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## Exclusion and Discrimination in Schools: Experiences of Dalit Children

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## Foreword

Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) has been amongst the first research organizations in India to focus exclusively on development concerns of the marginalized groups and socially excluded communities. Over the last six years, IIDS has carried-out several studies on different aspects of social exclusion and discrimination of the historically marginalized social groups, such as the Scheduled Caste, Schedule Tribes and Religious Minorities in India and other parts of the sub-continent. The Working Paper Series disseminates empirical findings of the ongoing research and conceptual development on issues pertaining to the forms and nature of social exclusion and discrimination. Some of our papers also critically examine inclusive policies for the marginalized social groups.

The working paper “**Exclusion and Discrimination in Schools: Experiences of Dalit Children**” draws focus to the position of the Dalits in the caste structure which historically led to their exclusion from knowledge and education in traditional Hindu society. The major issue dealt in this paper are to what extent and in what ways do the oppressive and unjust hierarchies of the caste system continue to ‘lock’ Dalit children out of full participation in education within schools. The paper draws insights from classroom participation and analyses the levels at which caste as a defining feature of inter-personal and social relationships continues to have prominence. The study catapults children’s perspectives and experiences in relation to constraining and enabling factors at the institutional, familial (and communal) and individual levels. Indeed, so to say; educational institution seen as the critical platform for change becomes the medium and the very apparatus to insinuate humiliation and discrimination at the inception of caste identity. In other words, the discriminatory practices have been internalized by the higher caste groups towards the Dalit (*teacher, colleague, student, peer groups*) in education and social networking on every day basis. More strikingly, education has not been significant to perpetuate awareness against nor ensured a value system that can resist discrimination at grass roots level. The strength of this study is that it maps the diverse spheres of school life where social relations and pedagogic processes fail to ensure full participation of Dalit children. Keeping abreast the socio-historical experience of disadvantage that these communities have experienced as a result of caste discrimination it is important to bear in mind the manner in which caste identity continues to impinge on their education and seeks for redressal of the same.

This is part of a knowledge partnership between UNICEF and Indian Institute of Dalit Studies to unpack policy concerns of relevance to all children from the perspective of socially excluded communities. We hope this Working Paper will be resourceful and supportive to academia, students, activists, civil society organizations and policymaking bodies.

Surinder S. Jodhka  
Director, IIDS



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# Exclusion and Discrimination in Schools: Experiences of Dalit Children

Geetha B. Nambissan

## 1. Introduction

The position of Dalit communities as 'untouchables' in the caste structure was the most important factor that historically led to their exclusion from knowledge and education in traditional Hindu society. Though schools were legally opened to these communities in the mid nineteenth century, attempts by Dalits to avail of education were met with considerable caste opposition (Nambissan, 1996). At the time of India's independence in the 1940s, Dalits (officially Scheduled Castes) had significantly lower literacy and school enrolment rates as compared to the rest of the population. In the post independence decades, constitutional provisions, policy thrusts in education as well as parental aspirations for the education of their children brought an increasing proportion of Dalit children into schools. However at the close of the last century it was found that barely 48 percent of Dalit children had completed even primary schooling (IIPS, 2000). Even today, the vast majority 'drop out' from school well before they complete eight years of education.

To what extent do the oppressive and unjust hierarchies of the caste system continue to 'lock' Dalit children out of full participation in education and in what ways does this happen within schools? This is an issue that has surprisingly been neglected by education policy, pedagogic discourse as well as research. There are a few studies that have made broadly pointed to the role of caste in education, for instance in discriminatory teacher attitudes, denigration of Dalit students, assigning them menial tasks in school as well as caste based peer relations (Balagopal and Subrahmanian, 2003; Nambissan, 2006). However there is little research that identifies spheres and processes of exclusion and discriminatory practices in school and how they influence Dalit children's experiences of education.

This paper is based on an exploratory study of the experiences of Dalit children in schools. The objective of the study was to identify spheres of exclusion, discrimination and opportunity in education and practices and processes in which they manifest in school and thereby deny or enable Dalit children full access to cultural and symbolic resources and social relations, including dignity and social respect within these institutions. Bringing in the stand point of Dalit children, this paper will focus on their experiences in relation to a) Access to school including facilities and resources b) Participation in different spheres of school life - curricular and co-curricular and c) Social relations with teachers and peers.

The study is located in Rajasthan, considered a feudal state with relatively still rigid caste hierarchies especially in rural areas. Rajasthan is one of the educationally backward states in India where as many 22 percent of children remained out of school in 2004-05. Scheduled Castes (SC) comprise around 18 percent of the population of Rajasthan. Only 71.5 percent of SC children in the state were attending schools. This was below the national average school attendance rate of 78.3 percent for SC children. Urban school attendance rates for SC children in Rajasthan are lower (64.6 percent), than that in rural areas (73.5 percent)<sup>1</sup>.

A village in the Phagi tehsil of Jaipur district as well as a poor settlement - a 'Tila' within the state capital of Jaipur were chosen as the two sites of the study to understand the rural and urban context of educational exclusion<sup>2</sup>. An initial survey of 234 Dalit households (129 urban and 105 rural households from the village and Tila respectively) was conducted. Children (64) from a range of Dalit sub-castes, at different stages of education and in both government and private schools from the two locations (34 from the Tila and 30 from the Village) were purposively selected in order to map, through their experiences, spheres of exclusion, discrimination (and opportunity) in school and the forms in which they manifest. An attempt was made to explore whether Dalit respondents experienced/perceived unequal or differential treatment vis-à-vis their non-Dalit peers in school.

### 1.1 The Context: Tila and Village

The Tila or urban settlement chosen for the study is one of seven such settlements within a geographical stretch on the outskirts of Jaipur. The Dalit sub-castes in the Tila include the *Bairwas*, *Raigar*, *Khatik*, *Dhobi* and *Balmiki*, all of who are officially categorized as Scheduled Castes in Rajasthan. The

settlements are generally referred to as '*bastis*' or low income shanties. A residential locality across the road from the *basti*, has middle and lower middle class families belonging to non Dalit, '*Sindhis*', '*Punjabis*' and castes that come presently under the category of 'other backward classes' (OBC).

The village is 60 kilometers from Jaipur and has a significant presence of *Jats* and *Gujars* (OBCs), *Rajputs*, and a few *Brahmin* and *Bania* families (locally acknowledged as 'higher'/dominant castes)<sup>3</sup>. The *Bairwa*, *Regar* and *Balai* are the main Dalit sub-castes in the village and the nearby habitations. As compared to the Tila, the proportion of *Balmiki* families is negligible in the Village. A number of *Bhagaria* families live at one end of the village.

The Dalit families are economically poor and are at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy in both the Tila and the Village. This is far more pronounced in the Village where they live in separate habitations and segregated spaces, and 'untouchability' is practiced in different spheres of daily life. Common water sources, public spaces for worship such as the temple and even tea shops continue to be sites for discriminatory practices though this varies in different contexts. Hierarchies are relatively less rigid in the Tila partly because of the exigencies of urban life, but pervade interpersonal relations. *Balmikis* continue to practice their traditional occupation of sweeping in 'modern' spaces in government and private sector offices as well as in homes in the neighbourhood.

## 2. Schools and Facilities

Enrolment rates among children in the surveyed households decline from 74 percent among children aged 5-13 years, to 35 percent in the age group 14-18 years in Tila households. Children who have never been enrolled in school still comprise a significant proportion (17 percent) of the primary school-going age group (5-10 years). In comparison in the Village, only 68 percent of children in the 5-10 year age group are enrolled in school. Among SC households, the enrolment of children among *Balmikis*, drops from a low of 34 percent in the 5-10 year cohort to an abysmal 20 percent in the 14-18 year age group. Among *Bhagarias*, hardly any child goes to school. Gender differences are sharp. Among *Balmikis* for instance, the percentage enrolment of girls barely reaches double figures.

Children, in the Tila and especially the village, access mainly government schools. Some children go to private schools that are largely 'unrecognized'

and unregulated. A social divide is quite visible in the government schools that cater to the *basti* as well the Tila - between children who come from the *colony* ('referred to as *colony children*) lower/middle socio-economic status but 'higher' caste as compared to the Dalits from the *basti* (referred to as *basti children*); and the 'higher' including the dominant OBC castes as compared to the Dalits in the village schools<sup>4</sup>. Teachers in the schools mainly belong to the non Dalit castes<sup>5</sup>.

A striking feature of the journey through schools is the significant 'shifting' between schools that takes place for an individual Dalit student. This can result in a sense of unease, for instance in making new friends and establishing rapport with the teachers, especially for children from socially discriminated groups.

On changing schools frequently, one has to sit behind, and in a new school you feel scared also. It takes time to know the teacher and make friends...Problem is there is making new friends. Adjustment with them takes a long time. It also takes a long time to know the teacher. Till then we can't ask from them (the teacher/peers) (T34,B,B).<sup>6</sup>

Government schools are characterized by poor quality infrastructure, less than adequate number of teachers and lack of resources. There were a number of schools where toilets were either not available or in very poor condition or dirty and all children were constrained by this. No respondent reported that they were denied the use of toilets or other school facilities. Water however was a sphere where group identities came into play, especially in the village.

## 2.1 Access to water

Piped water through taps, the water tank and hand pump ('boring') are the main sources of drinking water for children in schools (see table 1). No respondent reported being denied direct access to water today. However some did say that as recently as around three to five years ago, when the only available drinking water in school was that which was stored in tanks and in pots and jars, Dalits were not permitted water directly by themselves. At the time, they were forced to drink water from the hand pump situated at a little distance away from the school.

When we were in 9th, then all the students kept one matka (earthen pot). Then Jat boys said that we will give you water to drink water, you

will not touch the pot...Now when we drink water from hand pump, then Jat boys drink after washing the hand pump (V13,BL,B).

In primary school, Jat boys did not allow us to touch the water jug. If we happened to touch it then they used to clean it with sand. We were not allowed to drink water from the pot. Jats used to forbid us. Teachers did not forbid them (to do this) but scolded only us. We used to drink water from the hand pump a little far away from school. Just since the last 2-3 years we have started drinking water from the school hand pump (V12,B,B).

An integral part of school culture (particularly in the Village) is practices around the drinking of water. Some (5/30) of the respondents from the Village said that they make way/ stand at a distance when general caste children come to drink water and that 'we do not drink water together'. What appears more common is the practice of washing of the mouth of the hand pump/tap by general castes after Dalit students drank water (table 1). This is a practice indulged in by general castes vis-à-vis Dalits at the village hand pump to deliberately communicate to the latter their 'polluted' and 'inferior' status. What is significant is that the same discriminatory practice has been re-contextualized within the domain of the school.

When I go to drink water, the boys of Jats and upper castes tell me to move aside a little. "First let us drink water. You drink after wards". They say "you are 'Bhangi' (pejorative term for Balmiki), stand off". They wash the tap after I drink and tell me that "if you drink first then we will have to wash the tap". So I drink last of all. At that time, it comes to my mind that I must beat them... I sometimes tell the teachers but they also do not pay attention and fob me of saying that "no one will do this again" (V3-BK, B).

After we drink water, they scrub the tap with sand. Once I said "does it (water) become better on scrubbing?" They did not reply (V14, BK, B).

Dalit students are deeply resentful of this practice as of the fact that they are often forced to make way for their classmates. A few *Balmiki* respondents mentioned that when they complained to the teacher, the latter tended to ignore or gloss over the matter. One way in which Dalits have begun to contest these practices and make a symbolic statement is by washing the tap after *Jat* and *Rajput* children have had water!

Table 1 - Provision of and Social Access to Water in Schools: - Tila, Village\*

Provision of/ Access to Water	Tila	Village
<i>A. Provision</i>		
▪ Tap	17	4
▪ Tank	14	5
▪ Hand pump	1	18
▪ Cooler/fridge**	9	2
▪ Earthen pot (matka)**	11	19
<i>B. Access</i>		
▪ All can take water	18	20
▪ General castes/colony boys take first	6	5
<i>C Practices around water</i>		
● Tap washed before drinking		
▪ by general castes	-	11
▪ by Dalits	-	2
▪ habit/hygiene	2	1
● General castes pour water for Dalits	1	4***

\* The number of respondents who reported the following is given below. Categories have been evolved from responses and tabulated accordingly.

\*\* For teachers only.

\*\*\* Two respondents mentioned this as having happened a few years earlier.

In the Tila schools, the preponderance of numbers (*colony* boys as against those from the *basti*), gender (girls stepping aside for boys), and difference in physical size (bigger as against smaller children) were seen to give some children the 'privilege' to drink water first. Washing of the mouth of the tap was reported in a few instances in relation to hygiene and habit (which Dalit children also followed). There were suggestions that caste status may have been a consideration occasionally.

When we drank water then we wash the tap a little. Because this has become a habit (T19,BK,B).

When any Basti child remain filthy (and uses the tap), because of being lower caste, upper caste boys, colony boys wash the tap before drinking water. They overawe you saying first we will drink water (C-20T).

What emerges from the experiences of respondents is that with the provision of 'running water' through taps and hand pumps the blatant denial of access to water for Dalits in school is less widespread today than some years earlier.

However where water is stored in pots, jugs and even tanks, caste based discrimination (Dalit children not being allowed to touch the jug/glass of water) continues to be practiced in some schools often with the indulgence of teachers.

### 3. Participation in the Classroom

While there has been some research on teacher attitudes, and peer interaction in relation to the more marginal groups, there has been no attempt to explore how children participate in the transaction of the curriculum<sup>7</sup>.

#### 3.1 Segregation in Class

: A fairly large number of respondents (25/ 64) said that they were free to sit where they pleased. However, only one respondent in the Tila, and three in the Village actually reported to having sat in the front row in their class. The actual seating arrangements tend to be influenced largely by teacher expectations and preferences ('intelligent' / *hoshiar* students in the front rows and those considered 'weak' / *kamzor* behind), peer group dynamics (in relation to caste/social dominance) and 'locational' identity (*basti* as against *colony*). Individual inclinations had a relatively smaller role to play.

Dalit children were well aware of teacher's notions about *hoshiyar* front benchers-who had to 'memorise the lesson' and 'answer the teacher's questions'. Most of them found it difficult to do either. While it was rare for the teacher to ask them to sit in the front row, respondents often strategized to sit behind for 'fear that madam/sir may scold and insult us in front of all because we do not know'. In the Village, children usually sat with those who came from their own caste group. In the Tila schools, the intersection between class and caste is probably reflected in comments such as 'we actually sit with people like us'. In the Village, the social location of the general castes, preponderance of numbers in class and brute strength facilitated their dominance over space in the classroom. The colony children often had their way in the Tila schools. Dalit children are hence usually relegated to the back benches in the class. One of the respondents, a Bhagaria boy who had left school mentioned that his *Jat* class mates would not permit them to sit on the mat (*durrie*).

We sit with people who are like us - friends. Colony girls sat with colony girls and basti girls sat with girls of the basti. Colony people used to sit in the front and basti girls behind.... The girls themselves used to sit there. If teacher asks any basti girl to sit in front, then firstly she herself does not sit there... the colony girls will not let them sit there (T10, B,G).

In class, we sit in three lines. I- girls, II- intelligent ones, III- weak ones. I used to sit in the third line (T25,BK,B).

Jat children sat on the durrie (mat). We could not sit on it. One day I sat on the durrie and they snatched it from me. The other children started laughing. I also wanted to sit on the durrie. There were other children also who could not sit on the durrie'. (V30,BG,B).

One of the respondents referred to the abhorrent practice of making *Balmikis* sit in the corner of the class in his school some years earlier. He goes on to insightfully observe that this segregation had detrimental consequences for *Balmiki* students' interest in their studies.

... When I was in V - VI, then 'Harijans' were made to sit in the corner. Then they don't feel like studying. Therefore they don't come to study. The children of general caste and OBC look down upon them. If there was a Harijan boy then he used to sit behind (V15:BL,B).

We ourselves sat where we wanted to. Seats changed also. But I sat alone. Other children used to sit nearby but separately (T14,BK,G).

### 3.2 Silencing

When asked, majority of respondents (56/64) said that were largely silent in class when it came to curriculum transaction (see Table 2). Only 26/64 said they could ask their teachers for explanations when they did not understand what was being taught. Of these as many as 14/26 said they could do so only with some teachers, often just one teacher. The reasons respondents gave for not asking questions/clarifications of their teachers were: 'being scared that teachers would scold, beat or insult us' and 'peers will make fun of us for what we do not know'. Some said they were shy and hesitant to speak and they 'prefer to wait for another child to ask the teacher for clarifications', 'ask a friend instead' or else they just 'leave out that portion of the lesson', if need be.

The messages that teachers often conveyed in their interactions with children - that they lack ability, are not intelligent or do not deserve to study, tended to increase the latter's uneasiness in the class. Though respondents said that some teachers (usually this was a specific teacher) do try to make them comfortable this appeared to be the quality of the individual teacher rather than institutionalized in the culture of the school or based on pedagogy of how children learn. 'Learner' categories have become part of the 'common sense'



constructed within schools. These influence not only seating arrangements but confer identities such as ‘intelligent’ and ‘weak’ on children. Teachers are generally inclined to focus attention on the former to the neglect of the latter group of children. This leads to inadequate and unequal pedagogic attention to children of marginal groups, in this study, Dalits.

Table 2- Participation in Class - Tila and Village

Respondents in Class	Tila N=34	Village N=30
A. <i>Asked questions and explanations</i>	15	11
▪ only from specific teachers	6	8
▪ could not do so	4	3
▪ no response	15	16
B. <i>Were mainly silent</i>	29	27
▪ scared to ask questions	19	20
C. <i>Reasons for being silent</i>	<p><i>The teacher</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scolds us if we ask</li> <li>• May beat us if we do not know</li> <li>• May start asking us questions</li> <li>• Says why don't you pay attention when I am teaching</li> </ul> <p><i>Others</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am shy/hesitant</li> <li>• I ask friend to ask and then explain</li> <li>• I am not comfortable</li> <li>• Class mates may tease</li> </ul>	<p><i>The teacher</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scolds us if we ask</li> <li>• Says come later</li> <li>• May make fun if wrong</li> <li>• Will not explain so that we can understand</li> <li>• Makes you hold your ears</li> <li>• She/ he does not know the answer</li> </ul> <p><i>Others</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I may be insulted because I do not know</li> <li>• What is explained cannot be understood.</li> </ul>

Giving assignments or ‘home work’ to be completed by students after school, is a regular practice in most schools. The regularity of teachers correcting/ reviewing homework ranged from every second or third day, to a week or, at times never at all. While all children receive homework, the support available within the home to complete such tasks is uneven. Dalit students suffer in comparison to others as they come from homes where parents are usually non literate or poorly schooled and hence are unable to provide the necessary academic inputs. They are usually penalized, often beaten when they fail to comply with what teachers expect of them. This has been referred to in earlier studies.

Respondents varied in their perception of whether teachers discriminated in meting out punishments to children. A number of respondents especially from

the Tila said that when home work was incomplete ‘all were beaten equally’, or ‘those who are beaten more are those who did not do it daily’. Only a few of them suggested that colony children were beaten or scolded less than those from the *basti*. Many more of the Village respondents felt that teachers were less harsh towards some children. Reasons given for differential treatment were intelligence (‘clever ones are scolded less’), gender (‘girls are beaten less whatever their caste’) and caste (teachers used to beat children of their caste less’). For the majority of Dalit children, homework remains an onerous task and many in desperation take resort to the ‘pass book’ (guide book), which is used as a major support for ‘learning’ (memorizing lessons).

### 3.3 Official curriculum

It is also pertinent to understand whether Scheduled Castes, their communities as well as leaders and heroes find representation in curriculum transaction or ‘legitimate school knowledge’? For instance respondents were asked whether the life and work of Ambedkar was discussed in school. Most respondents said that they had not hitherto given much thought to the issue of whether Scheduled Castes or their own communities were absent or present in ‘official school knowledge’. However when urged to look back, some of them felt that it is rare for the text lesson to highlight, or the teacher to draw attention to Scheduled Castes, their lives or leaders. Reflecting on this a few went on to say that if they were taught about a leader, such as Ambedkar, and if his life and achievements were discussed in class, it could inspire Dalit students as well as raise their self image.

### 3.4 The ‘Co-Curricular’

The participation of children in ‘co-curricular’ activities, is important for developing their personalities and confidence, strengthening peer relations and building secular identities in school. Research on Dalit and marginal groups often ignores this important sphere of school life. Respondents were asked whether they participated in games and school celebrations during the two national festivals, Independence Day (15 August) and Republic day (26 January). In order to understand whether such opportunities were available in school and to all children equally, they were asked whether their classmates participated in them as well as reasons for their (Dalit) non participation.

Of the 64 Dalit respondents, only 18 had participated in games in school and 20 in functions organized on January 26 and 15 August the previous year. The numbers were larger in the Tila (16/34 participated in games and 13/34 in

functions) than in the Village (2/30 and 7/30 participated in games and functions respectively). On the other hand as many as 25 respondents in the Tila and 20 in the Village said that their classmates participated in games, and a similar number reported that this was so for celebrations during the two national festivals, the previous year (see table 3).

The number of respondents who did not participate in functions was significantly larger in the Village as compared to the Tila. Reasons offered by respondents for non participation included feeling shy and scared, not considered 'good' enough by teachers and apprehensions

**Table 3: Participation in Games and Functions - Tila and Village**

Stage	Respondents		Tila*				Village*			
	Tila	Village	Games		Functions		Games		Function	
			Resp	CM	Resp	CM	Resp	CM	Resp	CM
<i>Elem.</i>	12	14	4(1)	8(2)	3(1)	5(2)	0(2)	8(2)	4(2)	10(3)
<i>Sec.</i>	22	16	12(1)	17(2)	10	19(1)	2(3)	12(4)	3(4)	11(4)
<i>Total</i>	34	30	16(2)	25(4)	13(1)	24(3)	2(5)	20(6)	7(6)	21(7)
<i>Harijan</i>	13	3	3	10	3	9	0(1)	2(1)	0(1)	2(1)

Note - Respondents were asked to give their experiences in the last class they attended. Those who discontinued school also recalled experiences in the last class attended.

\* Resp- Respondents; CM-classmates. Respondents were asked to recall if they/their classmates participated. \* Non responses are given in parentheses.

that they would be laughed at or insulted in front of classmates and the 'villagers' (local guests ) if they did not perform well. The tendency of the teacher to include members of his caste rather than Dalits was also suggested by comments such as "*The one who prepared children (for programmes) was a Brahmin teacher. They used to take us less and used to take Jat boys more*". Children also acknowledged that 'prior knowledge of dancing' was a factor that influenced who would be chosen for a performance. This 'cultural capital' was more likely to be with children belonging to families of the general castes as compared to the Dalits.

From the beginning, I have not spoken in front of anyone. So I used to feel scared, there is hesitation. Only one classmate (Jat community) always remains ahead in speaking and playing (V3BK,B).

I never participated in any thing. Teacher selects the 'good' children of our class before hand, those who listen to what she says and do

good work. We do good work even but even then she does not write our name. (T2,R,B)

I do wish that I also should participate as other children... But no one takes me. Sir never even asks me and I also have never told Sir... because they take children of Brahmans, Jats only. I am of 'low caste' so they don't take me. There is fear in my heart that there will be a mistake. Then all the villagers will make fun of me. I do wish to participate but have not till today (V4,B,B).

Where group performances were concerned it was important to be 'included'. Both in Tila as well as in the Village children reported being excluded by their peers in such activities.

Colony girls never included us. Where possible I used to take part alone as there was no one to take part with me. Even the only friend I had from the colony, Ritu used to take part with the colony girls and not with me (T7,BU,G).

Among Dalit children, *Balmikis* were likely to be most 'left out' of co-curricular activities and school functions. Not only do they tend to be 'hesitant' given the manner in which caste relations pervade the school, teachers also fail to 'choose' them. In addition, their peers including those among the SC may also exclude them. One of the *Balmiki* girls from the Tila recalled an instance where a group of girls who were to perform for a function refused to include her saying:

It is full (the group); there is no place for you. We will not take you. Then I felt very bad. I also wanted to participate in the song. The other girls did not take me (T,14,BK,G).

Where games were concerned, some of the reasons for non participation cited were that there was no equipment for games in school and when available it was given to the students from the higher classes (grades). It was mentioned that the conflict between the older Dalit and *Jat* boys was played out often in the games field. Some respondents preferred to avoid situations involving violence and squabbling and stated this as the reason for not participating in games.

#### 4. Gender, Caste and Education: Intersections

Caste and gender identities intersect to make the schooling of Dalit girls relatively more at risk than that of boys. The survey of households indicates

that rates of enrolment in the primary school going age group are lower among Dalit girls (68 percent in the Tila and 60 percent in the village) as compared to boys (80 percent and 75 percent respectively). Within the family, the time and space made available for girls to go to school and to be able to devote time to their education is relatively more constrained as compared to boys. In addition, girls find that social relations, especially within the Tila, are extremely circumscribed and the boundaries between home (*ghar*) and outside (*bahar*) are clearly drawn.

While this may be partly true for girls in the colony as well, social and community norms as well as the environment within the Tila constrain parents from sending their daughters outside the home. Girl respondents said that the school gave them a greater sense of freedom in comparison to the Tila and was the only space where they could meet their friends. This is also reflected in the nostalgic memories that linger about school regardless of the fact that facilities are inadequate and beating often commonplace.

The strength of larger numbers of their own gender becomes important for girls education. Girl respondents said that it is easier for them to obtain parental and extended family approval to go to school and carry on to higher levels of education if they have the company of other girls. Parents are also able to resist community pressures that continue to favour marriage for girls at a young age and fears of their 'getting spoilt in school'. Girls find that in a group they are better able to protect themselves from harassment from boys and to ignore comments that are directed at them as they walk to school - a regular experience especially for Tila girls. Intra caste social distance that is maintained to different degrees, within Dalit communities poses serious problems especially for *Balmiki* girls. One of the girls specifically mentioned that she had no friend within the Tila and also that she was not part of any group of girls and hence had to walk to school mainly on her own.

The present study was unfortunately not able to adequately dwell on experiences of Dalit girls in school though we know that gender discrimination, sexual harassment and abuse of girl students is a reality that is little acknowledged or addressed. Given the relative powerlessness of Dalit girls because of caste and gender identity, this is an area that requires urgent research.

#### 4.1 Responsibilities and Tasks

An important responsibility assigned to one or two students in a class is that of 'monitor'. The monitor is usually expected 'to manage' the class in the

teacher's absence and he/she is also given charge (along with others) of odd jobs linked to the academic and other work of teachers such as bringing the register, chalks and teaching aids. In addition, children are also involved making/ serving tea and water, sweeping the classroom and school grounds and serving of the mid day meal.

*The Monitor:* All respondents reported the presence of monitors in schools that they attended. Most schools in the village had two monitors (first and second). Students belonging to the OBC/ general castes were more likely to be appointed monitors in class as compared to the Dalits. As many as 25 of the 30 respondents from the Village said that the monitor in their classes were always non-Dalits. Where there were monitors belonging to the Dalits, these were usually one of two monitors, in some cases the second or junior monitor.

Respondents especially from the village felt that caste status mattered in the selection of monitors. Many teachers were reported to appoint monitors from among students belonging to their own caste. Some teachers followed the practice of voting of monitors but a respondent reported that 'they would not make SC students stand' as contenders before their peers. Further Dalit were smaller in number than *Jats/OBCs* and hence at a disadvantage where voting was concerned. Caste dynamics and social dominance of general castes made it difficult for Dalit monitors to maintain order in class. A respondent said that if made monitor, 'higher caste students would not listen to me and would make trouble for me and have me removed'. The possible discriminatory division of labour among monitors is reflected in the quote below where a respondent mentions that the teacher made the second/Dalit monitor do the more menial tasks as compared to the first monitor (a *Jat*). Or again where a *Balmiki* boy was appointed 'safai (cleanliness) monitor' and made to sweep the classroom.

Two monitors were made, one from Jat and one from Bairwa. The teachers make Rajesh (Bairwa) sweep the office, wash the cups, lock the office, keep the mats inside. They make Sriram (general caste) bring tea, water... (V27,B,B)

Teachers did not make a 'low caste' a monitor.... If they make me, then Jat boys would not listen to me (V25,B,B).

Once in Vth class I was selected as the Safai Monitor (T12,BK,B)

### *Other Tasks*

Children in many schools are involved in the sweeping of classrooms; a task that teachers say is shared by all students. However while a fairly larger number

of respondents (28/50) said that in their school all students (Dalits and general caste) were involved in sweeping the classroom, and a smaller number (8/50) said that only SC students were involved in such tasks, *there was not a single instance reported of a school where only general caste/OBC students were involved in such work* (see table 4). Even where children were supposed to sweep in turns, it was often the case that boys from the general/ dominant castes would refuse to do so and pass on this task to Dalit students.

Table 4: Distribution of Tasks and Responsibilities\* in Government Schools\*\*

Site/Social Group	Sweeping Classroom	Serving Water	Serving Tea
<i>Tila</i>			
▪ Only SC	2	[1]	- -
▪ Only GC	-	11	11
▪ SC and GC	13	3	3
▪ Others (peon etc)	7	3	6
▪ No response	1	2	3
▪ All	23	23	23
<i>Village</i>			
▪ Only SC	6	[5]	[5]
▪ Only GC	-	23	19
▪ SC and GC	15	1	4
▪ Others (peon etc)	6	3	4
▪ No response	-	-	-
▪ All	27	27	27
<i>Tila and Village</i>			
▪ Only SC	8	[5]	[5]
▪ Only GC	-	34	30
▪ SC and GC	28	7	7
▪ Others (peon etc)	13	7	10
▪ No response	1	2	3
▪ All	50	50	50

SC Dalits; GC - general castes

\* As reported by respondents

\*\* Pertain only to government schools in which enrolled

[ ] Only served Dalit teachers.

Caste lines were more sharply defined in serving water and tea to teachers who, with few exceptions, were non Dalits. As many as 34 of the respondents said that except for a few schools, (more so in the Tila), only 'higher caste' students served water to the teacher. It was clearly stated by some that only students from *Jat/OBC/Rajput* castes could serve teachers. This was a responsibility much sought after as it enhanced status amongst ones' peers. Dalit students were involved in a slightly larger number of schools in the serving of tea to their teachers (in the Village this was mainly to SC teachers). In the

Tila schools especially in the primary classes where SC children comprise a relatively large proportion of students, teachers tend to differentiate between the 'cleaner' and 'most polluted' among Dalit castes. Thus though Dalit respondents did serve non Dalit teachers in some schools in the Tila, they were unlikely to be from the *Balmiki* caste.

In school all do cleaning daily by turn..... We bring water for the teacher. Only 'Harijan' (Balmiki) children are not asked to serve/bring water for the teacher... (GD-T,1).

When asked if she would make tea for the teacher, Rani the Balmiki girl from the Tila broke down saying "I will make but will she drink from my hand"? (T,14,BK,G).

The inclusion of rituals linked to the Hindu religion in the daily routine of the school and the division of responsibilities to carry them out is another domain of school life that is yet to receive attention<sup>10</sup>. The morning assembly in most schools includes a prayer which is led by a student (*prarthana bulvana*). In the Tila, some of the respondents did mention that they began the prayer, but in most government schools in the Village, it was the general caste child who led the singing of prayers. In one of the village schools a statue of the Hindu goddess Saraswati had been installed, and children were involved in performing minor rituals such as lighting the incense stick while the teacher performed the 'puja' (worship). There was no question of Dalit children being asked to light the incense stick or participate in these rituals in any manner, a visible acknowledgement of their traditionally 'low' ritual status and causes them great anguish.

In our school, Ramesh Maheshwari lights agarbatti (incense stick) in the temple. We do not light it. We are not allowed to light it. And we do not even ask. I wish to light the agarbatti (GD,V2).

What is clear from the observations in schools and children's own comments, is that these practices, built into the daily school routine, lead to and reinforce caste based boundaries that get drawn in the process of the construction of the 'sacred' and thereby the 'polluted' within the institution.

*Sharing/Serving Food in School:* As discussed, caste hierarchies come sharply into play where serving of water (and food) to teachers is concerned. What is the experience of Dalits in relation to regular school programmes that involve sharing and serving of food among peers?



The officially sponsored Mid Day Meal (MDM)<sup>11</sup> is now a part of the daily routine of government primary schools to address the nutritional needs of poor children. It also provides space to bring principles of equality and non discrimination within schools and strengthen peer relations. Mid day meals are provided to all schools in the city of Jaipur by a non government organization. In the Village, local women are engaged to cook meals. The schools visited during the study had engaged only cooks belonging to *Jat/OBC* and none of them were Dalits. General caste cooks did not permit Dalit children to enter the kitchen while it was possible for other caste children to do so, making it easier for the latter to ask for and receive an extra helping. Children are involved in the serving of the MDM, though Dalit children are not involved in this task in the Village. In Tila schools older Dalit children are being involved in serving the meal. However only children belonging to the ‘cleaner castes’ among Dalits appear to participate in carrying out such tasks. The *Balmiki* student is never asked to serve the meal nor wash the teacher’s plate after she has eaten.

Jats served and sat separately from us. We sat with our friends. Each one washed their plates and the Jat boys washed the teacher’s plate. Lower castes are not asked to serve. There is Jat lady cook (GD,V).

... We used to stay outside the kitchen and Jat boys used to enter into the kitchen and used to take more food. When we asked for a second serving they (cooks) did not give us, but gave to Jat boys. To us, however they used to say...; this much is enough for you’ (GD, V).

I have never been asked to wash the teachers’ plate. If I serve no one will eat (T, 14, BK ,G).

School ceremonies, rituals and functions are another domain where students participate in preparing, serving and eating food. Respondents in the Village reported not being allowed to serve guests during the annual celebrations of national festivals. School leaving functions organised by class X/ XI students to bid farewell to those who are in class XII (their final year in school), is another celebration marred by casteist practices. These are functions where students are expected to contribute financially as well as assist in preparing food and serving their seniors. From respondents in the Village we learn that while they contribute financially as do other students, there are not allowed to prepare and serve food. They find this discriminatory and extremely hurtful. On the other hand the positive experience of a respondent at a programme where boys of all caste groups were brought together to interact with each other high lights the importance of providing such opportunities in school.

Teachers did not let us offer drink or water to guest on 15th August/ 26st January. They used to say that “10-15 boys should stand up and serve drinking water. But children of `lower caste’ do not stand”. So we did not.... stand. We were asked to make a separate line...’ (GD, V).

For the farewell party to XII class, they take money from us, the same amount as from all, but they do not even allow us to touch the food. It is kept away from us. On 15 August we are not allowed to serve food ‘with our hands’.... They say that” you are Bairwa, you are `lower caste’, ‘we won’t eat from your hands...”. (V11,B,B).

We 50-60 boys had gone there (for a programme organised by an NGO). The boys of all the castes were there. So we ate food together, there was no ‘chuachut’ (untouchability). I made good friends among them. If it had been like this (always) then it would be better (V18,B,B).

#### 4.2 Peer Relations

The foregoing discussion highlights the manner in which caste relations pervade school processes and suggests that they are likely to vitiate social interaction among children as well. Peer relations are a neglected sphere of school life but one that is extremely critical for academic and interpersonal relations and their interface. Relationships and networks among children in school are seen as crucial for academic and emotional support systems. The extent to which one is included or excluded from such relationships hence is important for ones’ identity and well being in school.

Dalit students appear to largely interact with members of their own sub-caste and nearly as often with those of another SC. The number of respondents who said they interacted with members of another Dalit caste was smaller in the Village (15/30 percent) as compared to the Tila (30/34 percent) possibly reflecting the sharper intra-Dalit hierarchies in the rural as compared to urban settlement (see table 5). On the other hand, only around half the Dalit respondents (33/64) said that they interacted with general caste children. Except in a few cases such interaction was infrequent and usually with a classmate or two. In a few cases, older youth made a mention of roaming around in multi-caste groups.

A relatively small number of respondents (24/64) said that they invited their general caste friends to their homes. A smaller number (12/64) said that these friends had actually visited and a negligible few (5/64) said non Dalit classmates had had a cup of water /tea in their (Dalit) homes. Only one respondent reported that a friend from a general caste actually ate a meal in the former’s home.

The main reasons cited for a larger number of Dalits not inviting their general caste friends home was that ‘they will not come home even if we invite them’, ‘we are of `low caste’ so their parents will not allow them’, ‘they will not eat and drink what we offer so what is the point of inviting them’ and so on. None of the *Balmikis* covered in the study with the exception of one in the Tila reported that a friend came home and had a cup of tea (Table 5).

**Table 5: Peer Relations - Tila, Village**

Respondents Dalit and ( <i>Balmiki</i> )**	Tila*	Village*	All*
1) <i>Who play/talk with peers in school from:</i>			
▪ own caste	29(9)	25(2)	53(10)
▪ other SC/ST	30(13)	15(2)	44(15)
▪ GC	19(7)	15(1)	33(18)
2. <i>Have ‘good’ GC friends</i>	19(7)	14(0)	33(7)
▪ have called them home	15(5)	9 (0)	24(5)
▪ have been visited by friends	7(3)	5(0)	12(3)
▪ they have taken food/water in our homes	4(1)	1(0)	5(1)
3. <i>Have visited homes of GC friends</i>	18(8)	14(0)	32(8)
▪ felt hesitant/ uncomfortable doing so	17(7)	10(-)	27(7)
▪ did not enter/went from outside	3 (2)	NA	3(2)
▪ were offered food/water	10(6)	8(-)	18(6)
▪ were offered but did not eat/drink	5(3)	2(-)	7(3)
4. <i>Making friends from GC</i>			
▪ like to make such friends	16(6)	16(2)	32(8)
▪ do not want to make such friends	7(3)	11(0)	18(3)
▪ want friends - caste unimportant	1 (1)	-	1 (1)

GC- general caste

\* The number of respondents who gave such responses has been tabulated.

\*\* *Balmiki* respondents’ answers are given separately in parentheses.

Despite the fears and apprehensions voiced, a fairly large number of respondents (32/54) in both the Tila and even the Village said they would like to have general caste friends. Among the reasons cited were that general caste friends can help them with school work, lend them ‘pass’ books that they often cannot afford and support them in their studies in other ways. Some respondents in the Village mentioned that being friends with Jat and Brahmins can help prevent others from discriminating against them. Of course the caveat also expressed was that such friendships were possible only if the non Dalits in question did not discriminate against them. In some cases this was happening as reported by this respondent:

We share refreshment, Namkeen, tea with the friends (general caste). When any boy objects and says why you are eating with this Bairwa, then they (the friends) used tell them that you 'expel' (remove) caste' (T26, B, B).

Some respondents were however clear they did not want 'higher caste' friends and said 'we are shown by them as low and degraded', 'they will never eat and drink with us' and 'their parents discriminate', while others felt that 'one can be comfortable only with 'ones' own caste group'.

*Peers and Academic Support:* Few Dalits who enter class actually reach class X as reflected in the relatively high proportion of drop out from school. 12 From those who spoke about failure it emerged that the inability to understand lessons and to be able to seek clarifications from the teacher were important reasons for not being able to perform well in school and pass examinations. When asked, Dalit respondents reported that as many as 64 of the 82 of their classmates whom they named as the 'top three performers' came from the 'non Dalit' castes. However it is noteworthy that the remaining 18 were Dalits and included four respondents (three of whom were *Balmikis*) who said they stood first in their class.

To what extent are Dalits able to ask for academic support from their classmates? It is significant that that a fairly large number of the respondents did ask for help from classmates who were considered to 'perform well'. Not all classmates gave of their time and what they knew. In the Village for instance, of the 40 odd children named as good performers there were only around 16 from whom they received help. Of these, 13 belonged to the non Dalit castes (3 were Dalits). Some children said they 'felt shy' to ask a classmate of the opposite gender and that 'they (*Jats*) will not explain'. In a couple of instances casteist abuse was mentioned as a deterrent to seeking help from peers.

I ask less from Lata Jain because she is of Banias. So she does 'chuachut'. She does not even touch my books or tell me the answers to questions. She says that you are of 'lower caste .... Do not come to me (V3,BK,B).

...Because they (general caste students, rank 1 and 2) do not even tell us. So we also do not ask them (V10,BB.)

As mentioned earlier, *Balmikis* bear the brunt of caste discrimination and this is likely not only to constrain school friendships but also the peer support they

are able to receive for their studies. Intra- caste hierarchies though less marked are also likely to compound the unease and discomfort that some Dalits experience within the classroom. *Balmiki/Bhagaria* children who are the minorities among Dalit castes in school find classrooms extremely lonely with detrimental consequences for their interest and motivation in studies. This is evocatively described by the *Balmiki* and *Bhagaria* respondents below.

Because of caste, studies were affected. Children never used to tell me. They used to avoid our questions... ‘Upper caste’ boys did not tell. I did not dare to ask from them (C28:BK,B).

I do feel that why there is less of our caste. ...they do not make me play with them. Say that you are Harijan, we won’t make you play. I feel angry that if today there had been more of our caste then I would have also played with them. In school, teachers call me Munna Balmiki. And Jats boys say that ‘ai bhangi’ boy! We won’t make you eat. So I come home in the interval (school break) and return after the break’ (V3,BK,B).

No one sat near me. I sat right at the back of the class and alone (V30,BG,B).

Did Dalit students wish to help their classmates? A large number of respondents in the Tila (22/34) and the Village (18/30) replied in the affirmative. Respondents (mostly in higher secondary school) said they felt ‘good’, ‘happy’ if someone, especially from the general castes came to them to learn something. It made them feel important and ‘clever’, and that ‘we know something’. Saying that some of their classmates ‘refused to tell even when they knew’, respondents made it a point to say ‘what ever we know we will tell anyone who asks us’ and ‘will not do *bhed bhav* (discriminate)’. Most of such interaction remained confined to the school and non Dalits rarely came to their homes, as seen earlier. However occasionally, consulting on studies provided an opportunity for this as well. For the *Balmiki* respondent for whom other Dalit castes are also ‘higher’ in the social hierarchy, it is a matter of satisfaction even when Dalit classmates seek their help.

I feel happy. When somebody comes to ask me, then I tell them sincerely. I do not discriminate with anyone in telling any question. What ever I know I tell them nicely (V7,BL,B).

Yes I feel good when I help. Other children come to take help but in school. They don't come to my house but on the pretext of studying, they have come. My family also likes it when Jats' children come to ask.... (V17,B,B)

No, I Kumar Harijan stood first in class. So I do not seek help, rather others ask me for help. I feel nice that they ask for my help (T5,B,B).

#### 4.3 Identifying and Naming: 'our caste is written on our foreheads'<sup>13</sup>

Integral to the process of socialization is the learning of ones *jati*/caste identity - children learn who they are, whom they should interact with and other social practices that are informed by hierarchical caste relations. From early childhood a boy/girl is identified as the son/daughter of his/her parent who again is known largely by his caste name and epithets for it. School practices institutionalize and reinforce these identities at the very time of admission as the common practice is to add the sub caste to a child's name. Teachers, majority of whom are from non Dalit castes, carry to schools the beliefs and practices that they follow in their villages where interaction with 'lower castes' is based on the identity of the group to which they belong rather than the attributes of individuals. A regular practice in school is that of teachers calling children by their 'caste name', or 'son of a caste'. Peers often did likewise making the Dalit student 'lose my confidence' and 'feel myself low'. Respondents clearly articulated that naming by caste caused them tension and distress. Teachers and school administrators seem to give it little thought.

Teachers used to call me less by my own name. They used to say, "O Balai ke chorai (son of Balai) come here" ....used to tell another child, that, "the newly admitted balai ka chora, go and call him" (V17,BL,B).

At start of the session, teachers used to say,"... stand and tell your name, father's name, where you come from..." They also ask your community, "whom you are of", and then we tell our caste. When they ask about our caste... I feel sad... why do they ask about caste? Because ...., other children come to know of our caste... then they will call us 'chamar' and they will do bhedbhav (discriminate). Therefore we feel angry with the teacher, but we tell the caste..... On knowing our caste, children's behavior 'shrinks'. They keep a distance. They won't eat drink with us, won't tell us questions, and won't give books on our asking. So we feel a little bad (,20, B,B).

Scholarships for Dalit children are seen as enabling incentives provided by the state to facilitate their education. Discussions around scholarships largely centre round their meager value, lack of adequate coverage, delay in receiving funds and malpractices. Though scholarships are usually delayed, and the amounts received are relatively small, many respondents use these funds to tide over part of the incidental school expenses. What appears significant and little commented upon is the manner in which scholarships tend to reinforce stigmatizing of Dalit identity as 'lower castes'. Ironically, to claim incentives under affirmative action programmes and facilitate inclusion, those who have suffered from disadvantage must publicly proclaim identities that are still the target of discriminatory practices. They are often required to do so in the school assembly and before their classmates ostensibly to 'facilitate' their identification as SC students and thereafter to receive fellowships and other incentives. A few respondents brushed aside this 'name calling' and appeared to be able to take on adverse comments from general caste peers. However the majority said they suffered considerable anguish as their identities are brought into public 'gaze' again and yet again, and they are constantly at the receiving end of disparaging barbs from peers, office staff as well as teachers.

I have not received the scholarship; we used to get it before the annual examination. Teacher used to announce in class that SC/ST children can take their scholarship. Jat boys tease us that you are of low caste, you get scholarship, we do not. It comes to my mind that I also should stop taking scholarship because children tease us saying "we are 'upper caste' so we do not get it (V 8, BL,B).

...teacher used to call out our whole name (including caste). So all used to understand 'in their mind' that he is of 'low caste' that is why he is getting a scholarship (V5,B,B)

#### 4.4 Teachers - Interaction and Support

An important concern for Dalit respondents was how teachers taught and interacted with them. It is not surprising that the experience of abuse, especially physical abuse, prevalent in all schools is one of the major factors for dislike of a teacher. Respondents were also unhappy when teachers 'did not teach well'. 'Teaching well' meant explaining to them, repeating more than once for their benefit and not wasting time in class. Whether a teacher discriminated against them was an important factor in their construction of 'a good teacher'. In contrast to a few who were 'good natured' and treated them

‘with love’, there were many who ‘differentiated on the basis of caste’, which included ‘not asking us to serve them water’, ‘insulting us’, and ‘making us sit at the back of the class’.. Respondents were quick to identify and describe a teacher whom they considered ‘fair’ - one who asked questions from everyone, did not insult them in front of their classmates and who did not discriminate or practice untouchability . A ‘fair’ teacher was seen to punish only when it related to studies and pardon if mistakes were made.

What kind of support did Dalit respondents receive from their teachers? Of the 64 respondents, 31 (only 8 from the Village) said that they had received support that appeared to be of a very minimal kind from non-SC teachers during their schooling. For instance some respondents said that their teacher had given them a book (usually the ‘pass’ book), notes for the examination, ‘question bank’ and so on. A few teachers gave moral/emotional support such as encouraging respondents to study and get ahead in life, appreciating their efforts and so on.

A smaller number of Tila respondents (6/34) seem to have been taught by SC teachers as compared to the Village (23/30). Most of the Village respondents who were taught by Dalit teachers found them supportive and those who did not have Dalit teachers were keen to be taught by them. The overwhelming reasons given were that these teachers were ‘different from others’- they spoke ‘nicely’ to them, scolded/beat them ‘less’ and understood them ‘more’. They emphasized that the Dalit teacher took more time to explain to them, listened to their questions, did not beat them as much and if he did, was fair about it. Most importantly, respondents said that SC teachers did not practice ‘untouchability’, and by making them serve water, raised their ‘self respect’. These factors were highlighted as respondents were using their experiences with ‘non Dalit teachers’ as their frame of reference<sup>14</sup>.

The implication of the above discussion is not that only SC teachers should teach Dalit students but that their educational concerns should be understood in a nuanced manner. For instance, it is because social relations that govern the relationship of Dalits with SC teachers are less hierarchical as compared to ‘higher caste’ teachers that some respondents find learning to be relatively more comfortable with the former.

## 5. Exclusion, Inclusion and Education - Some Reflections

A review of education policy and programmes for Dalit children would have us believe that the major impediments to their education are inadequate access



to schools, poverty and apathetic attitudes of parents. Hence increasing the number of schools within easy physical access, provision of incentives and mobilizing of local communities have been and continue to be major thrusts of education policy for the Scheduled Castes in India. Caste based discrimination in education has never seen a mention in policy documents<sup>15</sup>. However the foregoing discussion based on an exploratory study in two sites in the state of Rajasthan points to a number of spheres where Dalit children, despite being 'included' in schools, continue to experience exclusion and discrimination within these institutions. The study also suggests that there are institutional spaces within schools that provide opportunities for equitable inclusion.

One of the most important spheres within the school where exclusionary practices continue to flourish are those that are concerned with water and food, which have been traditionally potent sites of caste based discrimination. Where 'running water' is not available in schools through taps (and hand pumps) and drinking water is 'stored' in earthen pots, jars or served in glasses, Dalit children are likely to continue to face caste prejudice reflected in discriminatory practices such as not being allowed to take water themselves. Though respondents in the study said they were not denied access to drinking water this could partly be attributed to the fact that the hand pump and piped water were now available in their schools. What is however pronounced especially in the village (and hence likely in many rural areas of the state) are practices such as the washing of taps after Dalits drink water and forcing them to give right of way to general caste students. Water sources in schools are hence spheres where practices that communicate 'polluted' status to Dalits outside school are being recontextualized within it.

Programmes, functions and ceremonies where food is cooked, served and eaten are also sites where Dalit students experience unfair treatment and are denied equal participation because of their caste identity. The study indicates that Dalit respondents became targets of discriminatory treatment where food was served/eaten together (the mid day meal), where it was cooked and served to seniors (farewell functions) or where it had to be distributed to guests from the village. *Balmiki* students were likely to be most vulnerable to such practices. Though the intensity of such discriminatory processes is likely to vary in different school contexts, this domain of school life requires serious attention. Given that the school provides probably the only space where children from different castes can eat together as well as the symbolic significance of cooking/sharing food in a society where caste hierarchies are still rampant, it is pertinent that conscious efforts be made to encourage such sharing in an equitable manner.

The manner in which identities of caste (and class) constrain peer interaction and friendships as revealed in the study, is particularly deleterious for Dalit children as it circumscribes not only inter personal relations but also possibilities for them to seek resources and support both for curricular and co-curricular activities. In the present study children across castes/classes in the Tila, Village and Colony come into contact with each other and interact in however constrained a fashion only in school. Also important is that children can support each other academically and for Dalit children, the majority of who come from non schooled homes, such friendships can provide invaluable support.

The agency of the teacher and school administrator in addressing and confronting discriminatory practices is critical. However the study shows that teachers, majority of who belong to the general castes largely ignore such practices by non-Dalit children even when attention is drawn to them. Of greater concern are the many different ways in which teachers themselves tend to engage in caste based discrimination in school. This is most strikingly seen in the division of responsibilities among children within the school. The study reveals that tasks considered to be menial and 'polluting' (such as sweeping) are more likely to be assigned to Dalit as compared to general caste children while those concerned with serving of water and food to teachers (with its caste based implications) are assigned mainly to those belonging to general castes.

There are also classroom processes that tend to deny Dalits fair participation in curriculum transaction and give them a voice in classroom discourse. The study highlights the labeling by teachers of Dalit children as 'weak', giving them inadequate pedagogic attention and the failure to give them the confidence to ask questions and clarifications in class. Quite contrary to the teachers' possible view of them as not interested in their studies, Dalit children want to ask questions but are afraid to, feel they will punished, not be listened to, insulted and discriminated against.

Dalit children are often excluded from co-curricular activities. Teachers are partly complicit in the poor participation of Dalit children in cultural programmes and functions as they fail to 'choose' them and often do not encourage them to take part in these activities. These activities provide children opportunities to nurture their self confidence and also to build co-operative relations and secular identities. This sphere also offers children especially from Dalit and other socially discriminated communities opportunities for status enhancement and secular identities in school and they must be encouraged to participate.

The singing of prayers in daily assembly and performing of worship leads to the construction of 'sacred spaces' within the school where Dalits are likely to be excluded because of their perceived 'low' ritual status, as seen in the study. Embedded in the daily rhythm of school life are processes of naming of students by caste. This causes considerable distress to Dalit children as their identities are 'stigmatized' and repeatedly brought into public 'gaze' at the time of admissions to a new school, when a new teacher comes to class, to claim incentives and so on. The politics of 'naming' in school is hence an issue that needs to be addressed. The tendency to largely view SC as homogenous groups has resulted in inadequate attention to intra caste inequalities among Dalits. The study points to the heavy burden of caste identity and brunt of discriminatory practices that *Balmiki* students have to shoulder. This is likely to constrain friendships and resource support that they receive relative to other Dalit children.

What emerges from the study are diverse spheres of school life where social relations and pedagogic processes fail to ensure full participation of Dalit children and they are in fact subject to discriminatory and unequal treatment in relation to their peers. While on the one hand these experiences are detrimental to children's self esteem and self worth, on the other hand they are likely to have serious implications for their interest and motivation in studies. It is not surprising that majority of Dalit children who enter and are formally 'included' in schools often fail/perform poorly and discontinue their studies. However there are a significant few who despite odds are able to complete their education and in fact perform well. This evokes a sense of pride in them and brings recognition among peers and teachers. The fact that Dalit respondents wish to give of their knowledge sincerely and treat all classmates equally, something they usually do not experience, speaks for a level of sensitivity and maturity that must be acknowledged and appreciated. What has also emerged in the study is the agency of Dalit youth, who do try to contest and attempt to resist discrimination by their peers and teachers.

Teachers and school administrators have a responsibility in building a culture within schools that encourages participation of children from hitherto educationally deprived and socially discriminated groups and an environment that values their dignity, social respect. When teachers fail to confront, ignore and actually indulge in unequal treatment of Dalit children, they give legitimacy to sites of exclusion and reinforce discriminatory practices within schools. Though the study did see individual teachers (more so among SC) who are supportive of Dalit students, there is need for systemic attention and

institutionalized response. For instance a critical rethinking of teacher education is necessary if teachers are to engage with and confront their deep seated beliefs relating to caste (and gender), and if a pedagogy sensitive to issues of caste and other social inequalities as well as the academic needs of children from marginal groups is to be developed. In other words the professional training of teachers must aim to equip them with a pedagogy that addresses issues of deprivation, discrimination and social justice.

There is among Dalit communities today growing demand for education and aspirations for social mobility. While the socio-historical experience of disadvantage that these communities have experienced as a result of caste discrimination must be kept in mind, the manner in which caste identity continues to impinge on their education must be squarely addressed. Education for marginal groups is increasingly vulnerable to policy shifts, pressures and interests that are leading to the break down of the public system of education. A growing number of private schools are dotting the educational landscape with claims of 'better quality education' and the promise of occupational opportunities which all marginal groups increasingly aspire to. What these changes mean for the education for Dalit groups particularly in the context of exclusion, equitable inclusion and future life chances in a globalizing world requires serious research and policy attention.

## Endnotes

1. These figures relate to the 5-14 year age group and are taken from *NSS (National Sample Survey) 61st Round Report 516 "Employment and Unemployment Situation among Social Groups in India 2004-05*.
2. The two sites have been named the **Village** and **Tila** to ensure confidentiality especially of the schools/teachers that could otherwise be identifiable. Names of persons mentioned have been changed to protect their identities.
3. *Brahmins, Rajputs* and OBCs are locally referred to as 'higher' and socially dominant castes '*unchhi jati*' and the Dalits as 'lower' / '*neechi jati*'. We are deeply aware that these terms are discriminatory and reinforce popular attitudes and perceptions of unjust hierarchies. We hence use the terms 'general caste' for non Dalits and Dalit/SC for Scheduled Castes. The term *Harijan* which is locally used for the *Balmiki* sub-caste traditionally associated with the task of scavenging/sweeping is has been rejected by Dalits. We desist from unfair naming other than to make a specific point or where these terms are used directly in quotes by respondents.

4. An increasing proportion of children in urban government schools belong to the educationally hitherto most deprived communities who are coming in as middle and lower middle classes/castes are abandoning these in favour of private schools.
5. The proportion of SC teachers in schools is relatively small. According to the NCERT (1998) the percentage of SC among school teachers in Rajasthan was only around 12 percent. In urban areas this was even smaller - 5 percent at the primary stage and barely 2 percent at the secondary stage of schooling.
6. Respondents are referenced as follows: First the sites Tila -T/Village-V, the serial number of the interview, followed by sub-caste: B-Bairwa, BL-Balai, R-Raigar, BK-*Balmiki*, BG-Bhagaria, BU-Bunkar; and finally gender: B-boy/G-girl. T34, B,B is respondent no. 34 from the Tila, a Bairwa boy. GD-group discussions with Dalit children.
7. It must be kept in mind that the dominant pedagogy is primarily one of chalk, talk and making children copy from text books or blackboards, or reading aloud.
8. Reprimands, scolding and beating are also quite common for coming late to school. Most Tila respondents felt that punishment for coming late was meted out equally to all children who were not punctual and in that sense there was no differential treatment. However it is also true that it was the *basti* children who mainly came late to school and hence received more than their share of verbal abuse and also physical punishment. What is important is that punishment for late coming often results in the further cutting down of the learning time of already late children, by extending their time out of class.
9. Bernstein's (1971) reference to power relations that influence selection of 'valid knowledge' represented in the curriculum as well as to the strength of 'boundaries' between what may/may not be taught is pertinent.
10. There were a number of spheres of discrimination that were revealed only in the course of research as respondents cited experiences that disturbed them such being excluded from leading the singing of prayers and rituals associated with worship in school. These are areas to be explored to see how widespread these practices are.
11. A directive from the Supreme Court of India presently directs government schools to serve cooked meals to all children in government run primary schools; this is popularly known as the Mid Day Meal program.

12. Though there is very little data specifically on this phenomenon, NCERT (1998) does provide information on 'repeaters' in school. The data reveal that while 'repeaters' for Rajasthan state as a whole in classes IX-X in 1993 was around 11 percent, that for SC communities was as high as 15 percent. For classes XI -XII the figures are around 8 percent for all students and 13 percent for Dalits.
13. Statement of a Dalit teacher in one of the Village schools
14. It is not surprising that there were some respondents (7 in the Tila) who were clearly not in favour of Dalit teachers as in their experience these teachers tended to ignore or were indifferent to them, did not specially reach out to them, or as one respondent mentioned, beat them severely.
15. See *National Policy on Education 1986/1992*. Ministry of Human Resource Development. New Delhi: Government of India.

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