funds did not allow them to hire any more. The community workers of the project were young women who had completed their schooling recently and were pursuing other degrees and diplomas through the distance learning mode. Though initially I was treated as a guest and a ‘senior’ person, as I continued visiting the community and assisting in the everyday work at the centre over a period I became a part of their project. My presence and the work that I did was taken for granted and at times I was ‘taken to task’ (the way a community worker would be) for absenting myself from work without prior information – in fact even I felt apologetic and guilty when I did so.\textsuperscript{11} It was in this process that I began to make sense of the term ‘participant observer’ and experienced the oxymoronic character of the method. At PRAKRITI the work involved going on field visits door-to-door and searching for out-of-school children, convincing the parents to enroll the children in school and then ensuring that they attend school.

\textsuperscript{11} I encountered this feeling many times when I worked at the school, with the SSA and in the community. I felt liable, guilty, excited, and experienced things subjectively on one hand, while on the other I continuously questioned these feelings, analysed them and objectively documented them.
regularly. I visited the vicinity with two community workers, Jagwati and Neetu. Interactions with Jagwati, who was a principal informant for the study (probably the most indispensable one) and with Neetu, were also significant in developing understandings. The project coordinator, Ms. Kavita, was critical in facilitating and informing this study, but my interactions with her were limited.

Box 3.3.: Jagwati

Jagwati was born and brought up in the vicinity where she is now working. She is 20 years old. When I met her she was pursuing her BA from the Himachal Pradesh University through the distance mode. She wanted to become a teacher, but could not pursue a teacher education programme for she had to work and help her family economically. Her father worked in a government office but was not in good health. Her mother was a housewife and, as per Jagwati, could not earn for the family as she was illiterate. Jagwati’s family would marry her off at the age of 21 (she said this was the norm in families like her’s), therefore she was in a hurry to get a job as a teacher. She therefore regarded her work more seriously as compared to her colleagues. While all community/fieldworkers preferred being in the room allotted to Gyan Jyoti at the Sarvodaya school, Jagwati invariably volunteered to go for, what she called, ‘survey’ (field visits). She was not an exception, just a little more forthcoming in taking the initiative. While I always found other community workers sitting idle until they were ‘asked’ to work (they did not even talk among themselves), Jagwati worked as Ms. Kavita’s ‘right hand’.

b. Relationship with the community

There were multiple ways in which I related to the community – through the NGO, through the children of the school, through the school, and independently when I visited the field without the NGO’s help. The relationship with the community transited and took various forms. When I was visiting the various sites in Delhi during the field selection phase, I felt as though I was being ‘gazed’ at throughout. People took note of my being around and stared at me without inhibition. I felt strange, awkward, and at times vulnerable as a woman. However, when I started visiting along with the NGO staff, people from the community did not take notice of my presence
and almost ignored me. They did not even look at me and I was unable to understand how to initiate talking to them. This was very similar to the experience that Geertz (1973) described in his work. Even when I asked something or attempted to talk, most people did not reply to me directly. At Sitapuri, they would rather look at Zahid and respond. This was clearly the case with the men. Once at the NLF NFE centre I met an elderly person from the JJ colony, who Zahid introduced as someone who was like a community leader. He was around 75 years old and was called Shah ji. Shah ji did not look at me at all; he ignored me completely even when I wished him. This continued for some days whenever he happened to visit the centre. His body language was such that it communicated closure and a non-willingness to talk. One day I requested Zahid to ask him some questions on my behalf and help me in interacting with him. Zahid initiated a dialogue with him, and re-introduced me to Shah ji who asked, “Does she understand Hindi?”

Zahid and the other community workers could not refrain from chuckling and laughing. This was the first time I talked to Shah ji. I told him that I speak Hindi and that everybody in my family spoke Hindi. Shah ji said,

Oh, I thought from the way you appear, you would not understand our language\textsuperscript{12} so I did not talk to you. There are many women who come here and find it difficult to speak to us in the language...

He did not find the incident funny and was upset at the ‘laugh’ – when he later met me, he criticised the NGO staff for making fun of an elderly person.

This short dialogue broke the silence and what followed was an extensive sharing of everyday life in the JJ colony, with a focus on what he perceived as the major challenges – and not what I wanted to ‘know’. Without my taking the initiative, Shah ji spoke at length about all kinds of issues. So much so that he did not even give me a chance to ask a question. Even when I did manage to ask, at his discretion he either

\textsuperscript{12} There was something noteworthy in the use of the phrase ‘our language’ by Shah ji. Shah ji and around 90% (or even more) of the people residing in the JJ colony are Bengalis. The term ‘our language’ used by Shah ji appeared to indicate a reference to the ‘people’s language’ or the language that the ‘elite’ don’t speak, much more than it did to ‘Hindi’. Bengali, despite being spoken at most homes (as per Zahid’s account), has somehow become restricted. A little ‘distorted’ version of Hindi is commonly heard in the colony (with a confusion regarding grammar, particularly gender). Even fights happen in Hindi. Zahid informs that most children know very little Bengali and are more fluent in ‘bol-chal-ki Hindi’.
answered it or slipped into another realm. It appeared as if he had been waiting for someone to listen to him – someone who was not overpowering. Zahid told me that Shah ji was very fond of talking and could speak on any subject. He also told me that though Shah ji was reliable, he ‘constructs’ details by himself and ‘amplified’ things. I also found several inconsistencies in his accounts. When the people from the community saw me interacting with Shah ji, they too took interest in my presence. However, due to some reason the NLF staff (excepting Zahid) did not feel comfortable with my interacting with people in an ‘informal way’. Shah ji told me that the NLF people had asked him to explain to me “how dangerous it was to work there”. Not that Shah ji disagreed with the NLF, he himself spoke candidly about the difficulties that ‘outside’ women faced in the JJ colony. The NGO staff had instructions from the chief executives about not letting me visit the community by myself, and someone or the other led me through the JJ colony. This lent a contrived character to my interactions with the community. As a result, my activities at Sitapuri became limited to observations at the NFE centre, interacting with children and conversing with people when they visited.

The experience at M-Block, K-Block and Shiv Puri was different. This was because of the fact that I myself was visiting door-to-door, and also because to the homes to which I went mostly it was the women who were available to talk to. The women soon began taking interest in my presence and asking who I was and what I was there for. The men were neither available at home until late evening, nor did they interact much with unknown women (even to those living in their neighbourhood), other than when essential. This was a general (understood) ‘code of conduct’. However, I could talk to the men when they visited the school to pick-up their children. Gradually, I was also able to interact with some other men and one of them became a principal informant (Teekam). I always addressed the men with whom I interacted as Bhai or brother – to ensure that I did not flout the ‘code of conduct’. In a similar manner, other rapport and relationships were developed, or I should say unfolded, where I had to make-sense of what may not be acceptable and balance my ‘ambitions’ about the inquiry.
A reason for locating the work at M-Block was also related to the relationships that I was able to develop with the people. Given the nature of the work that I was engaged in, it became easier to approach and interact with the people. The conscious selection of the new NGO, PRAKRITI, that was establishing its work was particularly for this kind of access that it facilitated. Once the people started ‘taking an interest’ in me, I was able to approach them and talk to them by myself. This enabled me to gradually separate my identity from the NGO by beginning to interact with the people beyond the restrains that the organisations’ work imposed. Gradually my presence became more acceptable and then usual. Thus, from being invisible, I transited to become ‘conspicuous’ and then ordinary. However, it was only through some particular incidents that I became less ‘interesting’ or more ordinary. For example, when I got stuck in the field during heavy downpours and took shelter in homes when the women offered, or when I slipped on the slippery walk way and hurt myself in which community women helped me, or when I carried the younger children when they asked me to, or searched for and did not find information that women were looking for and the like.

It is relevant to state here that being a source of information was something that particularly enabled a meaningful relationship between me and the women in the field. The women asked about a variety of schemes, schools for vocational training for adults, janampatri, medical facilities, jobs, NGOs, discounted machines, and the like. They were forthcoming with information that I sought, particularly in relation to the routes, resource persons in the vicinity, their experience with institutions (where women mostly ‘vented’ their complaints about the police and the school), and so on. It appeared as if there was a lack of ‘approachable’ sources of useful and reliable information that the women needed – or maybe it was the way in which the women perceived me. As one of them said, “Jankari [‘knowledge’/information] is a big problem; we don’t get to know many things…I thought you would know everything but you have also come here for jankari…this seems to be the whole worlds’ problem!” The exchanging of need-based information transformed into being able to relate to each other with a purpose, and then gradually progressed into a more ‘natural’ relationship. It would be misleading or naïve to say that I became one of the
participants in the field; the divide of ‘us’ and ‘they’ continued to exist through the strong impressions of the social worlds to which we belonged. Nevertheless, I was able to access the people and interact with them in a manner that had a quality of informality and ordinariness. It would be more appropriate to say that in due course of time I came to be seen as someone who was there for her work – the purposes of which were known and seemingly ‘appeared rational’. In my view, being in the community for reasons pertaining to work or a job helped people understand, more than anything else, that there was no ‘hidden’ agenda in my presence. This was particularly so with the principal informants. This ‘acceptance’ among the people was essential to be able to understand their positions and meanings. Patient listening, not passing judgements, speaking less and simply and politely, and not having preconceived notions and opinions were some ways which I thought were important in being able to develop relations. My being in the field was transiting from being the odd man out to being treated as almost being ‘non-existent’ or not worthy of attention, to becoming conspicuous as a very strange woman (probably as a NGO Didi), to an ‘educated’ source and a naïve seeker of information, and finally as a woman who is usually there for an understandable reason. These experiences were similar to those that Geertz (1973) describes in his work, where while highlighting how he negotiated through a variety of identities while inquiring the ‘Balinese cockfight’ as an anthropological researcher. He brings-out the ‘Otherness’ between the participants and a researcher in in-depth inquiry and how it intervenes in the inquiry. Whyte’s (1943) relation with Doc., his principal informant, also in a way enabled in reflecting on (and even ‘valuing’) my relationships with Zahid, Jagwati, Mr. Mehta, Shivali and other principal informants whom I will be introducing at later points in the thesis.

c. Relation with SSA personnel

The rapport with the SSA personnel was enabling in several ways in entering the school. Although initially I had not systematically planned to study the SSA, the interactions with Mr. Mehta (at the State SSA) made it appear worthwhile to engage with the project, with a focus to understand the school in a more holistic fashion. I also made use of the opportunities available to me as a researcher who was affiliated to the Department of Education, University of Delhi to interact with some national
level personnel working for the SSA. While I was pursuing this study, I participated in four SSA workshops in various capacities - as an observer, as a documentar for documenting the workshops, and as a facilitator for facilitating sessions concerning the Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) and development of guidelines for it, etc. The work with the SSA was the most convenient and smoothest among all the institutions and people I engaged with during this study. This was mainly because my educational identity enabled several ‘connections’ more naturally, and also because there was a shared set of meanings between me and the personnel – given our common training and orientation. This experience enabled me to understand how my identity and meanings ‘interfered or mediated’ in the work that I was doing as a researcher. I primarily depended on semi-structured interviews and conversations to collect data from the people I engaged with at the SSA.

d. Relation with schoolteachers

My institutional affiliation also enabled in developing a relationship with the teachers at the E-5 school. For example, for one of the teachers (principal informant), Shivali, I wrote sections of her MA Education assignments and helped her in her school related work, particularly because (as she said) she could trust my ‘knowledge’. There was already a set of shared meanings through which I could relate to teachers. These meanings, more than our training in education, came from our social positions (shaped by our gender, economic class, education and caste). With the teachers at the E-5 MCD school (morning shift), it did not take a long time to relate because the teachers complained of being short of staff, and they saw me as a helping hand in their work. The school in-charge and the class teacher explicitly permitted me to do my work in any one of the classes available irrespective of whether or not I was transacting the prescribed curriculum. The only condition was that no child should move out of the class and that the ‘normal’ working of the school should not be disturbed. Although initially I was treated like a guest (being offered tea and biscuits in the office, which was very unusual), soon my presence in the school became a matter of ‘routine’ and there wasn’t anything unusual/’special’ that the teachers saw in my being there. Of course, my absence created turmoil, as the Class V-B had to be ‘attended to’ by the class teacher. Here it would be relevant to say that my gender and
my age both helped in developing a better relation with teachers, and being a part of their everyday context.

However, the experience was not the same everywhere. As described earlier, at one of the schools that I visited and where I was attempting to situate my work, the teachers played the key role in ensuring that I was unable to continue. I had a similar experience in the second shift of the E-5 MCD School. In structured ways, despite having permission, the teachers ensured that I did not come to the school. It would be more meaningful to describe the relationship with teachers in Chapter 6, where I describe the data that I collected and the patterns I observed in the context of teachers, their situation and their work.

Although I worked in a focussed manner with the teachers at the E-5 MCD school, M-Block (Day shift), my being located at the School of Educational studies at Ambedkar University, Delhi, provided me with an opportunity to interact with a small group of teachers on a regular basis (at least twice a month) from August 2011 onwards. This special location also helped in organising and participating in focus group discussions and workshops, with teachers from a variety of schools across Delhi.

e. Relation with children

The rapport with the children was central to this PhD. Observing, interacting and working with children to understand their experiences were central to this work. I engaged with children at the JJ colonies, resettlement colonies and other forms of dwellings that I visited. I also interacted with the children at the special training/NFE centres of both the NGOs I worked with, and at the two schools that I accessed. In particular, I engaged – over a period in a concerted fashion – with children who worked as rag-pickers and who also attended the centre of one of the NGOs (an aspect which will describe in Chapter 4). These included around forty children, varying from ages 7 to 14, both boys and girls (though the majority were boys). The major part of the fieldwork was situated with children of Class V-B at the E-5 MCD school (girls shift) (Chapter 7). The fact that it was a girls’ school, though was limiting in one aspect, was enabling in the other – in that I could relate to and understand their
meanings better. We could also discuss matters which would not have been touched
upon in the presence of men. The girls of Class V-B were between 9 to 14 years of
age. I also visited the second shift (boys shift) of the school to ensure that I could
corroborate my understandings (though it was limited due to the teachers’
intervention). The ‘out of school’ children, with whom I interacted, included boys and
girls both. It would be difficult to delineate children into those who were the principal
informants and those who were not – as all of them were critical in this work.
However, I developed much more nuanced and deeper ties with fourteen children (ten
at school and four out of school) and interacted over a period of time with a group of
children who were engaged in rag-picking.

Although before beginning the study I had intended to situate a substantial part the
work with the children who did not attend the school (and were working), I came to
realise that it was difficult to access them and almost impossible to interact with them
in an intensive fashion over a period of time. They went to work in the morning and
came home late, or had flexible timings. The girls who were engaged in household
chores were relatively more accessible but at the same time it was not possible to
interact with them at length. Also, my presence did not seem ethical in such cases, in
the sense that it would disturb their daily schedule and may appear to be unnatural.
Though I talked to several such children every now and then, it was with great
difficulty that I could engage regularly with only four such children (two boys and
two girls) (Hazari, Heena, Lalit and Diri), and two of them shifted their location
during the course of this study. It was in this process that I understood the pragmatics
of working with the children who worked, and planned to interact with them at the
special training centres of the two NGOs.

It was relatively easy to engage with the schoolchildren as there was a possibility of
meeting them daily and there was a legitimate space in which I could interact with
them. The children whom I interacted with in-depth and in a focussed manner, were
mostly in the age group of 9 to 16 years, with more than 90% falling between 9 and
14 years. Class V B had 60 children on roll, but only around 40 attended school, of
whom 25 were regular. Among these were the 10 children with whom I developed a
deeper relationship and organised focus group discussions. I also visited their homes and was able to interact with their mothers at least once a month – this was in turn critical in deepening the relations both with the children and their families. In case of the younger children, it came across specifically that my relationship with their mothers and/or their teachers, was a determining factor in how they would relate to me. At the homes, they would first assess the interactions between their mothers and me, and then decide how they would interact with me.

A degree of comfort in ‘touching’ was another aspect, which children assessed in developing a relationship with me, or making-sense of ‘who’ I was. For example, having seen me talking to his mother twice, Sunny (6 years) on a later visit walked up to me while I was talking to his mother and held my hand. He then gazed at my face, as if he was waiting for a reaction. When I did not react, and behaved as if it was not ‘unusual’ or as if I did not notice it, he held my other hand also standing in front and looking at me – as if demanding a reaction. When I smiled at him, he also smiled back. On later visits, he ran-up to me to hold my hand, as if doing it consciously – with an artificial quality to the exercise. But after repeated visits, touching ceased to be a special matter – where he would hold on to me while skipping over a drain, or stand with my support as I talked to his mother, or ask me to lift him and carry him across a road, or ask for some other assistance in a game or while lifting something. Children in their homes, at the training centre and at schools, in some way or the other made sense of me by touching me. At the school and the training centres, during the initial visits when I offered my hand for the sake of contact to ‘break’ the distance, all of them rushed towards me to shake hands. The schoolgirls, during initial visits, would run-up to me and hug me, which appeared very unnatural and contrived. However, all these reactions withered away shortly. What remained was a more casual way of associating, where touching did not matter or rather was not something unusual or ‘special’ – and involved nothing as dramatic as shaking hands or hugging. Physical contact and distance had special meanings in the contexts that I was studying, which I would explore in the Chapters that follow.
My bag and the things that I carried in it were another source of curiosity among children. I carried a big ‘schoolbag type of’ bag which the children found very intriguing. They would ask me what I was carrying in it, and opening and inspecting it was something that they appeared to like. They found books, short story books, pens, papers for rough work, pen caps, coins, an empty water bottle, an empty lunch box, a broken mobile charger, and several ‘useless’ things in the bag. The ‘rag-picker’ children exclaimed that I was also like a girl-\textit{kabadi}. A child once exclaimed, “You already have so much of \textit{kabad} in your bag, why don’t you come along to sell it with us?”

Children, specifically those at the MCD school, also showed curiosity to know my background – particularly the kind of house I lived in, about my father’s job and my religion and caste (Chapter 7). They described me as a ‘teacher’ at home, however, a ‘special teacher who did not teach’. In my interactions with them, they initially called me ma’am, then they drifted to \textit{Didi}, then with my name together with one of these. However, schoolteachers ensured that they call me ‘ma’am’ and did not use my name. The children of classes II and I called me by my first name and pronounced it in various distorted ways. They addressed me as ‘\textit{tu}’ rather than ‘\textit{aap}’. In a discussion about their teachers, the class V-B children identified me as a non-teacher. Shabnam said, “You are not a teacher, you don’t beat and scold us… but you come to school every day.”

In the process of working with children, it came across how I never ceased to be an adult for them; however, my adulthood worked as a ‘resource’ for accessing small possibilities for children rather than being a source of fear and domination. For example, it was obvious to them that if they wanted something to be taken off from a high place, or something heavy to be lifted, or a difficult situation to be tackled, I could be called for help. Children went in and out of the class in my presence, moved around and talk freely, children from other classes entered and sat when I narrated a story, they shouted, fought and used cuss words in my presence, they demanded to do particular activities in class and gave me ‘homework’, intervened in the flow of discussion, asked questions, argued and responded, lead the class and taught me their
games. There were instances where some children (the principal informants) got upset with me over some issue and I had to offer an apology. Other researchers working with children have also described how their adulthood continued to be an essential part of their identity (Sarangpani, 1997). In fact, such a feature of relationship at one end ensures a natural character in the association, but at the same time it indicates the limits of ethnographic techniques and participation in such situations.

In the process of relating to children, I learnt several aspects of an adult-child dyad and about how children make sense of the social world. I was able to identify techniques with which I could understand the meanings they made. In this process, stories and ‘narratives’ emerged as a way of deepening such relationships and situating meanings in a common frame. Listening to what the children had to say was also critical in developing a rapport and training oneself in the meanings and logics. With the older children, conversation or ‘debating’ was a technique that worked better to understand their perspectives on issues; some of them began conversations and debates themselves. However, it never took the shape of dominating their points of view, instead involved listening much more than speaking. The older children vented their thoughts and feelings before me – complaining about their families, employers, school and society, and patient listening and empathising were the ways through which these were supported. Admittedly, children taught me the ‘method’ of listening and empathizing, which I now feel are powerful ways of ‘participating and observing’.

3.4. ‘Ways’ of working: ‘Tools’ and ‘techniques’

a. Semi-structured interviews

In the early phases of the work, I used some tools to understand the field. These tools were semi-structured interviews in which I asked open-ended questions about the demographic profile of the field, some descriptions of field and community, everyday experiences, children and education. The purpose was to begin a conversation through these questions and being able to get a glimpse of the people’s perceptions. I interacted with some ‘outsiders’ who either worked at the M-Block (a teacher) or lived nearby (a neighbour from the upscale vicinity), and the community workers of
the NGOs (particularly Jagwati, who used to live there). I also engaged in similar semi-structured conversation with teachers of the school where I was working and children whom I could interact with. In the process of these interviews, I was able to perceive the people’s image of the community, their vision of their own practice/work/life, some instances which they remembered or regarded important, and some areas where their sense of predicaments and/or being resolved got highlighted. However, it also came across that the semi-structured interviews, though meaningful in the initial phase, may not be suitable when the inquiry intensifies. This was because in the first phases the aim was to initiate conversations, talk to people with a purpose (to communicate a sense of purpose), becoming ‘familiar’ or ‘unfamiliarising’ oneself, and to find directions towards some categories of making sense of the situations. However, later on, as the inquiry proceeded and I started participating in the routine, it was felt that a semi-formal/structured inquiry would seem unnatural. Also, as I went deeper, the categories for inquiry started taking shape and they almost spontaneously guided the interactions and observations. On some forums (like the one that AUD facilitated with teachers, and those where I worked with SSA personnel, etc.), I continued to use semi-structured questions for inquiry.

b. Participant observation

This work primarily followed the participant observation mode of being there in the field. I began the work with observations, when I ‘made visits’ to the various sites, where at first I only ‘observed’ and then gradually became ‘involved in’ the field. At times the involvement was contrived, while at other times it was spontaneous and happened in the course of the flow of work. What was central to the process of doing participant-observation, much more than participating and observing, was note taking. Note taking and skimming through the notes once every week, enabled me to analyse what I was doing and enhanced consciousness about the way I was proceeding. A meta-view of the field-notes enabled me to understand the process better. If I look at the nature of the data that I gathered during the beginning phase, it appears like a record maintained based on a ‘survey’ or over-viewing of the places I visited. Even the descriptions that I have made involve detailed notes of the entire day’s proceedings in the field (with details like colours, structures, weight, height, distance
and the like). The nature of the initial data is such that it lends itself for being framed into an observation schedule. However, as the work progressed and the relationships with people developed, the field-notes took the form of long narrations with dialogues and a record of subtle cues, and gradually included notes/signposts for analysis. A study of the field-notes also enabled me to understand how the categories of observation were emerging in these phases and how these were refined or discarded in the process of further field immersion. Furthermore, the process of zooming in and zooming out in the descriptions is also explicitly visible. That is, describing things in an involved fashion along with reviewing one’s engagement and identifying one’s own subjectivity. This way of keeping the field notes brings out the inherent subjective-objective ‘dyad’ in the phrase ‘participant observation’, and how it was experienced in the process of fieldwork. This process defined the contours of the study itself. It presented itself as a dilemma, as a caution, as a paradox and as a technique during the course of the study.

c. Listening
More than being a technique for data collection, listening was a technique to develop a relation with the people. Because I listened, people talked to me. At times, people (especially those who were my principal informants) spoke in a venting mode, gossiped, complained, and shared matters about their private lives, which made me realise the faith they were positing in me. In this process I also made sense of the ethics of confidentiality and respect that a researcher is likely to get as a participant. In the initial phases of work, where listening made me vulnerable to being swayed by what people said, I understood the idea of participant-researcher in a more nuanced fashion – where I believed and got swayed, while at the same time made sense, recorded and analysed. It enabled me to constantly understand how the informants and the others perceived me, how politically correct they sounded when they talked to me, how consistent they were in their practice and what they said, and how my relation with them was evolving in the process of engaging.

Listening was a major way through which I corroborated the observations, particularly when I specifically ‘made’ people talk, to understand the observations
better. This enabled me to ensure that I did not attribute my own thoughts and perceptions to the people’s actions. It further enabled me to understand, in a more nuanced fashion, the gaps and contradictions between what people believe and how they act – how the everyday reality and contexts lead to gaps in their thought and action. ‘Listening’ demands patience and skill. Training myself to listen was among the major methodological challenges that I encountered during the work. Listening required the quality of patience (involving self-control and a degree of selflessness) whereby, despite having something important to say, compelling disagreements to present, and compulsions of time, as a researcher I had to maintain composure. It involves an ability to empathise and a sense of respect for the other and her perspective. In the case of children, I also realized how listening demanded from me an ability to understand a different kind of logic, imagine with them and understand what they wanted to communicate beyond the limits of the vocabulary, while at the same time, it posed a challenge to ‘objectivity’ in research.

d. Conversations

Informal conversations with all the informants were also central in making sense of particular categories and experiences. The records of the conversations were also a source for corroborating data as well as identifying the categories for observation. Conversations also enabled in identifying and understanding my own biases and perceptions. This was particularly so in the case of conversations with the children. The questions that they asked and the way they made meaning, enabled me to analyse my own thoughts and become aware of a better way of conversing with them and the others. Conversations were central to understanding and relating to the teachers at the school.

e. Focus group discussions

The focus group discussions began in the later phases of the work. While some of them were organised with the help of external agencies, others were conducted independently in the field – particularly those with mothers of school going children. The themes of focus group discussions mainly emerged from the understandings from data generated through the other techniques. I engaged in 8 FGDs with school
teachers. Three of these were organised with a larger group of teachers in which I engaged as a participant. In these FGDs, a group of around forty teachers identified their concerns and experiences based on which they themselves identified themes, broke up into smaller groups and discussed the themes. These small discussions were further discussed in a plenary. SSA facilitated one FGD with thirty-two teachers who were working in the MCD schools in Delhi. I participated in it as a moderator and facilitator. In other four instances, I engaged with a group of four to six teachers from the E-5 MCD school (both shifts), on a theme that arose from general conversations. In four such instances, I did the groundwork in advance in order to be able to engage over an issue (which comprised presenting a theme in a spontaneous way and in a manner that would trigger discussions, reading related literature, approaching teachers, etc.). In the other two instances, the group discussions happened on the initiative of the teachers, where they themselves proposed a thorough discussion on two interrelated issues. Willis’s (1977) and Chapman’s (2007) approach to FGDs were particularly useful in organising these sessions.

I also engaged in three focus group discussions with the mothers of some of the class V-B girls. These were also more spontaneous, and were triggered off by my presence in the field – although I had planned for discussions, I had to wait for appropriate occasions to introduce the discussion and at times modify the theme I had thought of. During the FGDs, I did not tape-record the discussions in order to ensure a naturalistic ethos. In the three FGDs that I had with a larger group of teachers, the teachers expressed explicit resentment at the idea of tape-recording the discussions. Sometimes I took short-notes and later completed them, while at other times I had to recall and reconstruct the discussions based on memory. Recording or taking notes during the discussions with teachers was not much of an issue, but it was not possible to do so with mothers and children.

With exception to the three FGDs with forty teachers (that happened at an institution), all other discussions took place in the natural environments of the participants. Furthermore, I did not interrupt the flow of the discussions. Except at the time of the introduction of themes, I did not intervene much. However, I attempted to ensure that
a discussion did not ‘end’ due to lack of arguments, or digress into issues which were unrelated – at times this worked and at other times it did not. This was particularly so in the case of working with children on stories.

f. Stories
Storytelling and discussions on stories, completion of stories, jointly constructing or ‘distorting’ stories and constructing representations (drawings) based on stories, were some techniques that I followed while working with the children at the school. Although it would be more worthwhile to present the techniques of storytelling in chapter 7, here it is important to say that story narration did not happen in a teacher-taught mode. It is difficult to reconstruct a complete picture of the reactions and classroom environment during storytelling sessions, but the classroom environment did undergo a shift during these sessions – the classrooms which were otherwise ‘noisy’ and where children did not listen to each other, appeared more ‘composed’ and children listened, spoke and participated in a more ‘self-disciplined’ or rather self-directed way. In a way, the potentials of the pedagogy of storytelling were exemplified in these processes. The discussions following the stories made the ethos resemble to that of a social-science classroom where people jointly analysed and described and deconstructed cognitive categories and meanings that are encountered in everyday social interactions (like work, book, festival, etc.). Though there were several stories with which the group engaged, for pragmatic constraints – in Chapter 7, I will be presenting a selection of the stories pertaining to caste and class, while briefly touching upon some other significant aspects as well.

Box 3.4.: Working with children: Constraints of method

In the process of fieldwork, I realised how ill-equipped I was as an adult to dialogue with children. Along with this, the limitations of social research or of ‘systematic’ inquiry into children’s experiences came to the fore, given the ways in which one expects things to happen. While attempting to engage particularly with children who were ‘out of school’, I realised the inadequacies and impossibilities of using the available techniques of research. As I proceeded to ‘focus’, I understood the different meanings that focussing and concentration carried in the children’s
lives – the concept of sitting together in a group and discussing something started looking irrational, the idea of interviewing failed over and over again, and conversations did work but not in the manner in which ‘I had wanted them to’. It was only in institutional spaces that I could work with the children; though in these spaces also, I had to devise techniques that would facilitate in accessing and developing a common ground with the children, to probe their experiences.

Another complication related to the ethics of research. As I thought about the ways of working with the children, the notion of ‘taking consent’ and not ‘disturbing’ the participants in their everyday contexts was turned on its head. What does taking consent mean in the context of children? How does an adult conduct a ‘non-intrusive’ research with children? What would participant-observation mean in the context of children? These were some of the prominent dilemmas that emerged. Although I continuously articulated and rearticulated the possibilities that were available in these contexts and devised ways of working with the help of theory, these dilemmas themselves were much more that pragmatic concerns and introduce the problematic of ‘research’ as an enterprise of the adult world. In such experiences, I started searching, in what may be called an introspective manner, for ways of engaging with children - ways where my adulthood would at least become less important, if not redundant, in my relationship with the children. Although, not read in the context of children, thoughts and the work of Freire (1968/71) helped in questioning my own position in relation to children and thinking about ‘dialogue’ as a method.

These techniques were followed with a purpose to ensure a non-intrusive set of conditions (or situations) in which contextual meanings could be understood along with an insight into how they are discursively created. The nature of these techniques etched out an ethnographic ethos in the methodological approach of the study. However, a close examination of the chapter would bring to the fore that this study is not an ethnomethodology in the traditional sense of the term. This is given the fact that a neat pre-determined theoretical and methodological framework for this work did not exist. There was a clear understanding that the inquiry would be qualitative in
nature, that the questions would involve a deeper and prolonged engagement with the field, and that the thesis would be a reconstruction of the engagement. However, \textit{a-priori} descriptive categories were present only at an intuitive level, and underwent refinement and deepening as the engagement with the field developed in the process of study.

The struggle with the research questions, categories and perceptions – particularly in connection with caste and marginalisation in an urban context, and institutional knowledge – in several ways continued to shape what I was attempting to do in the field and worked as categories that deepened the pursuit. For example, though I had set-out to study experiences of children from the Dalit community, in the field I struggled to ‘make sense’ of the meaning of Dalit in an urban context, and in this way the ‘relation’ between slum and caste became a significant aspect of making sense of the field. Through these processes the research questions were framed more clearly and objectives were articulated. This further gave a direction to the study with respect to how to intensify the fieldwork.

3.6. Prominent dilemmas
There were several questions, concerns and dilemmas that surfaced during the process in which I began making sense in the field and thickly describing it. However, for the sake of brevity I describe one such experience which was critical in shaping the work.

**Question of understanding Dalit experience: Who is a Dalit?**
Beginning the fieldwork brought a constant doubt regarding the question of the Dalit experience. The socio-cultural identity of the urban marginalised was not only difficult to understand but also difficult to separate in terms of the socio-cultural and historical affiliations. Although the literature indicated the profiles of urban slums, stressing the proportionately higher population of Dalits and other backward social groups (Antony and Maheshwaran, 2001, p. 5), I could not trace a reliable source of data to be able to make sense of the caste profiles of the particular settings that I visited. On attempting to inquire, I got blanket statements which complicated the matter. For example, a teacher working in the MCD school said, “Truly speaking
except for a few families, all in the vicinity are either SCs or OBCs or Muslims....”
The NGO workers of PRAKRITI told that most people in the area who do not send their children to school were from the backward castes. The teachers and the NGO workers, both, confirmed that those from the upper castes reside mostly in resettlement colonies, and that the people’s account in general cannot be relied on what caste they claim to be from as many ‘lie’ about their castes. In the community it was not possible to ask people about their castes – it was not at all the purpose either. There were literature resources that indicated based on a sample that in the slum clusters in the particular zone of Delhi where I was working, the concentration of SC population was as high as 80% of the total population (GOI and CES, 2008), and the case was near around similar in two other zones. However, such records were based on sample estimates, which may or may not represent the actual picture of all settlements in the zone. This is particularly so because each settlement may differ from each other substantially (and usually do in the case of Delhi), that is, there are limits to generalisations. Yet, even when exact estimates are not available (as stated earlier in the Chapter) most studies and official reports register the fact that slum clusters in Delhi have a significantly high concentration of SC and OBC population (GDCR, 2011).

Identity in the urban dwelling clusters that I visited was appearing to be a nebulous category, where all the people appeared the same (in how they described themselves) and all appeared different, both at the same time (in contradictions that appeared in their accounts). The descriptions that the NGO workers (who had lived there) gave complicated the matter further. They did not see caste as being a significant factor in the lives of the people. One of the community workers said, “Caste doesn’t matter all that much here; in villages it matters but here there is nothing like that”. Teachers and others whom I interacted with in the early phases of my work also opined the same. Having done the work, I realise that I was asking a wrong question and at a wrong time. However, at that time it appeared essential to explore the demographic identities

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13 This applied equally to the upper and castes. The teachers (Shivali and Ms. Alpana) and the NGO workers (Jagwati and Ms. Kavita) opined that the people from lower castes “pretend to be from upper castes” when they are asked – ”except when there is a scheme at offer”. They also thought that when it concerns availing of a scheme meant for lower castes, even the people from the upper castes produce caste certificates.
not of the individuals but of the place. Even the school records added to the confusion. As per the DISE school report card, the school only had 52 SC children out of 622 (total on roll); zero ST and 70 from religious minorities. With such questions, I was unsure about how I would be able to study the Dalit experience. Along with that a larger question of ‘who is a Dalit’, evolved when the nature of marginalization on the face of it appeared to be similar for all people. Questions like the following started emerging - Why is it important to understand the ‘Dalit’ experience? How would the experience of marginalization of the urban poor differ based on caste, or for that matter any other socio-cultural identity? However, as the fieldwork became rigorous, these questions became far more complicated and deeper, as the category of caste started emerging in the interactions and instances.

i. **Anonymity and taboo of caste**

In the door to door surveys, when the NGO workers attempted to fill a register recording the details about the children who they were registering for the training centre, they also asked about the caste along with other details like, father’s occupation, income, age of the child, etc. It took them considerable time to explain “caste” to the people. The NGO workers consciously avoided the use of the Hindi term *jaati*. One of them told me that they couldn’t use the word *jaati*, as it is a ‘bad word’. Jagwati said, “…it is bad to say the word”. Reference to *jaati* was a kind of a taboo for them. Actually, they asked for a ‘surname’ when they inquired about caste, though the purpose was to know if the child belonged to a scheduled caste, which would have a bearing while the NGO facilitated the child’s movement to school. As Jagwati said, “If you get to know the surname, you would obviously get to know the caste…but people never tell the caste; they don’t know that it’s for their own benefit that we are asking.” They asked about full name (‘tell me your full name’), last name (‘that which you put after your given name’), gave example of their own ‘caste’ (‘like, my caste is Solanki, you must be having a family name’). The responses that they got were like the following: ‘we write it like this’, ‘we write only this name’, ‘we write his father’s name’, ‘we are Gujarati’, ‘I don’t know’, ‘will ask his father and then tell you’, and the like. There were instances where the occupation of the father was used to connote, or may be explain, caste; for instance ‘write *lohar*, his father is a *lohar*’, or
‘we are mochi’, or ‘maali’. It is significant to note that these did not represent the actual social caste groups to which the families belonged; these were the literal descriptors of the works taken up after migrating to the city. However, it subtly indicated how people tended to relate caste and occupation. Many people at the slum introduced themselves to me as Nagars, (non-Dalits/Brahmins). However, later interactions, especially where people inquired about some State schemes for depressed castes and their being eligible to avail them, brought out the caste affiliations. In these experiences, it emerged that caste is a sensitive category and resides in implicit, subtle ways in everyday discourse, and therefore is of consequence in the ordinary life in the field.

The discomfort and resistance, expressed in revealing caste affiliations, in a way comes across as an expression of some comfort in a degree of anonymity that an urban setting entails. This also gives a sense of a subtly strong resistance to caste and its implications. Teekam (a principal informant from the community) says, “In a village and a small town, unlike the metropolis [mahanagar], everybody knows everybody – the family’s whereabouts, who is whose kin – but here it’s not like that”. Therefore, it becomes impossible to ‘forget’ caste or not to refer to it at a smaller closely-knit centre. But the isolated life at a metropolis does away with the familiarity with each other and allows for a space to reconstruct names and identity. This matched with the teachers’ and the NGO workers’ account about people “pretending to be” from a different caste, but gave it a different perspective. The fear of being asked about one’s caste could be sensed in the way people behaved in such situations – though it is difficult to describe.

ii. A confusion and a perception

When I asked a principal informant teacher (Shivali), about the scholarship schemes for SC/ST/Minority children and about the DISE school report cards that indicate the number of SC/ST/Minority children enrolled in the school, she told me that there is a lot of confusion in the schemes that are available for SC/ST children. She said, “Actually, if you really go on to do a research on the castes of children enrolled in the school, you would get to know that most are from lower castes. The issue is that most
of them do not fall in the Delhi SC list; they do not have certificates so they do not get anything. On the contrary, you will come across several parents who are from upper castes but have got these certificates made.” An inquiry revealed that there is a bureaucratic process and paperwork that is needed to get a certificate of caste that is valid in Delhi (I will touch upon this aspect in Chapter 4). Most families being migrants find it difficult to get these certificates made. The teacher also told me about parents who did a lot of running around and got the certificates made and are now availing of the schemes. What was peculiar about these parents, she said, was that they were economically better-off than the other children’s parents, and were educated as well. In that she came to the conclusion that they were upper castes. There were no possible ways available to the teacher for discovering whether the certificates were forged or not. Thus, more than anything else, this view of the teacher brought forth the ‘commonsense’ way in which she read caste, and how the caste identity would matter to her. Economic status and education worked as the parameters for inferring caste through such commonsense ways (that I describe in chapter 4, 6 and 7). As observations intensified, I was able to observe a few patterns in the everyday social relationships and the life at school. Although these patterns were interconnected, for the purpose of clarity it may be said that one was observed in relation to the ‘good children’ of the class V-B and those in the school, and the second related to the friendship groups.

iii. Peer group relations between children and socialization in relation to caste: Midday meal and the “good” children

Observations or rather supervising during the midday meals in Class V-B revealed some features of the peer group formations among children. The children who had the midday meal offered at school sat on the floor to have the meal. This was not because they had instructions to sit on the floor and eat. They did so because it was difficult to clean the desks when the food spilled over from the plate, and also because it was relatively easier to sit on the floor and eat. They did not sit in a line, but in small groups with friends. Though these groups were seemingly arbitrary, an inquiry revealed that there were some tentative criteria implicit in the formation of these groups. Similarities in the background of the children, (which at times appeared much
more than matters of coincidences) were found with respect to the location of their homes, acquaintance among parents, household income and occupation, and the family names.

Although a large number of children (at least 90% of those present) had the midday meal served in the school, some brought lunch from home. These children sat together on benches in a group while they had their food. Initially the group appeared to be ‘purely’ based on the condition that the children brought food from home. However, through concerted observations it came across that the group was fairly stable. Further, these children were also the ones who were referred to by the teachers as ‘the good children of our school’. The children had many traits that were regarded highly by the teachers – they were neat and clean, wore a proper uniform, were regular at school and better at studies, their exercise books and textbooks were well maintained – they even maintained a pencil box (and the other children admired their ‘matching’ pencil boxes). One of them, Hema, was the class monitor. The teachers described the six children as ‘obedient’, and so were their parents who appeared for all meetings and were described by the teachers as much more ‘cultured’ than other children’s parents were. The parents had arranged for tuitions for the children after school, for all the four school subjects.

These children were admittedly from better socioeconomic backgrounds, as their families could afford to let go of the midday meal and similarly ‘afford’ all the other ‘traits’ valued by the teacher. Interaction with Shivali revealed that none of them availed of the scholarships meant for the minorities and SC/ST children – and this was what Shivali said she ‘respected’ them for. As per the school records, their family incomes were around Rs. 80,000 per annum. All the six children’s mothers were housewives, whereas the fathers worked to earn for the family, some of whom were thekedars or contractors for varied kinds of jobs – plumbing, carpentry and small construction work. Two of the girls in the group of six, Neha and Nidhi, were sisters, and their father was a Pandit in a nearby temple. These six children were among the few children in class who wrote their full names and also asked for ‘surnames’ of the others with whom they interacted. For example, when I started visiting their school,
they insisted on knowing my full name, and expressed surprise when I said that I do not use a surname (I will describe this in detail in Chapter 7). Their class teacher Ms. Priyanka (the class teacher of V-B) told me that all of them had remained together ever since they joined the school. She also told me that through her experience she found that good children form a group because they cannot adjust to the ‘culture’ of other children’s.

**iv. The category of the ‘unknown’ or unfamiliar**

It is not that these children did not intermingle with the other children of the class. However, their deeper ties remained within the group. They ate together, came to school, went back together, exchanged things with each other, and played with each other. They even accompanied each other to the toilet. Their interactions with other children were primarily within the framework of classroom processes – like in a classroom activity. When these children fought among themselves, they sat alone in the class instead of joining other groups. The other groups in the class though stable and having been formed on the basis of the place of their residence, were apparently more flexible. When a child in the group fought with others in the group, she associated with other groups and other groups were also receptive to her. However, in a few days she went back to the original group.

This is not to say that caste and socioeconomic status share a cause and effect relation, but to indicate that an inquiry into how they work in the social world brings out a complicated design. Though it would be very easy to conclude that there was some kind of caste grouping at work, it would not appropriately represent the complexity of the case. It will be misleading to say that all the other children excepting this group were from lower castes. What lent the group its ‘exclusivity’ was a matter that I wanted to explore. However, it did appear very strongly that the class and caste dyad needs to be understood for this purpose. As a researcher, I never made an explicit attempt to ‘discover’ or ‘inquire’ about the children’s caste affiliation. However, I could not ignore the fact that a better socioeconomic status was evidently and invariably related to caste in most of the cases I had come across during the fieldwork.
at school and in the vicinity. A discussion with three children in the group is presented below:

I: Why do you all remain together?
Nidhi: Because we are best friends
Neha: Because we always play together
I: Why do you play together?
Anu: … our homes are nearby
Nidhi: Anu stays in the next lane, Sonia stays two houses ahead of Anu’s house, the others stay in the camp
I: So you meet after school?
Anu: When we don’t have tuitions and on holidays they come to my home…we all play with my sisters…they bring Krishna too…sometimes we play till dark and then their mother comes and we all get a scolding
I: Your mothers know each other?
Nidhi: Yes, they come to school together… for meetings and on the result day, together.
I: What about the other children of the class… don’t they stay near your house?
Neha: Many do, but they play separately… we don’t go to them
I: Why?
Nidhi: My mother told me to play only with Anu…
I: Why so?
Nidhi: She told me that Anu is a good girl….
I: What about the other girls?
In response to this question the girls started speaking simultaneously completing each other’s argument: They are not good….They give all sorts of gaali [cuss-words]…don’t bathe… they are so dirty…
Neha: And they have big fat lice in their hair…my mother said that if I mingle with them I will also get lice
Nidhi: Nobody from our home knows them or their parents….
Despite the fact that the children feel that their parents do not ‘know’ the other children and their parents, they unquestioningly accept the view that the other children are ‘dirty’ and not worthy enough to be spoken to. The implicit hatred and fear of contact with the ‘unknown’ is central to the image of the ‘other’ that is created or rather reproduced in the children’s cognition. The relationships and feelings in children within schools are not unmediated – there is a strong role that their families and teachers play in this regard. These discussions may not explain the basis of cohort formation and in-group and out-group politics among children, but they do highlight the manner in which children’s relationships are framed. They also describe how the narrative and description of filthiness mediates the everyday discourse in the community/at homes in the context of this social segregation, and the manner in which children are socialised in the content of such discourse. It provides a glimpse of how the narrative of ‘cleanliness’ and the category of ‘touch’ is located in an urban setting. As will be described in the next chapter as well, this peculiar narrative resides in the heart of descriptions of slums, people living in slums, and the poor. Through such observations ‘Dalit’ became an overarching category of inquiry. While understanding the ‘Dalit experience’, an array of meanings had to be connected and borne in mind which were situated/framed in a matrix of name, teachers’ perceptions, children’s groups, familial background, cleanliness, good behaviour, performance in examinations, and the like.

A similar complication emerged in the context of inquiring into ‘institutional knowledge’. The initial idea was to observe curricular processes, relations and meaning making through classroom observations and engagements. However, the school experience brought to the fore an absence of such activity. This made me explore how institutional relations worked in the absence of such curricular engagement and the manner in which the children experience schooling in such situations. What constitutes ‘institutional knowledge’ in such contexts? What purpose did the school serve? What did it institutionalize? These became some prominent questions. In similar processes, where I came to doubt my own formulations and notions (sometimes ambitions as well) the nature of qualitative inquiry was explicated. In fact, sometimes I felt the meaning of ‘method’ in the context of
educational research was more complicated than it appears to be. This was particularly so because as an educational researcher, I experienced a sense of ‘chaos’ as I ‘applied’ the techniques drawn from other disciplines.

This experience appears to be shared by the researchers working in the field of education, as Egan (2003) articulates, “To use, for economy’s sake, the popular sense of Kuhn’s terms, we may say that working with a paradigm drawn from a particular field of inquiry can only produce knowledge of interest to that field… Education… may be characterized as “pre-paradigmatic.” Of necessity, inquiry in these fields will lack the methodological security and rigor of inquiry in such relatively secure fields as psychology or sociology” [italics original] (p. 16 – 17). This feeling may get substantiated as the writing progresses.