

# Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India by Meenakshi Thapan (editor)

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The book *Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India*, organized by Meenakshi Thapan, presents ethnographies made in private, government and non-aided schools in India. This work is divided into eight chapters by different authors, which present the operation, personal relationships, differences, difficulties and limits of the school that was the location for their research.

The various texts analyze how purports are produced in the surveyed schools and discuss the management of the student who questions, claims and goes against the rules imposed by the school. It highlights the influence of popular culture, the media and the aggressiveness of the consumer goods market in the school arena, elements that compete with the school's formal ones. The work argues for the importance of the student's voice in the construction of purports in the school environment. In addition to the focus given to the student's culture, it seeks to understand the role of the teacher and his or her expectations in the construction of the school as a whole. The construction of the Indian citizen is another aspect present in the chapters of this book, as well as the role of religion, gender and social and political relations.

In Chapter I, Anuradha Sharma discusses the theme *Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary*, focusing on a survey carried out at the Pratyantarschool. The author used Butler (1990), Davies (2004) and Marcus (1995) as theoretical support. The text is presented from the post-structuralist perspective, with the understanding that individuals are not fixed products of a socially constructed exercise, but rather constructed from the discursive practices through which identities emerge in the school environment. Images, metaphors, narrative structures and teaching practices are important in the creation of several lines of thinking. In this manner, the students are not passive recipients with respect to what the school offers them, but already carry the baggage of images, metaphors and myths that conflict with the school's ideas.

Another fact brought up in this chapter is the issue of peer relations stating that, while not totally beyond the control of school authorities, this is an informal aspect where students apply their criteria and rules of interaction.

It also analyzes the construction of gender identities, supported with studies by Judith Butler (1990). In this context, teacher's behavior that unconsciously prioritized male activities was observed, as well as stereotypical images that students brought from home. The school dynamic emphasized the studious and obedient person, virtues and values that were reiterated by the students.



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In conclusion, it stated that group relations acted as intermediaries for socialization in the school's culture. It further emphasizes that the group culture of a school is an informal aspect of its experience and an integral part of the teaching and learning process. This dimension reveals the understanding of students as social actors not only in school but also outside of it.

Chapter II entitled "Schooling and the Production of Student Culture: Principles and Practice", written by Maitrayee Deka, presents an ethnography made in an erudite public school using Lucas (2002); Seidler (1998); Dumont (1980), among others as theoretical support.

A fact that stands out was the observation of the absence of some teachers on some school days and another teacher would keep students busy with some activity.

In addition to homework every day, students also have weekly evaluations of different school subjects, without questioning evaluations and curriculum content. The school's senior students gave greater prestige to science classes, considering the possibility of becoming engineers or doctors. These students mentioned that this pressure came from their parents.

The school gave higher priority to Indian culture, heritage, tradition and rational scientific knowledge through various activities such as ceremonies, competitions and special celebrations, which echoed off the nation's project to develop and industrialize. There was a lack of dialogue to communicate to students the school's principles and they only saw the need to follow them as an empty ritual and did not see such acts as allowing for their development.

The body and the mind were regulatory objects in school ideals and disobedience was sanctioned. The training of the mind was conducted in meetings that took place on Tuesdays, led by religious leaders of different religious institutions. Students were experiencing multiple negotiation methods to interpret the school's ideals. They were not homogeneous in their views regarding the cultural ideals of being Indian. This construction hybridized several elements including Western belief systems.

In conclusion, there is the claim that the school was a paradoxical space where the students obeyed the rules in the educational and sports contexts, but at the normative level, negotiated as much as possible. Another accentuated aspect is that the cultural universe of the students was the bricolage of the local cultural elements along with the global ones.

The 3rd Chapter, written by Anannya Gogoi and entitled "The Sociological Narrative of a Government School", is the result of ethnographic research done in the government school of Kiranjyoti Vidyalaya, where the means of communication amongst students as well as teachers was Hindi. The theoretical basis of this research are the following authors: Durkheim (1961); Bernstein, Elvin and Peters (1966); Giddens (1984); Goffman (1959). Inside the school, there was the painting of the goddess Saraswati on one wall, ads posted on other walls containing messages on environmental protection, work and discipline and photographs of school functions and outings. The walls of the Science Laboratory contained diagrams and formulas of Science and Economics and collages with pictures of female social activists.

The celebration of all the holidays belonging to different religions was striking; however, Hindi festivals were the most celebrated in the school.

In relation to school fees, students belonging to the Schedule castes, schedule tribes and other backward classes recognized by the Indian constitution paid less.

The school dynamic, in addition to giving priority to quality and uniform education for the students, also conveyed academic and moral education, with the latter including loyalty, honesty and scientific attitudes or perspectives. It was clear that the intentions and objectives of this school included learning and adhering to moral values and maintaining discipline. In this context, the organizational structure emphasized as fundamental the performance of the activities required to achieve the school's academic and vocational intentions.

The students saw the school as the temple and the teacher as a priest who transmits knowledge. The holy aspect of the school emerged, as well as the consideration of the school environment and the teachers as ideal models. Thus, the school and its sacred organization were distanced from the outside world.

In addition to other rituals such as the annual examination and formal and informal celebrations such as Independence Day and Diwali festival, a ritual that was a manifestation of institutionalized authority also stood out: the discipline.

The school had closed circuit cameras, through which the director controlled the teaching environment and the entry of strangers. The camera's presence in the school strengthened the structure of the institutionalized authority, a fact that limited the students' freedom of expression.

In conclusion, it is emphasized that the school seen from a distance appears to be a formal institution with impersonal relationships among the students and teachers. Because of the above, the school project had many aspects that were organizing school life beyond what was effectively academic. However, when viewed from the inside, the school offered a space/time for teachers and students to express themselves and build relationships that worked as support in times of stress. This understanding of formal duties and informal interaction can be considered as the main driving force that helped the school function.

Therefore, there was a great difference between the ideals that were set forth in school and the practiced culture. There were also varying degrees of approval and practices of ideals derived from the social order. So teachers and students rationalized values /ideals according to their beliefs and situational needs. This can be considered as a means of creating their own unwritten and individual culture that distinguished them from other schools with the same written and formal guidelines.

The 4th chapter, written by Meenakshi Thapan and entitled "Schooling, Identity and Citizenship Education", presents an ethnography carried out in three schools. The study used Delanty (2009), Hennessey (2006); Piper and Garratt (2004) as theoretical support and examines the relationships between education, citizenship and identity within pluralistic and complex processes and of environments that characterize education in contemporary times. It also examines the notion of citizenship instilled using civic education and the ways the struggles and communication processes take place in the classroom. It is understood that citizenship is not a legal statute, but a social process that leads to the production of values related to freedom and autonomy, as well as those that build the students' perceptions from their relationship with society. It also states that school culture is not only constructed by the school's official line of thinking, but it is simultaneously created and subverted by the students, teachers and administration, which seek to bring their own purposes to school.

The public school, Government Boys Senior Secondary School in Delhi, values patriotism and respect for national borders and the emergence of the ego with respect to the

identity defined in assemblies where patriotic and religious songs and the national anthem are sung.

The other two schools are private schools. The English Medium Private School gave priority to the instilment of values related to good behavior, discipline and good manners. A culture of discipline on the dress code was not restricted to students, but also teachers. The third school, Private Unaided English Medium School, gave priority to communicative discipline, good manners and good behavior. The moral space of the morning meeting was replaced by photographic exhibition and quotes written on the walls of the hallways and classrooms. The school buildings were named after national heroes in different spheres.

The 5th chapter entitled "In Quest of Identity: Student Culture in a Religious Minority Institution", by Parul Bhandari, presents an ethnography done at the non-aided St. Margaret School, attended by girls in New Delhi, using Benei (2005), Willis (1997) and Bourdieu (1977) as theoretical support. Through this ethnography, various aspects of the school culture were analyzed, such as the school as an organization, the student culture and the various forms in which students take ownership and negotiate with the school. It also analyzes citizenship ideas as they are embraced by the school and received by the students and finally the role of religious identity. This ethnography also explains and explores the dynamics of group relationships and identity formation.

The emphasis of the school is given to Christian identity and the transmission of values and compliance with the rules through Christian ways. The dynamics and the construction of Christian identity in the school were analyzed, their citizenship values and their distinct cultures as a result of the interplay between education and religion. However, there was a gap between the aspirations and goals of the school and those of the students. Therefore, the study states that they are not docile bodies, for they have their own means of resistance to authority and discipline. The presence of a statue of Jesus Christ and Mother Mary was also noted in the classrooms and the hallways. The paintings showed texts that communicated moral values from biblical passages. There were also photos of famous freedom fighters and political leaders of the country.

In terms of rituals, St. Margaret had a morning assembly and celebrated the Day of the Republic, Independence Day, Teacher's Day, Children's Day, Christmas and its own founding. The school emphasized the full development of the student, with a focus on sports, dance and debates. However, the teaching structure was most prominent. In addition to the duties and functions officially set, the school also defined its own for its teachers via the school diary, which praised the transmission of knowledge without prejudice. However, due to its religious affiliation, the school faced many obstacles and struggles in the transmission of civic ideals and citizenship.

Chapter VI of authors Matthan, T., Anusha, C., Thapan, M., entitled Being Muslims, Becoming Citizens: The Muslim Girls' School in Post-riot Ahmedabad, used Jaffrelot & Thomas (2012) and Jasani (2010) as theoretical support and presents the ethnography made at a school attended by Muslim girls in the state of Gujarat. This chapter examines discourses on citizenship within a minority space in order to understand the representations and the ideas of a "good citizen".

The effort to create a "good citizen" is performed by the pedagogical instruction language and its meaning is related to the turbulent past and through the preservation of culture and assertion of differences. The priority of the school was to teach the girls to speak little and softly and learn how to talk to boys.

In conclusion, the study makes the claim that, through an exploration of various aspects, the unstable nature of being and simultaneously becoming a citizen and a Muslim in Gujarati stood out. It is a project that is still worked on by various actors within and outside the school, to reconcile the apparently conflicting aspects between being Muslim and becoming a citizen.

Chapter 7, written by Bhavya Dore and entitled "Living in the Bubble: Rishi Valley School and the Sense of Community", used the following authors as theoretical support: Durkheim (1956); Anderson (1983); Bidwell (1965) and McLaren (1999). It is an ethnography done at Rishi Valley School. What was observed was that the school was marked by considerable lowness in terms of hosting events, of technologies, of cultural importation and of the diverse movements within school spaces. The school sought to enforce discipline, instrumental teaching practices and to prepare students to have high grades and for the so-called real world. It was understood that this was accomplished by following schedules and through a set of activities. This school did not observe other religious holidays, only dispensed students on Sundays and two national holidays. It was also found that the culture of a Rishi Valley student involved a negotiation between the city's values and those of the school.

Chapter 8 by Meenakshi Thapan, entitled "School Experience: An Autobiographical Approach" used Ellis (1999); Clifford (1986); Pinar (2004/2011); Willis (1977); Bourdieu and Foucault (1977) as theoretical support and makes an attack on the ethnographies presented throughout the chapters. In this context, she presents her autobiography and brings several other biographies with different testimonies relating school experiences. It is then stated that the autobiographical method reduces the distance between the researcher and the location of the research. Then there is the story of the author's school experience, who was bitter because she lived in a boarding school far from her family and so, in her opinion, the school should fill the void created by the absence of her family.

The author then notes that at the school where she studied had disciplinary rules aimed at making them "good girls" so that later they would be good wives and mothers. However, the author points out that the students always found ways of expressing themselves against the rules and discipline imposed.

In conclusion, she points out that for the sociologist of education, the study of schools is submersed in the experience of a similar sense of "strangeness". Familiarity emerges from the experience of having been a student somewhere in the past and this is what makes the task of the school sociologist a unique experience.

Therefore, ethnographic studies are presented in this review from private, government and non-aided schools in different regions of India like Delhi, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh's Chittoor district, Sarvodaya Vidyalaya, Pratyantar, which have different forms of operation. We could observe, for instance, that in some schools, the type of activities and opportunities designed for boys were different from those proposed for the girls, as noted at the Pratyantarschool. There were also schools that valued the regulation and control of body and mind as well as academic and moral education, as was the case of Erudite Public School and Kiranjyoti Vidyalaya School, respectively.

It can also be noted that there are schools that give centrality to religious aspects and these are basic in the transmission of values and compliance with rules and conform to the ways of Christian life. This is the case, for example, of the non-aided St. Margaret School in New Delhi. Another aspect that drew attention was the issue of education for citizenship, the formation of an Indian identity and the idea of the sense of community in Government

Boys Senior Secondary School; Private Unaided English Medium School; Erudite Public School; School of Gujarat; and the Rishi Valley Boarding School.

Finally, the organizer of the texts, Meenakshi Thapan, presents the various ethnographies reported in the book and also from her own autobiography, which is the account of the difficulties that students faced at boarding school and her experience as a student, and from this experience, she suggests that school should make up for the absence of parents.

The book, reviewed in terms of its methodological approach, used the accounts of several ethnographic surveys and several authors as theoretical support. On one hand, based on such research, we can then draw attention to the importance of this study in terms of curriculum, since these ethnographic studies, throughout the texts, analyzed research conducted in different schools from different regions of India and, within such school spaces, different educational practices and different ways of evaluating the work of teachers and students. On the other hand, it also analyzes the ways in which students within the school environment communicated and interacted with each other and with the teachers and school administrators, as well as what was being presented and discussed at school with respect to school subject content. Another contribution of this ethnographic research for the curriculum field is that, besides having allowed researchers to observe in schools the way in which the disciplinary content was presented and the evaluation of learning, it equally allowed for the observation of the behavior and attitudes required from male and female students in the context of producing a school curriculum.

## Notes

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