

Research Paper

Unsettling caste-bound gender orders: the convergence of teacher commitment and pupil aspiration in two schools in Madhya Pradesh, India

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Abstract: *Whilst there has been significant progress towards gender equity in school enrolment, attendance and achievement in India since Independence in 1947, boys still out-perform girls in all these areas. Despite considerable social change and intervention in the last decade, poverty, the poor quality of government education, the highly abstract curriculum and restrictive class, caste and gender regimes interact to sustain gender inequality. This paper presents two case studies, focussed on gendered dimensions of schooling in and around two government schools in Madhya Pradesh, North Central India. The case studies illustrate that, despite the many challenges they had to overcome, girls from the most marginalised socio-economic groups were determined to succeed academically, and that two teachers, through their professionalism, attitudes and commitments, supported these girls in their struggles. Enrolment, attendance and achievement data demonstrates that, regardless of teachers' positions on equality of opportunity, the interaction of complex caste-based dynamics and gender regimes operated to ensure that Dalit girls from low-income groups faced the most persistent inequalities of opportunity. Despite the persistence of bias in educational opportunity, however, both teachers renounced discrimination, attempted to treat all pupils equally and ultimately inspired most of them to aim for academic success. Spaces were thus created to challenge gendered caste and class regimes and compensate for some of the inadequacies of the system. Future policies and strategies in pursuit of educational gender equity must be based on further exploration of the lives, practices and insights of such teachers.*

Introduction

In 1900, the crude literacy rate for women in India was less than 1%. At the first Census after Independence in 1951, this figure was 7.93%. By 2001, it had risen to 45.84% (Registrar General and Census Commissioner India, 2001, p 114)¹. Progress has undeniably been made, but despite gender specific policies, focussed strategies and significant investment in the last decade, the gender gap persists. By the end of the twentieth century, girls constituted 65% of the 89.64 million out-of-school children (Ramachandran, 2001, p 1). Policy statements have tended to lay a significant proportion of blame for the persistence of gendered inequality at the door of teachers (World Bank, 1997). Although located in highly patriarchal, gendered contexts, however, there are teachers who challenge class, caste and gender norms and aim to provide all pupils with opportunities to enhance their capabilities. The support provided by such teachers to pupils facing parental disinterest is vital, and can transform pupil pessimism and failure into optimism and tenacity (Sherry Chand and Shukla, 1998).

This paper, based on PhD 'fieldwork-in-progress' in Madhya Pradesh, North Central India², focuses on two such teachers, highlighting issues of structure and agency in the maintenance and confrontation of gender inequality. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate

¹ The Crude Literacy Rate is different from the 7+ Literacy Rate used in most calculations, including the remainder of the census publication.

² The first six months of field-work have been completed at the time of writing, the second will start in October 2002.

that whilst 'systems' function to sustain gender inequality, this inequality is increasingly challenged by female pupils, and by individual teachers, whose attitudes and practices actually function to confront and undermine it. (There is no attempt to generalise from the case studies to other teachers in India, nor to explore how representative the two teachers may or may not be.) Part 1 of the paper provides an overview of the gendered educational scenario in India, a discussion of published research and an outline of the data collection for the paper. Part 2 introduces the two schools, classes and teachers. Part 3 explores the enrolment, attendance and exam statistics of the two classes and outlines challenges to girls' academic performance. Part 4 explores the gendered dimensions of the two classroom environments. Part 5 explores a classroom bias that, although not immediately gendered, may have camouflaged gendered caste/class bias. The conclusion highlights the obligation on the Government of India to locate and learn from the lives and practices of its own inspirational teachers.

Elementary educational and gender in India: the research

Despite the commitments of the 1986/1992 National Policy on Education and the strategies of the two major educational initiatives of the last decade, the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), progress towards educational equity goals in India has been limited. Educational indicators for men and boys, southern states, urban areas and individuals from higher socio-economic and caste groups are superior to those for women and girls, northern 'Hindi Heartland' states, rural areas, and those from lower socio-economic and caste groups (Shariff, 1999; Registrar General and Census Commissioner India, 2001; Drèze and Sen, 2002; Ramachandran and Saihjee, 2002).

In 1998-1999, the National Family Health Survey II (NFHS-II) canvassed 30,000 urban and 60,000 rural households throughout India, and found that only 18% of the 15 to 19 year old girls surveyed had completed primary school³, 22% had completed middle school, 15% had completed high school, and 6% had completed higher secondary and above (IIPS and ORC Macro, 2000, p 27). Statistics indicate that Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities are amongst the most educationally excluded social groups in India (IIPS and ORC Macro, 2001, p 41). Rural girls from the lowest socio-economic groups in Indian society are the least likely to benefit from formal education (Shariff and Sudarshan, 1996; IIPS and ORC Macro, 2000).

Indian educational gender research has proliferated as academics and policy-makers attempt to understand and address the situation. Studies document the situation in quantitative and qualitative terms (Nayar, 1995a; Nayar, 1997; EdCil, 2000; Nayar, 2000; Wazir, 2000a), investigate user reasons for poor enrolment and high drop-out (Nayar, 1995b; Indira and Nagaraju, 1997) and evaluate the impacts of Non-Government Organisation (NGO) initiatives (Nayar, 1997; Nirantar, 1997; Ramachandran, 1998b; Rajagopal, 1999; Cordeiro, 2000; Nayar, 2000; Ramachandran, 2000; Wazir, 2000b). The persistence of entrenched gender imbalance has led to a scathing critique of the gap between policy and practice (Ramachandran, 1998a; Ramachandran, 1998b; Nayar, 2000), which has in turn spawned a few institutional gender critiques (Kabeer and Subrahmanian, 1999).

Much of the research addressing school processes and curriculum is 'grey literature' of government and quasi-government agencies, which can be difficult to obtain (NCERT, 2000; EdCil, 2001; NCERT, 2001a; NCERT, 2001b). The bulk of internationally accessible pedagogic studies focus on gender-bias in textbooks and teaching materials (Kalia, 1979;

³ Primary and Higher Secondary figures are slightly better if the age-range is extended. 35% of 10 to 14 year old girls had completed primary school, and 13% of 20 to 29 year old women had completed higher secondary.

Kumar, 1989; Harris, 1998; Rao and Dutt, 1999). There is, however, a growing body of work exploring interactional gender issues in schools and classrooms (Kumar, 1986; Parthasarathi, 1988; Ray, 1988; Kumari, 1991; Devendra, 1995; Paranjpe, 1995; Pal and Natarajan, 1997; Umamohan, Das and Jayasree, 1999; Karlekar, 2000). Few of these present sustained ethnographic analysis of gendered classroom realities, but this trend is changing, spear-headed by the study by Bhattacharjee addressing classroom gender dynamics (Bhattacharjee, 1999). A recent study addressing gender and equity issues in DPEP provides a sustained conceptual and theoretical framework, combined with statistical exploration and six empirical case studies (Ramachandran, 2002). The only shortcoming of the work is that the case studies were based on rapid data collection. There is virtually no literature based on the intersections of the attitudes, lives and practices of Indian government elementary teachers, much less their gender attitudes and practices.

The PhD research addresses this gap, exploring the intersection of teachers' attitudes and practices and girls' educational experiences. The paper addresses the gendered dimensions of the classes of two teachers committed to equal educational opportunities, whose attitudes and practice did not suggest gender bias. It does not present in-depth analysis of the motivations and attitudes of the two teachers, but focuses on analysis of classroom realities informed by knowledge of teacher attitudes and priorities. Foundational data for the paper came from the ethnographic experience of living and researching within the fieldwork area for five months. This was supplemented by data from regular, casual school visits and 33 systematic observations over five months in two classes; by interviews with each teacher, with eight girls (of different religions and castes) from each class and their families, and by data on teacher and pupil background. Pupil data covered sex, age, religion, caste, sub-caste, parents' work, annual attendance, receipt of government incentives, positions of responsibility, teachers' estimation of ability, and exam results in all subjects. Further work will be conducted with the two classes and respective communities. All the pupils and their parents will be interviewed, supplementing information on sub-caste and occupation with that on income, property ownership and educational investment priorities.

Vidya and Sagar schools and the classes of Deepak and Rounak

The research was based in an around Nakuur⁴, an agricultural town of 50,000 with virtually no industry and little private employment. The case studies were set in two co-educational government schools: Vidya, a town primary school and Sagar, a middle school in a village 5 kilometres from the town. Both schools operated a double shift system, although the middle school housed a primary school in the morning shift. Both also had single grade classes.

The town primary school had a roll of 740 pupils, 464 boys and 281 girls (a poor ratio even by Madhya Pradesh State standards). Pupils were almost equally divided between the morning and afternoon shifts, although there was a preference for the afternoon shift. The school had 16 teachers (ten of whom were women) and a head-teacher for 14 classes: seven teachers per shift. The school served a highly heterogeneous town population. Although there were Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian pupils, most were from low income families associated with the lowest quartile of the hierarchical varna (caste) system. Educational statistics label this group as 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC), the most marginalised of whom are the 'Scheduled Castes', (previously referred to as 'Untouchables', now often referred to as 'Dalit', meaning 'Oppressed'). There were a few indigenous pupils (referred to as 'Scheduled Tribe' - ST⁵) in the school. There were very few 'caste Hindus' (referred to as 'general caste' in educational statistics) from the 'top' three divisions of the varna system.

⁴ Names of places and individuals have been changed.

⁵ They are labelled Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe as they were 'scheduled' in the Indian Constitution for special development efforts.

The village middle school had a roll of 151 pupils, 87 boys and 64 girls (a good ratio by Madhya Pradesh State standards). The school had three teachers (one of whom was a woman) plus the head-teacher for three classes in the afternoon shift. The school served a catchment area dominated by the Gurjar jati (sub-caste) of the OBC group. There were only a few non-Hindu and Scheduled Tribe pupils, and the Dalit: non-Dalit ratio was less positive than in the primary school, especially for girls. Of the Hindus, only a few were 'general' caste: most were Gurjar OBC. The general and OBC pupils lived in the village in the immediate vicinity of the school. The Scheduled Tribe pupils lived in a small gathering on the opposite side of the road to the main village, and the Dalit pupils came from a large, entirely Dalit settlement about one kilometre away from the village. Parents of the middle school pupils were slightly more affluent than those of the primary school. This was because there was less opportunity in the village for private education, and, more significantly, the poorest pupils had dropped out by the middle stage.

The physical impression of the two schools was quite different. The primary school infrastructure (six classes, a veranda and two small rooms) and considerable playground area were neglected. The fence, taps and toilet blocks were broken, stagnant water flanked the rear of the classrooms and rubbish from the bus station overflowed into the grounds, which were also used as a toilet area by bus passengers. Breakages which could have been easily fixed with minimal effort or expense were left broken. The entire infrastructure of the middle school (four classes, a veranda, two very small rooms and a restricted play area) appeared maintained. The walls of the classrooms had been decorated as part of the UNICEF 'Joyful Learning' Campaign, and funds had been recently gathered to extend and redecorate the school. Pupils were encouraged to maintain their surrounding and all shoes were left outside during lessons.

The academic atmosphere of the two schools was also quite distinct, reflecting the physical one. The atmosphere of the primary school appeared indifferent and defeated. Pupils did not appear 'school-socialised' and there seemed to be a gulf between them and most of the teachers. (This atmosphere was not reproduced in some of the individual classes, however, where teachers and pupils related well and discipline was maintained.) The middle school was more quiet, ordered and studious: pupils were respectful and generally well behaved, even outside classrooms in the absence of teachers. The atmosphere was not repressive, however, and pupils seemed comfortable with the teachers. (This pattern was also reversed in some classes, where pupils were more reserved.) There was a greater sense of control and purpose to the lessons in the middle school, whereas those in the primary school were often louder, faster and sometimes apparently chaotic.

The two case-study classrooms were also quite different: the primary one had far more potential than the middle school one. The primary classroom was large, light and clutter-free, with a stone-slab floor. There were two blackboards, many large windows with shutters (but no catches), and an old cupboard filled with ancient sports equipment. The room was linked to the next one by two large windows, allowing for considerable disturbance, especially when the next-door teacher did not come to class. Pupils obviously had (self-chosen) set places, but the linear arrangement was determined by strips of seating mats. There were three rows of threadbare matting: two used by boys, one used by girls. The boys sat at the right side, in one and a half rows in front of the teachers' desk, the girls took up one and three-quarter rows on the left. Heavy bags were filled with textbooks, study guides, exercise books, lunch, water, slate, pens and pencils. These bags were kept to the side of each pupil, serving as improvised desks. The pupils in the long full rows sat cross-legged, almost in each other's laps. Due to lack of space, they either faced the teacher and twisted their bodies to the side to write, faced the side and twisted towards the teacher to listen, or simply gazed to the side, never looking at the teacher. The pupils in the incomplete rows were more evenly spaced, and, significantly, able to sit towards the front of the class. They did not have to contort their bodies to work and they seemed more attentive than those at the back of the long rows.

The middle school room was small and the pupils were cramped. The only furniture was a small table and a plastic chair that was brought in and out for lessons. The door was next to the table and a very poor quality blackboard. There were two small windows: one on the right side, one at the back: both opening onto neighbour's property. The class was very stuffy and there was little ventilation. None of the classes were divided by walls that reached the roof, so there was invariably disturbance from next door lessons. Pupils sat cross-legged on the floor, but, despite the cramped class, spacing was reasonable, as there were four rows of new mats: sufficient to cover the free space for sitting. The girls sat in two rows at the left, the boys over-spilt two to the right. There was space at the end of the girls' rows, but no boys sat there. As in the primary class, all pupils kept their bags to the side of their rows, using them as makeshift desks.

The two case-study teachers were selected after two months spent conducting 50 systematic observations in all 21 classes of the two schools. Both of the selected teachers were outstanding in many ways. They demonstrated commitment in their jobs, in preparation, teaching and marking. They renounced discrimination of any sort (caste, class and gender) and aimed to provide equal educational opportunities. They were determined that they saw pupils as children, not as 'gendered' boys or girls, and they did not believe that their academic expectations were influenced by pupils' sex. They had respect for pupils and their parents. They felt they should challenge gender patterns in the allocation of monitor roles in the school and class and encourage both girls and boys to succeed and not be ashamed to aim for professional jobs. Both teachers had been with their respective classes for the past three years, they knew their pupils by name and by character, and they were highly appreciated by pupils and parents.

Deepak, the primary teacher, taught a morning shift Standard Five class. He had been recruited as an 'educational worker' three years previously. He had received only three weeks training, consisting of theoretical lectures declaimed from morning to evening in a large auditorium to hundreds of trainee educational workers. He was, despite this lack of training, a very good teacher. He was young, unmarried and highly qualified, with a BSc, and MSc in Chemistry. He had completed his school education in the government system, achieving over 75% in final Standard 12 exams. He was quiet but confident, especially in the classroom. (It was not possible to ascertain the level of his gender awareness and reflectivity in the first stage of the fieldwork.) He was from a Scheduled Caste family and his father was a head-teacher. He did not feel himself a victim of discrimination and may not have accepted the term 'Dalit'. Deepak lived quite far from the school, and usually travelled by cycle or scooter. This mobility meant that he was less accessible to students out of school hours than teachers who had no means of transport.

Rounak, the middle school teacher, taught Science, Social Science, Sanskrit and English to all three middle school classes: although only Standard Eight was observed for the case study. She was a qualified teacher with 19 years experience, with MA degrees in Hindi and Economics. She had been involved since 1987 with an NGO focussed on the professional development of government teachers. She had received in-service training in Science, Social Science and Maths, and was a resource teacher for the NGO, encouraging other teachers and developing materials. She had also been involved in developing literacy materials for adult women. She was extrovert and confident, highly gender conscious and very reflective, determined to create spaces for all children to challenge restrictive gender, caste and class norms. She came from a Brahman family and had remained unmarried to provide for her widowed sister-in-law and mother. Rounak lived five kilometres from the school. There had been periods when she challenged convention and cycled to school (in a sari), but generally went by bus or rode pillion on the head-teachers' scooter. Her frequent long waits at the roadside for return buses meant that she was often accessible for pupils to chat to after school hours.

Patterns in enrolment, attendance and exam statistics

In contrast to the trend across most 'Hindi Heartland' states of North Central India, both case study classes were highly subscribed and attended. There was no obvious gender bias in enrolment in either class: girls, in fact, dominated primary enrolment. The overall enrolment of girls in both classes was significantly better than 1998-1999 state averages calculated by the NFHS-II MP survey. NFHS-II MP data for 10 to 14 year olds (urban and rural) indicated a 1999 primary completion ratio of 1.26 boys for every girl (IIPS and ORC Macro, 2001, p 22). This figure rose to an enrolment ratio of 1.65 boys for every girl in the primary school, and fell substantially to 0.8 boys for every girl in the focus class (25 girls and 20 boys). NFHS-II MP data for 15 to 19 year olds indicated a highly gendered 1999 state middle school completion ratio of 1.95 boys for every girl: almost 2:1 (IIPS and ORC Macro, 2001, p 22). This fell to an enrolment ratio of 1.36 boys for every girl in the middle school, and slightly further to 1.27 boys to every girl in the focus class (18 girls and 23 boys). Both classes had better female: male enrolment ratios than any other in each school. According to pupils and parents, this high female enrolment was a direct consequence of the two teachers' egalitarian attitudes and high commitment.

The lack of obvious gender bias in enrolment may have also been influenced by the socio-economic composition of the classes. Literature documents the increasing trend for parents with some spare resources to invest in private education for sons but not daughters, and those without to send their sons to government schools, and keep their daughters at home (Ramachandran and Saihjee, 2002 p 1604, p 1613, Note 6). This may result in girls in government schools coming from higher socio-economic families than boys. Table 1 outlines the caste-wise composition of the classes. Although it does not provide background on economic group/class, tentative assumptions can be reached as national statistics indicate that Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Muslim communities have the lowest household and per capita income levels in India (Shariff, 1999, p 46).

Class	Total		General		Other		Dalit	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Standard 5	25	20	3	3	13	11	9	6
Standard 8	18	23	2	3	12	13	4	7

Table 1. Enrolment by Social Group

The 'General' category includes members of the top three varnas of the caste system, the 'Other' group includes OBC, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Scheduled Tribe pupils, whilst the 'Dalit' group is exclusively Scheduled Caste.

This data needs to be supplemented with detail on household income, families' gendered educational investment priorities, and the total numbers of children of different social groups in the two catchment areas (which will be collected in the second phase). Even in the absence of such data, however, some trends were visible in the two classes: most brothers of interviewed girls attended private schools, whereas sisters of some of the boys engaged in discussion were kept at home.

Despite the quality of the two case-study teachers, girls from the poorest families had to contend with parental opposition to their schooling and a lack of interest and commitment to its pursuit. Resource-poor families invested in their sons' educational and material well being before that of their daughters. The power of traditions developed by patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence (wives moving to their in-laws homes and villages) and the ensuing gendered divisions of labour combined with poverty to undermine the value attached by poor parents to education for their daughters. As educational success required considerable investment without the guarantee of any economic return, these parents felt that marriage

was the only option available to their daughters. This disinclination towards education was heightened by the difficulties and corruption faced by anyone attempting to get employment. Some parents expressed the opinion that education would give their daughter contempt for domestic and labour tasks, laying bad foundations for her submission and thus happiness in married life. This belief encouraged parents to assume that, given their poverty and their insight into the limited labour market returns to female education, they were doing the best thing for their daughter by restricting her education.

Although there was no obvious gender bias in enrolment, both classes demonstrated an age-related caste bias. The wide age range in both classes was surprising. Apart from three boys, however, Dalit pupils were amongst the eldest in each class. Tables 2a and 2b display pupils age-distribution.

Youngest: 9 years								Average: 10 to 11 years								Eldest: 12 to 14 years							
Total		Gen.		Other		Dalit		Total		Gen.		Other		Dalit		Total		Gen.		Other		Dalit	
G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
6	4	1	1	5	3	1	0	10	9	2	0	5	7	3	2	9	9	0	2	2	4	7	2

Table 2a. Age distribution at enrolment by social group: Standard Five

In Standard Five, ten pupils were 9 years old, nineteen were 10 and 11 years (the 'correct' age for this class) and sixteen pupils were between 12 and 14 years. Nine of the 14 eldest were Dalit pupils: seven out of the nine girls and two out of the six boys.

Youngest: 11 to 12 years								Average: 13 to 14 years								Eldest: 15 to 16 years							
Total		Gen.		Other		Dalit		Total		Gen.		Other		Dalit		Total		Gen.		Other		Dalit	
G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
3	5	-	-	3	5	-	-	12	10	2	2	9	7	1	1	3	8	-	1	-	1	3	6

Table 2b. Age distribution at enrolment by social group: Standard Eight

In Standard Eight, eight pupils were 11 or 12 years old, twenty-two were the 'correct' age of 13 to 14 and eleven were 15 or 16 years. Nine of the 11 eldest were Dalit pupils: three out of the four girls and six out of the seven boys. The eldest pupil in the middle class was the only representative of the most marginalised Dalit sub-caste, purportedly still treated as 'untouchable', even by other Dalit groups (Ramachandran and Saihjee, 2002, p 1613, Note 5). This data suggests that the Dalit pupils had enrolled late, or had failed promotional exams and were retained in a class with younger pupils.

There was an obvious attendance gender bias in both classes: girls were less regular than boys. Tables 3a and 3b display attendance distribution by social group (The denominator given in each case is the total number of pupils of the respective sex and social group Figures are displayed in this way as percentages with such a small sample are misleading). The obvious gender bias was also underwritten in the primary class by a gendered, caste bias and in the middle class by a highly discriminatory caste bias, that was also gendered.

Best attenders								Less good attenders							
Total		General		Other		Dalit		Total		General		Other		Dalit	
G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
9/25	13/20	2/3	2/3	4/13	7/11	3/9	4/6	16/25	7/20	1/3	1/3	9/13	4/11	6/9	2/6

Table 3a. Attendance distribution by social group: Standard Five

In the primary class, girls were clustered around the lower end of the attendance ranking. Nineteen out of the twenty-five least regular attenders were girls, with only seven in the top twenty attenders. Dalit pupils were distributed evenly throughout the attendance ranking, but boys were more regular. Four out of six Dalit boys and only one Dalit girl were among the top twelve attenders. Six out of nine Dalit girls and the only ST girl were among the lowest 50% of attenders, whereas only two out of six Dalit boys were in this group.

Best attenders								Less good attenders							
Total		General		Other		Dalit		Total		General		Other		Dalit	
G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
11/18	11/23	2/2	2/3	9/12	9/13	0/4	0/7	7/18	11/23	0/2	1/3	3/12	3/13	4/4	7/7

Table 3b. Attendance distribution by social group: Standard Eight

The distribution of girls in the middle class was slightly less gendered: four girls ranked among the six least regular attenders, eight were in the middle band and six were in the top fourteen. No Dalit pupil ranked among the top twenty-five attenders. Eleven of the remaining sixteen attenders were Dalit pupils: all seven boys and all four girls. One of the Dalit boys and three of the four girls were among the six lowest attenders in the class.

Attendance imbalance arose as girls from the poorest families were the main supporters of their mothers in domestic responsibilities. Even in supportive families, daughters, especially the eldest, were required to step in for their mothers and miss school when she was overburdened, ill or over-stretched by visiting relatives. A challenge to a girl's regular attendance also arose due to issues around menstruation: her own and her mother's. Traditionally, menstruating women in this area did not enter the kitchen, or handle food or drink for others. A daughter might thus be kept at home when her mother was menstruating, especially if there were guests at home. Furthermore, neither school had had toilet facilities. A nearby 'panchayat' toilet was used by the middle school pupils, but it was very dirty and there was no water available: there was no provision for hygiene of the person or the facilities. School lasted for 5 hours, most of which time was spent cross-legged on the floor: significant for a girl at any time, but especially so during menstruation. Consequently, eldest daughters from families who could not afford domestic help were kept at home on the worst days of their periods, as well as on those of their mothers.

Pupils' percentage results for all subjects⁶ from exams held at the end of the previous year (Standards Four and Seven) were used to assess achievement. Tables 4a and 4b outline pupils' achievement distribution by social group (The following observations are based on overall scores across subjects. As exams were not witnessed, so it was not possible to know how they were invigilated or marked, nor to assess if gender bias entered the assessment procedure. Despite this proviso, however, the overall ranking tallied with observation-based assessments.) Like enrolment, and unlike attendance figures, there was no glaring gender bias against girls in overall score distribution: in fact, girls' performance was generally stronger than that of boys. In the primary class, there were 13 girls and 9 boys in the top 50% (22 pupils), and twelve girls and eleven boys in the bottom 50% (23 pupils). In the middle class, there were ten girls and nine boys in the top 50%, and eight girls and eleven boys in the bottom 50% (19 pupils). Three boys did not sit the exam, and the lowest four achievers were boys.

Although there was no significant gender bias in achievement, there were complicated gendered caste patterns. Dalit pupils were clustered in the lower half of the achievement rank in both classes, although this pattern was more pronounced in the middle school class (where the older boys seemed particularly disaffected).

Top achievers > 50%								Bottom achievers < 50%							
Total		General		Other		Dalit		Total		General		Other		Dalit	
G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
13/25	11/20	3/3	3/3	8/13	5/11	2/9	3/6	12/25	9/20	-	-	5/13	6/11	7/9	3/6

Table 4a. Achievement distribution by Social Group: Standard Five

⁶ Primary: Hindi, English, Environmental Studies and Maths. Middle: Hindi, Sanskrit, English, Social Studies, Science and Maths.

In the primary class, there were only five Dalit pupils among the top achievers and ten among the lowest. In the middle school class, there were only two Dalits in the top twenty (both boys), whilst there were nine among the lowest eighteen.

Top achievers > 50%								Bottom achievers < 50%							
Total		General		Other		Dalit		Total		General		Other		Dalit	
G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
10/18	9/23	1/2	1/3	9/12	6/13	0/4	2/7	8/18	14/23	1/2	2/3	3/12	7/13	4/4	5/7

Table 4b. Achievement distribution by Social Group: Standard Eight

There was also a gender hierarchy to Dalit achievement: the highest Dalit achievers were boys: three in each class. In the primary class, Dalit boys ranked third, fifth and ninth. In the middle school class, they ranked eleventh, sixteenth and twenty-first. In the primary class, girls were clustered between twenty-first and thirty-eighth position, followed only by one Dalit boy who ranked forty-third. In the middle class, Dalit girls took twenty-second, twenty-seventh, twenty-ninth and thirty-first rank, out-performing the remaining three Dalit boys sitting the exam, who took the last three positions in the class, from thirty-sixth to thirty-eighth.

The highly academic, abstract nature of the curriculum discriminated against those children whose social environment was not highly academic, those discouraged at home and in wider society from applying themselves to academic concerns beyond the classroom, and those whose parents neither possessed facilitatory cultural capital nor resources to 'buy' it (in terms of academic support). There were caste, class and gender dimension to this discrimination: with girls from the 'lowest' castes and income groups facing multiple disadvantage. The environment of pupils from higher class and caste families in the case-studies possessed more of the cultural capital necessary to facilitate formal school success. The social environments of pupils from lower class, especially Dalit families, without foundations in a history of access to or benefit from formal education, possessed negligible amounts.

Within class and caste groupings, the gendered division of labour and gender regimes also determined girls' and boys' exposure to differentiated academic expectations, regardless of shared cultural capital (Liddle and Joshi, 1986, pp 61-62; Dhruvarajan, 1999, pp 35; Palriwala, 1999, pp 52-53; Agarwal, 2000, p 37). Middle class girls in the two classes were encouraged to complete their schooling, but it was assumed that their ideal vocations, even in the labour force, would be secondary to those of their husbands, in caring and practical domains (Rao and Rao, 1982; Liddle and Joshi, 1986; Derné, 1994; Seymour, 1994a; Seymour, 1994b). There was no such expectation for working class girls. Virtually none of the parents interviewed believed that their daughters would need formal education for the employment they might obtain, if they were to obtain any at all.

Not only were familial and societal expectations less for girls than for boys, but academic success was generally more of a challenge for girls. Given the educational priority afforded to boys, parents with limited funds were less inclined to make the investments that were necessary for a child to benefit from government education. The first basic requirement for school success was a set of official textbooks for the academic year. These books were available on the open market, but as their cost was prohibitive for some, many government schemes provided free textbooks, especially for girls. All Dalit children in the primary school received a small monthly stipend and uniforms and textbooks, yet parents reported that the government books arrived too late to be of any use. Poor parents were less ready to invest for their daughters, so her chances of making sense of lessons and homework that were taxing, even with textbooks, were severely reduced without them.

Success was also more challenging for girls of all social groups as they had less opportunity to do schoolwork at home than boys. Much more time was spent by the girls in housework

and sibling care, than by the boys in farming or even leisure activity. Although some village boys did have taxing outdoor work, they claimed the hours were less. They were also less intrusive to general school routines. The majority of the boys in Deepak's town class claimed that they did not engage in any work outside school. Girls were therefore likely to be more tired than boys during school hours, and possibly more cold. The morning shift was particularly problematic for girls who had to do considerable work in the home. If girls were to be at school by 7.30 am, they had to wake much earlier (some girls woke up to 2 hours before their brothers) to get the work done in time. Early mornings were particularly demanding in the winter season, as they were bracingly cold and girls' clothes were even less protective than those of their brothers. Another impact of son preference meant that girls were likely to be more hungry and less well nourished than boys, with insufficient energy and vitamin/mineral balance for academic pursuits (IIPS and ORC Macro, 2001, p 188; Drèze and Sen, 2002).

Studies have shown the impact of confinement to the domestic sphere on girls' ability to make sense of material in the textbooks, on the development of their spatial skills, and on their confidence (see Coffey and Delamont, 2000). As many girls in the case studies, especially those from higher caste/class communities, were discouraged from going outside the home without a definite purpose, they had restricted interaction with a wider social world. As girls were more involved than boys in domestic tasks, they also had less opportunity to watch television (where one was available, which was quite often even in the Dalit settlement). As boys had more free time and licence to wander, they were more exposed to the outside world through their own direct experience, but also through exposure to television in their own or others' homes. Given the visual poverty of most textbooks, even daily watching of a news bulletin helped in navigation of the Environmental Studies/Social Studies syllabi.

The inaccessibility of the curriculum and the hierarchy of family support from high class/caste to low and from male to female, meant that academic success for girls was, above all, a matter of 'stubborn' determination. A pupil's determination to succeed academically was influenced by cultural capital, the benefits of relative wealth, and by sufficient competence, but also by perception of the ultimate utility of the education pursued. Most of the girls in my study came from the lowest socio-economic groups. Most had mothers who were illiterate or who had completed less than 5 years education: all faced a future over which they appeared to have no control. All except two of the interviewed parents said they would marry their daughters between the ages of 16 and 20, although half did say that they wanted their daughters to finish their education before marriage. All said that the marriages would be arranged, although two said that their daughters would be allowed to take some part in the selection of the groom. They all said that their daughters' futures depended on their in-laws, and that they could only consider work of any kind if their in-laws allowed it. Some daughters resisted their parents' marriage ideas, and wished they could continue their education in the same way as their brothers, but all felt that they had no bargaining power and no options other than to accept arranged marriages. Despite all these de-motivating factors, all the girls interviewed were determined to make a success of their school experience. The exam results show that, despite irregular attendance, many did. Perhaps they saw the classroom as one domain where they could have some control over what they did, and how they did it.

Gendered dimensions of classroom environments

Numerical, observational and interview data were collected simultaneously. Patterns in the numerical data complemented exploration of teachers' interactional gender bias, within a framework informed by UK quantitative studies (see Skelton, 1997). There was little evidence of gender bias in teacher-inspired interaction. Both teachers shared their gaze equally across the sex-segregated rows, demonstrating aware, inclusive strategies. (The fact that boys' and girls' rows were almost equal in both classes made this less challenging than in others where girls were few). In terms of selecting pupils to read, Rounak seemed to make a more

conscious and successful effort to involve all pupils. Deepak appeared to select more boys, but claimed that he did vary the readers, and that observations must have been conducted on days when the boys' row was leading. In terms of questioning, Rounak utilised four questioning techniques. She often asked up and down the rows, sometimes asked the entire class then selected from volunteers, sometimes directly selected a pupil and occasionally maintained a declamatory monologue with open questions and no pause for response. Rounak made conscious attempts to avoid bias in pupil selection. Deepak either asked the pupils up and down the rows (starting alternately with boys then girls rows), or maintained a declamatory monologue with questions, allowing any pupil to join the chorus of replies whilst the monologue continued. It was therefore difficult to make a substantiated assessment of his questioning style, as he rarely asked a pupil a question by name. Despite this difficulty, it was concluded that the questioning patterns of both teachers were generally gender-aware and egalitarian.

Despite the lack of obvious interactional gender bias, and regardless of teacher commitment to the equal treatment of all pupils, both classes were located in a highly hierarchical and patriarchal society. They consequently shared many conspicuously gendered features: in terms of organisational strategies, pupil behaviour and teaching materials.

The most conspicuous gendered feature of the two classrooms lay in organisation. Whilst this dimension was obvious, it was not necessarily highly excluding. Rounak claimed that mixed sex organisational strategies could be costly in terms of girls' progress, retention at school and parental support. Seating in both classes was sex-segregated, in rows leading away from the teacher. When tasks were allocated or questions asked, both teachers tended to select from either boys' or girls' 'groups'. Where pair or group work was organised, it was mixed on only two occasions. The parents of some girls (and even a few girls themselves) regretted the lack of availability of single sex schools, so teachers tended to discourage too much interaction in school. Deepak appeared unconcerned about this, Rounak tried to help children interact sensibly, in order to help girls overcome their hesitation. She was frequently criticised for this, especially if interaction became mild flirtation. In such instances, girls ran the risk of being withdrawn from school, whilst at the most boys might be moved to another school. There was a small amount of interaction amongst the high-achieving pupils in the primary class, virtually no teacher-directed or spontaneous interaction between Standard Eight boys and girls within or outside the classroom. (All pupils, however, were less self-conscious and more ready to mix away from the immediate gaze of teachers or parents).

The second conspicuously gendered feature of the two environments was the ways in which boys and girls behaved as 'groups'. Within the classroom and school, boys were generally more bold, adventurous and vocal, whilst girls were generally more self-conscious, retiring and quiet. This tendency increased at the middle stage. Boys in both classes tended to need more control and monitoring, and girls were generally more passive, requiring less attention, often thereby receiving less. Many boys did not seem studious and conscientious, whereas most girls appeared serious about their studies. In experimental group work conducted outside the middle school classroom, boys were easily distracted, whereas girls worked systematically and collaboratively through set tasks.

Pupil response to open questions asked to the entire class was also highly gendered. Boys were more audibly 'involved' in the questioning process and girls were more silent. Boys in both classes tended to maintain an audible, running response to the teachers' questions, whether these questions were part of a monologue (in which case, responses had to be loud) or followed by a gap for an answer. Few girls maintained an audible response in the same manner. Observation from the front of both classes revealed that many girls in both classes were actually silently mouthing the answers: but the teachers either did not see this, or they did, and did not respond. The main mode of response to teacher questions in Deepak's class was calling out: a strategy girls' resisted. Only one girl called out frequently and five others (including one Dalit girl)

called out from time to time. Five others joined in occasionally, but their voices were barely audible. Fourteen rarely spoke. Most girls in this class were so self-conscious of speaking loudly that the teacher allowed them to come to his desk to respond to individual questions. On these occasions, despite my proximity, I could not hear their whispered responses. Pupils in the middle class did not need to raise their voices to contribute to class activity, so participation was easier for girls. Nevertheless, only three girls contributed frequently and confidently. Eight others (including only two Dalit girls) contributed from time to time, but very self-consciously.

Boys were more ready to take risks, and many of their answers were indeed incorrect. This was ignored by the Deepak and often laughed at (good-naturedly) by Rounak, a response that the adolescent boys either welcomed or shrugged off. Most girls were far more risk-averse and did not welcome such laughter. The girls who responded regularly in both classes were among the top achievers: their confidence presumably pushed them to break traditional gender patterns. Without this confidence, most girls did not engage audibly with the teaching/learning process. Whilst this did not mean that they did not engage in any way, it did mean that they received less teacher attention than the boys and the vocal girls.

The third and most fundamentally excluding gendered feature of the two environments was the nature of the syllabus and teaching materials. As noted in the literature, the syllabus was highly biased towards 'male-interest' issues, and there were very few positive female role models in the textbooks. As most of the curriculum content was based on experiences outside of the home, girls were more likely than boys to experience problems understanding and applying them. The syllabus was not only highly male-oriented, but it was also highly abstract and academic, reinforced by an examination style which demanded verbatim reproduction of abstract, textbook information. The education observed, where taught according to government curriculum and examination norms, was demanding, abstract, divorced from immediate life concerns, and biased towards men and urban, elite Hindu life-styles. Two subjects in the middle school were based on an NGO intervention, where content and approach were more engaging and accessible. (The pedagogic advantage of the middle school Science and Social Science textbooks and approach contributed to differences in engagement and comprehension between the classes, but this cannot be explored in this paper.)

The official knowledge paradigm created exclusion, as pupils were taught to memorise and reproduce knowledge deemed important by others, presented as objective truth. The 'others' who determine what should be taught were predominantly higher socio-economic class, and caste, urban males (Rao and Dutt, 1999, p 152). Highly trained and well-resourced teachers might have been able to overcome such restrictions to design materials to include marginalised pupils. Indian government teachers are not highly trained, they have virtually no resources and few have been trained in any practical approaches. Their own teacher education is usually demanding, abstract, and highly divorced from practical concerns (Agnihotri *et al.*, 1994, pp 124-125). Consequently, many of the committed teachers in the two schools did what they could and taught subjects in the abstract ways they were presented in the textbooks (which essentially constituted the syllabus). Rounak presented an exception to this pattern, but few teachers demonstrated the level of commitment and reflection that had led to her persistent urge to improve her performance.

Interest-based classroom interactional bias

Although conscious interactional gender bias was not evident in either case-study classroom, exclusion of a different nature did exist in both classes. It was pronounced in the primary class: almost indiscernible, but there, in the middle school one. This exclusion was based on pupils' ability to keep up with the academic curriculum, and their determination (or otherwise) to persist despite all odds. Although numerical data in support of the gendered dimension of this exclusion is not available, other data gathered during this study indicated that girls in the two schools faced more challenges to their academic success and determination. (The

second phase of data collection will focus on these two groups, exploring group composition, and the experiences and attitudes of all involved: pupils, parents and teachers.)

Deepak (and almost all teachers observed) did not interact with the entire class. He interacted, subconsciously, with those pupils who could keep up with the highly academic content and who engaged in class activity: essentially, but not exactly, the same pupils who achieved high exam results. There was no gender bias to this core of pupils: it consisted of equal numbers of boys and girls. No obvious pattern emerged in the religious and caste composition, but core group boys were generally of lower caste than core group girls. There was a definite income bias: only one parent of the twelve pupils in the core group worked as a daily wage labourer. (This was the father of a determined Dalit girl – the only one in the core group.) A highly atypical finding was that half of the core group boys were Dalit: perhaps inspired to success by the example and encouragement of their teacher.

Aside from this core group, about forty percent of pupils in the primary class seemed totally disengaged from the teaching/learning process. This group, however, did not correspond exactly with the lowest achievers in the end of year exams. The lowest achievers in the Standard Four internal exams were eleven boys and seven girls, almost the inverse of the composition of the disengaged group. (All the exam results were superior to observations of performance, however, leading to the assumption that the marks had been generous.) Regardless of the mismatch between two groups, the disengaged group was gendered: it contained twice as many girls as boys. There was much ethnographic data to suggest that the primary girls would have found it harder to maintain an interest in a curriculum that was so divorced from their essentially homebound, domestic lifestyles.

The disengaged pupils came to school, sat vacantly through the lessons, very rarely spoke, had no interaction with the teacher, disappeared during the breaks, and left immediately at the end of sessions. The demeanour of these pupils suggested that they were switched off and not making any sense of lesson content, but their quietness and their copying strategies allowed them to continue undiscovered by the teacher. Boys sat vacantly, interacted quietly with their neighbours or messed around and were reprimanded. Girls drew in their books⁷, plaited each other's hair, made origami figures from scrap paper (or even textbooks) or copied homework from one of their friends. During class reading sessions, although they appeared to be following the words in the books, they were in fact just dragging their fingers across the page. They had no idea where the reader was, as their fingers were in the wrong places!

Distracting non-engagement was reprimanded, but as very little of this behaviour was distracting, the teacher either did not notice it, or ignored it. In maths lessons, it appeared that the core group finished their work and had it marked by the teacher while half the class were still copying problems from the board. When the pupils with the correct answers returned to their rows, leaving the teacher marking other books, they allowed their nearest neighbours to copy their work. Their answers spread up and down the rows and eventually most of the books looked good. Ironically, it was only the minority who understood what they were doing who had more regular errors in their books, as part of the process of getting to the correct answers. The neatest books were the most suspicious!

The pattern of teacher interaction was very different in the middle school classroom. Rounak was very concerned to interact with all pupils, especially those typically disengaged and disadvantaged. She spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on her teaching approach and the conventional style of evaluation, frustrated by the persistent comprehension problems of some pupils. She tried to understand and compensate for parental disinterest,

⁷ One girl drew for almost all the time her class was observed her class. She had considerable talent, but art was never part of formal lessons.

frequent absences and poor comprehension, pursuing in-service education to improve her repertoire of approaches, often teaching after the end of the day's session and offering free extra sessions in the school premises at exam time. Despite these commitments, however, it appeared that Rounak did not interact regularly with a few pupils: those who showed no interest and who could not be drawn into interaction.

This group comprised the same number of girls and boys, but this composition did not necessarily indicate female success. The girls had not improved their performance to compete with the boys: the boys, all of whom were Dalits, did not perform. They were the three eldest pupils in the class (five years older than the youngest and three years 'overage'), had repeated many times, and were now regarded at home as men who should be contributing to their families' income. Two of the girls were also Dalits, although their home circumstances were not explored. The only other pupil a low attending Brahman - an eldest daughter with an ailing mother, a senile grandmother and a non-supportive father threatening immediate marriage upon failure of Standard 8 Board Exams (which was taken as a given).

These pupils seemed to have 'given up'. They had little interest in the business of school and little sense of its relevance. They came infrequently, and when they did, were not drawn to interact with Rounak in any way. This behaviour stood out in the class, where most of the pupils interacted respectfully but affectionately with their teacher. Whilst she tried to encourage all pupils those who displayed negative indifference to her efforts were the least likely to benefit from them as the year progressed. (This dynamic occurs frequently in well-resourced environments, but teachers in such settings can usually rely on extra assistance to assess and work with such pupils.) The fact that this disengaged group was so small bears testimony to Rounak's awareness and effort. It also bears testimony to the content of the alternative syllabi in Science and Social Science and to the in-service training and encouragement provided by the NGO.

The disengaged group of pupils in both classes comprised poor performers. Whilst there were no more poor-performing boys than girls in the middle school class, this underlined male failure rather than female success. Other ethnographic data suggest that interest-based bias may have camouflaged a highly gendered caste and class bias. Further exploration of these dynamics may provide an insight into the broader operation of gendered educational exclusion in other Indian government classes.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the ways in which education in two Indian government elementary classes both sustained and confronted gender inequality. As a generalisation, the poor quality of government schools and teachers, the abstract curriculum, and class, caste and gender regimes interact to sustain the poor academic performance of most pupils from lower socio-economic group, especially girls from these groups. In the two case studies, the majority of girls were determined to challenge restrictive norms and succeed academically, against all odds. The intersection of class, caste and gender regimes, however, and the gendered nature of the curriculum functioned to sustain gendered inequality. In contrast to this, the gender attitudes and practices of the two teachers challenged restrictive, hierarchical norms: they supported girls in their endeavours, creating spaces for more girls to enrol and succeed than is the norm in comparable schools. Regardless of teacher determination, however, enrolment, attendance and achievement data indicate that Dalit performance was inferior to that of non-Dalits, and that Dalit girls faced the most persistent inequalities of opportunity. Complex caste-based dynamics and gender regimes operated to maintain their exclusion.

Despite the persistence of bias in educational opportunity, however, both teachers, through commitment, professionalism and egalitarian attitudes, inspired most of their pupils to aspire

to educational success. Most girls were determined to attend school and to utilise the opportunity to act as individuals away from their home environments. Rounak's model as a successful yet sympathetic woman undeniably provided female middle school pupils with slightly more leadership than Deepak, the male teacher, was able to provide for his primary school pupils. Despite this, however, primary school girls were significantly inspired and empowered by Deepak. In terms of the inspiration afforded to pupils, attitudes were more important than teacher sex. Given government priorities and the lack of progress towards 'Education for All', policy-makers must learn from the lives and experiences of teachers such as these. Given the determination and tenacity demonstrated by so many marginalised pupils and their parents, they are morally bound to do so.

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