

Chhadi Lage Chham Chham, Vidya Yeyi Gham Gham **(The Harder the Stick Beats, the Faster the Flow of Knowledge): Dalit Women's Struggle for Education**

SHAILAJA PAIK

More than a reference to corporal punishment, the chhadi (stick) in this article denotes the psychologically crippling and inerasable experiences of Dalit girls in formal institutions of education. A Dalit girl's journey to the citadel of dnyan (knowledge) to gain an education is strewn with many social and cultural obstacles. I argue that power relationships in the wider society have a strong bearing on both access to education and the quality of the education that Dalit girls receive. Dalit girls are subjected to the discipline, control, regulation and surveillance of not only state services in the education system but also of their parents. Thus, they face double discrimination along lines of both caste and gender.

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Shailaja Paik is a Visiting Assistant Professor at the History Department, Union College, Schenectady, New York-12308. E-mail: paiks@union.edu and shailajapaik@gmail.com.

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the specificities of Dalit experiences of access to and the processes in formal institutions of education.¹ Caste, class and gender as issues related to education have not received enough attention from scholars. I venture to untwist this 'trinity' in educational processes by engaging with some experiences of Dalit women in Maharashtra (India). Dalit girls² are often discouraged from attending distant schools, attending technical schools, which are male-dominated, by the problem of gender streaming in education; however, central to my enquiry are the more subtle operations of power in the Dalit context. By Dalits (literally translated to mean 'crushed', 'oppressed' and 'down-trodden'), I refer to India's Untouchables or 'erstwhile untouchables', variously also described as *magasvargiya jati*, *achhuts*, *panchama*, Harijans and Scheduled Castes (SCs). Dalits, who comprise about 167 million Indians, have been historically prevented from accessing education as they were socially ostracised. The term 'Dalit' is also a term of militant self-assertion, a mark of identity: social, cultural and political identity.

At the bottom of the economic ladder, it is only recently that Dalits have begun entering formal institutions of education in great numbers.

This paper looks at Dalit women's struggles against all odds to venture into the citadel of *dnyan* (knowledge) that was controlled by the upper castes. I explore how 'untouchability' is re-visioned and reproduced within formal institutes of education. I will then unpack my empirical findings and comment on how different kinds of 'disciplining' and 'control' are at work in schools and in homes. *Chhadi lage chham chham, vidya yeyi gham gham* (the harder the stick beats, the faster the flow of knowledge) is an old Marathi proverb. It refers to the corporal punishment rampantly practised by teachers and parents in order to discipline children. However, in this paper, I use the term *chhadi* to signify the disciplining of Dalits through overt and covert means, through methods of *verbal*, *physical* and *psychological/mental* crippling carried out by the larger society. I focus on the subjection of the Dalit body to the *chhadi*, the discipline, policing, control and regulation by teachers and

parents. I will show how Dalits are made 'visible' in the precincts of educational institutions and face ill-treatment that parallels their social disadvantage.

Apart from Karl Marx, scholars like Michael Apple and Pierre Bourdieu have already argued that social hierarchies are reproduced in educational institutions.³ In this paper, I argue that the matrix of social structures and cultural forces interacted with the system of education to constrain the thoughts and actions of Dalit girls. Despite these impediments, many Dalit girls successfully completed their education at various levels. I look at some of the hurdles they faced in the process.

This paper is divided into two sections and the first deals with the details of the methodology that I adopted in conducting my research. This is followed by the second section in which I deal with the actual deployment of the *chhadi* by teachers and Dalit parents.

Entering the Ethnographic Archive/Breathing in the Dust from the Field

Fieldwork was carried out during the years 2000–2002, from May 2004 to November 2004, and from June 2005 to November 2005 in the cities of Pune, Mumbai and Nagpur (Maharashtra, western India).⁴ Respondents were Dalit women from varied age groups, sometimes three generations of women in the same family, with different levels of education.

I selected the city of Pune as it is historically a Brahmanical seat of power and also home to the pioneering movement in the education of the lower castes since the mid-19th century. Nagpur was selected, as it has a long history in the Dalit movement, and Mumbai due to its cosmopolitan climate. My residence in the cities of Pune and Mumbai for much of my life has immensely helped my research. I selected my informants on the basis of my contacts with the Dalit community—I had known some informants since my childhood in Yerawada (Pune). I had seen these women fill water from municipal taps, argue among themselves, hide behind their mothers' *padar* (*veil*), walk/run to the stinking public toilets, sit outside their houses and rub in the dark/brown roasted tobacco

powder or Colgate/Promise tooth powder on their teeth. I had watched them walk to school, play hide-and-seek/badminton/*lingorcha* (a game of hitting a pile of flat tiles and running) in the narrow lanes, and also walk to their jobs with bags dangling from their shoulders. I remember Lalita Randhir, a disabled girl, limping to her office with her head down. I was in complete awe of her.

Reflecting on these reminiscences, I deployed the sociological method of 'snowball sampling' that sociologist Sachidananda has referred to as 'the web technique' (1977: 12). I got information from the first few informants in my locality and then from my contacts: social workers, lecturers, teachers, relatives in Pune, and so on. This first batch led me to other Dalit women. After enlisting my informants, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews as required, in one, two and three interview sessions. I was looking for particularities and specificities, not abstractions. My methodology combined a formal interview schedule to elicit biographical details with a number of informal meetings and participant observation. I began with personal factual and biographical information and gradually prepared the respondent for a deeper involvement in the interview. Since some of them knew me as a school-going girl, we often started with our memories of Yerawada and our familial ties. I encouraged informants to speak at length without any interruptions.

My initial literature review revealed that there was little qualitative or ethnographic work among Dalit women in Maharashtra. It was a challenging task to study the 'everyday' lives of Dalit women, given the lack of an 'official' and 'non-official' archive. Further, most Dalit women I listed for my interviews did not possess written histories/accounts of their past nor had they written their autobiographies. Hence, I embarked on documenting data from oral sources, a necessary condition for creating a history of the non-hegemonic, Dalit categories. Such sources are less necessary for the history of the ruling classes who have had control over writing and leave behind abundant written records.⁵ In order to write richer and multi-layered accounts that include official and non-official history,⁶ we have to seriously engage with oral testimonies and with the Dalits' own understanding of their past. Dalit histories cannot be captured in archives and we need to develop a

view of the critical past through the 'eyes of the present'. To capture 'the lifeblood and heartbeat of Dalit women, oral histories are needed to supplement conceptual knowledge' (Bhave 1988: xii). I agree with Sumitra Bhave that 'concepts alone cannot evoke real-life experiences. Equally essential are the real-life experiences of women to be listened to, felt, recorded, considered and understood. Logical structures of knowledge come from these lived experiences and are rooted in them' (ibid.).

Such a methodology was crucial: to listen and to understand the experiences of women who were silenced by their caste experiences is to allow one to ask different and difficult questions of history. The collection of life stories provided a way of putting on record the experiences of relatively powerless Dalit women whose ways of knowing and ways of seeing the world have rarely been acknowledged (see Bhave 1988; Karlekar 1982), let alone celebrated. Telling and listening to such stories also created vital links among us participants, providing a powerful and practical instrument of conscientisation.⁷

Personal narratives of Dalit women offer them a place from which to reflect upon past Dalit experience, to scrutinise Dalit stories which carry agency, meaning and information about the social and psychological positions Dalits inhabit. And it is also significant to follow up what becomes of these stories. The current popularity of autobiography and narratives in feminist research is a measure of the significance now attached to experience, reflection and psychoanalytic understanding as a counter balance to the kind of public and external evidence which is available in studies in political economy and from historical and structural analysis. Carolyn Steedman exemplified the theoretical genre perfectly, when insisting that, 'once a story is told, it ceases to be a story; it becomes a piece of history, an interpretative device' (1986: 143).

The Interviews

There is a widespread belief among Dalits and non-Dalits alike that the power of caste is diluted in the cities. Surekha Punekar asked me, 'why are you asking me *that* [emphasis mine], where

do we find casteism *these* days?’ Indeed, in the Dalit imagination, there is a powerful conception of the city as being caste free, liberating and democratic. It is true that in day-to-day life, discrimination is not practised in such obvious ways in the cities as it is in the villages. At the same time, this could lead to a self-willed blindness to the discrimination that is suffered by many urban Dalits. Surekhat *tai* questioned me again, ‘Don’t you think that you are exacerbating caste differences and causing greater harm by investigating different castes (among Dalits)? You should be working towards diluting such divisions, and such works on caste are in effect ominous.’ At such times, I felt that I was committing violence against informants by enquiring into their caste backgrounds.

While some Dalits were vocal about their experiences, some women refused to grant me an interview when they discovered the nature of my research. They did not wish to talk about any such ‘thing’ in their life. What were the reasons for this ‘unspeakability’ about caste? Often, it was the symbolic or psychological violence that hurt more than physical violence, particularly in the modern urban environment. This ‘symbolic’ or ‘psychological’ violence has escaped the attention of many a scholar and remained largely unexplored. In certain respects, such violence has been more corrosive and harmful than physical violence, as it permeated deep into both the conscious and the subconscious, instilling a sense of insecurity and inferiority. Today, this social and cultural violence is experienced as being more dehumanising than economic exploitation (also see, Chakravarti 2003: 8, 17).⁸ How then does one write such a history?

Some respondents were very angry with me because they thought that I was digging up dead bones and ventilating the stench of the past. A few were aggressive and enquired about my background and my intentions. ‘What do you want to achieve with this?’ they asked. ‘Are you working for some party or NGO’, they questioned. Some respondents did not even stop to think about or find out the nature of my research but began immediately to narrate their experiences of discrimination. Sometimes, the very mention of research on Dalits evoked bitter memories of discrimination. I had to guide such interviews in order to get to the actual content of my questions—educational practices and processes.

Sometimes I was directed to the most articulate respondents. One respondent asked me to approach Mrs More, because 'Mrs More has a lot of stories'. Dalit feminists like Kumud Pawde, Jyoti Lanjewar and Urmilatai Pawar were very eloquent and narrated their experiences analytically. They talked extensively about their lives and the interviews flowed uninterrupted. These Dalit feminists had been in the public gaze; they made speeches, had been published and were well known for their social activities.

However, I consciously made an effort to turn my gaze to other respondents who could not even speak about their experiences. I especially gave space to those who had never been spoken to, or who could not verbalise their experiences, who gave me monosyllabic yes/no answers and toiled from dawn to dusk. Theirs were the lost voices that I have attempted to uncover and 're-present' here.

Access to archival sources was also not easy, particularly private ones. One has to have appropriate personal/official contacts to access material at local college or school archives. As I did not always have such contacts, some archives had to be skipped. On one occasion, a college authority refused to hand over the college magazine, a very useful source for my research on Dalit education. He argued that he could not trust me with the information he provided and that he did not want it to be misused. This sort of thing had happened in the past. Only after I haggled with him for half an hour, and convinced him of the nature and purpose of my investigation did I gain access to that particular volume. Historians often encounter such hindrances.

Most respondents were curious to know what would become of their stories. What was I going to give them in return? One has to deal with such queries in conducting oral interviews (see Karlekar 1982). At one point, I felt that I should stop my research as I may be doing great harm. Also, I did not have answers to some pertinent ethical questions. But finally, I reasoned that this exercise was a safety valve for the venom that was building up inside these Dalit bodies. As a Dalit woman, I questioned myself about the aims and objectives of my project. I reminded myself that this was an exercise to write Dalit women into history, to narrativise the ignored, contemptible, 'slave of the slaves'.⁹

I assured my informants that I was using their stories towards making some policy changes, be it in the matter of education, women's empowerment or government strictures on *tamasha* dancers.¹⁰ I also told them that I would publish their stories, turn them into pamphlets (easy for circulation), to engage public attention. Great sensitivity was also required when raising difficult emotional memories. Women cried bitterly when they remembered their grandparents and parents, their siblings, poverty, insecurity, want and vulnerability. I had to stop the interview at such moments. Initially, I did not know how to handle such emotional outbursts; only through months of fieldwork did I learn to deal with such predicaments.

I want to clarify my use of the Marathi word *tai*, or older sister. My experiential knowledge, supplemented by experiences in fieldwork, supported the increasing usage of the word *tai*. It is easier to call someone *tai*, rather than address somebody older by her name, which would be regarded as disrespectful. The word *tai* helped me gain an easy rapport with informants. I also realised that irrespective of caste and class, most women who engaged in social activities addressed each other or older women as *tai*. This practice finds its parallel in other parts of the country, for instance in the south of India, older women are addressed as *akka* and elsewhere as *didi*. Sometimes, the term is used as a respectable form of address even for younger women. For example, the *tamasha* dancer informants addressed me as *tai*, although I was their daughter's age. (Incidentally, it is a recent phenomenon in India—mostly due to the proliferation of women's studies departments—that students and younger scholars can call some of their respected teachers by their first name.)

It is often a difficult task to conduct research when the researcher is both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' (see M.N. Srinivas' classic exposition of this position). I underscore what Srinivas has to say in this regard:

The very depth of the involvement of the insider in his [and her] society is likely to invest his [or her] work with a relevance

and urgency which the outsider's work is not likely to possess ... The insider's view ought to give him (and her) a great insight into their behaviour. (Srinivas 2002: 560)

Belonging to the same community brought me very close to the informants. I knew some of the stories floating about in the community, as I had read Dalit literature, heard my parents and relatives talk about atrocities, about want and insecurity, about 'passing', and had heard them deriding the upper castes and the 'Baman' (derogatory term for Brahmins), and so on. At the same time, I was an outsider, an academic studying my own community.

I often had to delicately balance these two roles. Scholars may argue for/against one of the approaches; however, I certainly benefited from being in both roles. As an insider, I wrote about nuances which may escape the attention of scholars and as an outsider, I was armed with the necessary scholarship to study the community. This exercise helped me understand myself and my role better, and get back to my community to establish my relationships.

The question of 'representation' has been widely discussed and I do not wish to enter into it here. I also do not want to essentialise and say that only 'a Dalit can write a Dalit history', or can understand Dalit pain and suffering. Some middle-class, upper-caste fieldworkers/investigators/interlocutors/even translators often enter the field, attempting to understand, study and present the worldview of another, and an abstract one at that. They try to adopt a framework 'which must be applicable to both their structuring of society and to others. This also implies a sharing of beliefs and the ability to penetrate beneath the skin of respondents in Srinivas's sense of the term' (Karlekar 1982: 18). Such investigators also agree that without empathy, fieldwork will be nothing more than a series of statistics backed up by the subjective generalisations of the investigator.

I applaud the work of researchers who struggled with their initial inhibitions and a different milieu. However, I emphasise that unlike the middle-class upper-caste experience of studying marginalised groups, my fieldwork was an attempt to establish strong links with my own community, to understand women's

worlds and experiences as one of them, a Dalit woman. Instead of acquiring knowledge in the field, I was sharing my life with them as one who had faced a similar set of problems. We talked and tried to understand the meaning of our experiences of discrimination in villages and schools as well as the attitude of the upper castes, middle-class Dalits, Dalit men, and so on. My fieldwork was my life itself, the experiences of growing up as a Dalit in Pune, and it strengthened my Dalithood. Through this research, I have gradually learnt to stand up for myself; it has enhanced my self-esteem and self-respect. It has helped me reinvent my selfhood and look critically at my personhood and at my community. What Dalits need is not sympathy or emotional favours, but dignity and honour which has been missing from the entire discourse. As I went along, I found differences in tone and speech though we spoke the same language—Marathi. I could easily identify these differences. I have retained the original language as it was used by lower-class or middle-class Dalits.

Most of the time, my informants used the collective terms *aaplyat* (in our community), *aapan* (we), *aapla samaj* (our community), thus, talking to me as one of them. Being a Dalit woman certainly helped me easily ‘intrude’ into their private lives and engage with them fully. It also required me to seriously take into account the question of experience through which the deconstruction and reconstruction of history can take place so as to develop critical knowledge and a critique of knowledge itself.¹¹

My first interviewee was my grandmother who asked me why I was questioning her. Why was I speaking about caste to her? Why did I want to know about her degraded life in the past? She did not want to remember how she carried carrion on her head, holding the *ghamila* (an oval pot) with one hand, constantly waving her other hand to shield the meat from eagles and flies. However, after some persuasion, she reflected on her life in the village of Takali (*taluka* Kopargaon, Ahmednagar district). I argue that to some extent the Dalit experiences of pain, their suppression and oppression, their ideologies of protest and liberation constitute new knowledge that can lead to a Dalit epistemology, and potentially a Dalit pedagogy. Such efforts are necessary in pedagogical

practices, in order to transform educational institutions radically (see also Rege 2006: 6). Let me now turn to the second section of the paper—teachers and parents who operated the *chhadi*.

Wielders of the *Chhadi*—Teachers and Parents

Most of the women I interviewed were first-generation learners, the first from the Dalit community to enter schools. In the past, education was out of bounds for most Dalits. Meena Mahajan's mother¹² had never been to school, but she remembered her brother sitting in the corridor outside while the teacher taught inside the classroom:

The Brahman sat in front, then the Maratha, finally the Chambhar, Mahar and the Mang in the dust, at the doors of the school. Outside [...]. '*Kai aaiku yenar o yevhadya lamba, tumich sanga kasa shikaicha ann kay shikaicha?, mulinna tar baher jayala manai, ghar kaam phakta!* [How and what could a student hear from so far? You tell me how to study and what to study? Moreover, girls were not allowed to go outside, they were to work at home].

Meena's mother confirmed the prevalence of the 'feminised' 'private' domain by the norms of which Dalit girls were not allowed to be educated. She also explained 'caste rows'—rows in the classroom along caste divisions in rank order. Most Dalits talked about this and I also read about this segregation in the autobiographies available. Students were strictly categorised on caste lines, said Meena's mother.

Caste determined capability and rank: the highest caste would be the first benchers who were the most 'intelligent', thus mirroring the social hierarchy, and the lowest castes, the pests, the vermin, seated at the back of the classroom, or even outside it were the least intelligent. Thus, schools and classrooms (within/without), were arranged in order to regulate the social divisions so that there could be no 'infiltration' on an individual or collective scale. If and when Dalit bodies were made 'visible', the upper-caste pupils perhaps felt more privileged, and denigrated Dalit students. In these circumstances, how could Dalit girls find emancipation through education?

For the majority of the population, Dalit and non-Dalit, the teacher was likened to God, who would impart knowledge in order to 'open' their eyes. Thus, the operation of power leads to the reproduction of conditions of inequality, where the upper-caste Brahman teacher is *bhudeva* or God on earth, and the lower caste, an 'untouchable'. In any case, no Dalit or non-Dalit student would question the teacher.

Attitude and Quality of Teachers

The Dalit community's/girls' earlier imaginings, curiosities, bewilderments and questions about the nature of education were satisfied when they gradually won the right to attend school. It was a new experience for them to mix with children of other castes and be taught by a high-caste teacher—who was often a Brahman. In interviews, women talked about their schooling as often a very troublesome process, in which discrimination took multiple forms.

I myself observed that some teachers enjoyed their position and power and did everything possible to maintain their exalted position. They refused to befriend the students and made every effort to present the image of a strict disciplinarian. They thought that, like the elders in a family, it was important to be aloof to command respect. Those who gathered enough courage to ask a question were reprimanded ferociously, being shouted at and insulted. The very demeanour of some Brahman and upper-caste teachers silenced the pupils. Although this is a common experience for both boys and girls in many Indian schools, Dalit girls suffered more, because they had to fight both caste and gender oppression. In interviews, the Dalit women showed that they were keenly aware of the ways in which such relationships of power operated.

One common complaint was that the teachers were not particularly good at their jobs, forcing pupils to learn lessons by rote rather than by trying to help them understand a topic. Indeed, they wondered whether the teachers themselves grasped what they were teaching. Snehlata¹³ said:

I disliked geometry. It was in class eight when we dealt with some geometric theorems. The teachers just copied them from

the books to the board, one after the other and told us to copy [...]. Nobody asked how the teacher derived the proof. The teachers did not explain it ... Nobody dared ask questions. However, I asked once; but, with the response I got then, I never dared to ask anything after that. They did not reply properly and only insulted us. No one asked any queries and we just learnt everything by heart. We barely scraped through this subject most of the time.

The rigid learning machinery perpetuated disciplinary tendencies; Dalit girls were at a greater disadvantage and could not voice their opinions in the class at all. It would be blasphemy for a Dalit girl, the 'slave of the slave' to question the upper-caste teacher.

Jyotsna¹⁴ who attended a municipal school reiterated Snehlata's remark that her teacher did not teach properly. She further noted:

Sometimes, if they were new, they were not able to teach properly. Some were least bothered about whether the class understood their lessons or not. Some of the college teachers were irresponsible. They sometimes did not complete the prescribed syllabus. They also did not know much or could not explain well. So, we had to join [other] classes.

These memories underscored the Gramscian and Freirean concept of 'banking education'.¹⁵ Instead of stimulating the intellect of students, specifically Dalit students who were new to knowledge and education, teachers merely conserved and poured data into the 'student container', so that the student would reproduce it at a particular opportunity. Thus, the teacher-pupil relationship was rarely critical, dialogic and reciprocal—the teacher remained the teacher and the pupil the pupil, always. There was hardly any active participation in schools by Dalit girls.

Why did not Dalit girls participate in classroom interactions? Were they academically inferior or did they lack the necessary encouragement and support? In her interview, Kumud *tai* Pawde¹⁶ laughed and remembered how her teachers compared the students to the boulders of the Narmada (river), and caned them frequently.

Such qualitative information is relevant to understand the humiliation that Dalit students face in school and to critically analyse the reason for rising drop-out rates of Dalits rather than just blame them for their non-attendance in schools or question their merit. Such children are very often persuaded sometimes by their upper-caste teachers and sometimes by their parents to believe in their lack of aptitude for education.

Some teachers were prejudiced and placed children from 'better' homes from upper-caste and middle-class backgrounds at higher academic levels and Dalits at a lower level. Furthermore, even if Dalits were neatly dressed, there was no equal chance of their being treated well. Their neat and clean uniforms were not enough to *erase* their dirty background. In fact, donning clean clothes would be looked upon as Dalit arrogance by members of higher castes, even leading to verbal, physical and psychological abuse.

Mrs Hirabai Kuchekar¹⁷ was reminded of a Brahman teacher while she was in Class VII: 'He was really harsh. He asked me, "what are you going to do with education"?' He further continued, "These people will never improve. You will never understand maths; it is not meant for you."

On the other hand, some informants like Champabai Bhalerao,¹⁸ vociferously denied such discriminatory experiences and said that none of 'that' existed and they did not face any of 'that'. Can we take this at face value? Or is it that they choose to forget the shameful memories? While I do not deny that some escaped caste discrimination we can also interpret their silence as a refusal to remember their past, to relate to their 'untouchable' background.

Some teachers identified Dalits before the class. One anonymous respondent said:

I studied in a small English-medium school in Pune. I distinctly remember the overt caste discrimination from class seven to ten. A clerk frequently visited the class and asked: 'Will the SCs stand up? I have to check the list.' The few SC students in the class stood up and the rest of the class looked at us. I felt like vanishing and burying myself somewhere when I saw him approach the class. I simply half-stood with my head hung,

pretending to work on something in my books. I felt insulted, but I could not voice it. Why could I not voice it? The system had oppressed me so much that I felt that this was just a minor incident. I have to be prepared for more similar or worse experiences. Further, I asked myself 'why did he have to come twice a year to do this marking? Why is it not sufficient that the official records had our names ...'?¹⁹

The school maintained separate registers for Dalit students; such records were required to identify Dalit students for grants, scholarships, concessions, reservations and routine checks. Dalits were marked through a periodic roll call, and the concessions given to Dalits were publicly announced, thus insulting them further. How could Dalit girls attend school under such humiliating circumstances? Schools could be more discreet instead of making Dalit pupils 'visible' in the class.

Some predominantly upper-caste teachers were, as a rule, extremely ignorant about Dalit culture and nurtured many stereotypes. They had a negative image of Dalits in general, and low expectations of their Dalit pupils. In this way, the caste system indirectly constrained the educational opportunities of lower-caste children in India despite constitutional guarantees of equality. Some scholars have argued that teachers discriminate in such ways unconsciously (Khan 1993: 216), but my research shows that the teachers were often consciously discriminative. Bharati told me of how she was frequently scolded by her teacher for her 'dirty' uniform. She possessed only one uniform and could not wash it frequently for fear that it would be worn out. The teacher made fun of her, and the school peons and other pupils taking the cue mocked her similarly: 'They said that I was from a "dirty caste" and so should stay away from them. They hid my bag and stole my only pen. So I did not like to go to school.' But this rare woman fought back and attended school, eventually gaining her Masters degree. She believed that only schooling could help her out of caste oppression.²⁰

Some upper-caste teachers practised discrimination while grading pupils; moreover, they encouraged only upper-caste students.

Monica Tapase²¹ was troubled because despite fetching higher grades her teachers encouraged the 'others' (upper-caste students), not her. She said, 'In my case, they never acknowledged that I was doing well. I did not like it, but still I studied to prove myself.' These Dalit girls were rarely encouraged for the efforts they were making. They were ignored. Thus, these respondents needed to fight more than one battle to prove themselves in class. Very few aspired to do so, but Monica was one of them.

It is clear that although Dalits are permitted to enter the education system, they are prevented in many cases from taking full advantage of it. Some teachers from a high-caste background are often anxious about the threat to their status posed by Dalit self-assertion, and so do all they can to perpetuate their superiority. All this raises questions about the very nature of citizenship for Dalits in independent India.

Irrelevant School Curriculum and Imposition of an Alien Culture

In an excellent article, Mohammad Talib represented the experience of working-class children in a school located in an urban village on the southern outskirts of New Delhi. He observed that the teachers always said, '[...] this child was deficient in the *ruchi* (interest) necessary for aspiring to education of any kind'. One student said, 'my teachers have always told me so. They told me that my head does not contain brain but *bhoosa* [dry grass]. They said so because I do not understand the lessons in the class' (Talib 1998: 201–03). Convinced of this, he dropped out. In this manner, some teachers discouraged students.

Some Dalit students had difficulties in following the middle-class teachers and middle-class-oriented textbooks unlike the middle-class, upper-caste child. Did the school curriculum relate to Dalit society and culture? Scholars have argued that in most cases, the school curriculum selectively depicts the world of the dominant and strong, ignoring the marginalised. Scholars like Ramanamma and Bambawale (as cited in Karlekar 1983: 240),²² Karlekar (1983), Talib (1998), Muralidharan (1997) and Nambissan (2000) argue that the curricula do not resonate with Dalits. They

contend that there is a disjunction between the content of school textbooks and the culture and environment of lower-caste children. Talib observes that the life of the oppressed, such as the quarry workers' children from the SCs, did not find expression in the life and thoughts of the privileged in society. He states: 'The marginalised internalised and evolved complex cultural strategies to ignore and forget pedagogic knowledge presented to them at school—"certified degrada"' (Talib 1998: 201).

Geeta Nambissan (2000) reports that SC-ST (Scheduled Caste-Scheduled Tribe) students found their language and culture different from the supposed *standard* or mainstream language and culture. Very often, the subject matter is totally irrelevant to the everyday existence of these children. Karlekar also notes that some teachers were often unsympathetic to the special needs of such children who have problems in following lessons (1983: 216).²³ The practice of differentiation and discrimination against the SCs (and other subalterns) across a range of social institutions and practices, including curricula and distribution of knowledge, pervaded the system of education. Further research is essential into the role of the teacher and curricula which alienate Dalit children from the school system.

Teachers who were primary agents in the process of superimposing a new culture believed that speaking and understanding the language of the upper castes and adopting their social manners were essential for the children's general advancement.²⁴ Historically, teaching has been dominated either by the Brahman or by other upper castes who discriminated against the lower castes. Initially, these were the teachers recruited by the government, and hence, we find more caste discrimination in government schools. The majority of teachers who were drawn from the upper castes inevitably imposed their 'sanitised' culture, ideas, dress code, language, food habits, and so on, onto the lower castes, thus, delegitimising their lives and culture. According to the Hindu *shastras*, as well as 'common sense', upper-caste privileges like reading the scriptures and engagement in education are considered superior to lower-caste skills like carpentry, blacksmithy, and so on. Upper-caste vegetarian food habits were considered superior to the lower-caste tradition of beef/meat eating. One should not forget that

even if the upper castes ate beef, they were not polluted like the lower-caste Dalits. Dalit children were 'disciplined' to adopt higher-caste values; those who were unable to adapt to this essentially alien, upper-caste culture were treated as potential failures.

Further, teachers rewarded the 'good' language, and 'style' of students from an upper-caste background who were considerably privileged.²⁵ I have experienced and observed this since childhood, when my mother and some upper-caste acquaintances and teachers asked me to say the upper-caste '*ho*' instead of my lower-class/caste '*ha*' for 'yes'. Dalit language and culture are different from the standard Marathi, and Dalits are constantly erasing the '*ha*' vocabulary. Mr K.V. Sarawade reflected on his school experiences in his essay in which he remembered how a Brahman teacher thrashed him hard to make him pronounce the word *vyombi*—(fresh raw wheat from the fields) correctly. He says:

I used to follow my cousin to school. I did not have clothes to attend school. My mother asked a pair from someone and I wore that. I had a feeling of inferiority when I went to school with the well-dressed students. I used to sit in a corner. I had a Brahman teacher. Whenever he was angry he used to call us, '*dhedgya, mangatya*'.²⁶ If we did not wear caps, he used to yell 'you *haramkhor* [bastard], are you Ambedkar's heir? But that won't work here.' He used to use bad words and cane us thoroughly. He used to make other children laugh calling us names, '*dhedraje*' [King of Dheds], '*maangraje*' [King of Mangs]. All children laughed at us. We were tortured immensely when he used such caste names for us. He used to ask us to leave the class for want of a *topi* [cap]. He used to beat us up thoroughly and some Dalit boys left school due to this. (Sarawade 1996: 13)

Upper-caste teachers thus used their power to humiliate and make visible Dalit students in the classroom. They deployed a psychologically corrosive language, encouraged the making of Dalit 'Pygmalions'²⁷ and exercised power through corporal punishment (beatings). Urmila Pawar²⁸ remembered how her teacher slapped her hard for refusing to clean the classroom. Urmila refused

to attend school after this episode; however, after the intervention of her mother, she continued her education.

Many high-caste teachers did not consider low-caste pupils 'worth teaching'. They were unconcerned with the progress of pupils who merely advanced from one grade to the next automatically year after year. Draupadi,²⁹ Sandhya's mother, talked of her experience in a government school, 'we were just pushed from one class to the other. No grades/marks, *dhaklat jaicho* (we were just pushed from one class to the next), no standards.' Most informants agreed that the municipal schoolteachers left pupils with something to scribble while they chatted among themselves.

How did Dalits respond to such a *chhadi* of discriminatory systems? Some Dalit girls rebelled; some consented/submitted, while others escaped by 'passing' as upper-caste girls. Some Dalit girls hid their caste background. Meena Mahajan³⁰ reflected:

In school I told my friends I was a Maratha. I had a terrible complex. I thought that 'they' would not talk to me if I revealed my caste. Once when I was in class ten, one teacher loudly asked me 'tu Hindu-Mahar na ga'? [you are a Hindu-Mahar right?].³¹ I felt so bad, I stood with my head down. I was the only one (Dalit) in that class.

Dalits could not afford the luxury of attending private schools which demanded higher fees. Nor did they have the time to travel to schools that were distant from their *vastis*.³² Inequality and teachers' incompetence were the lot of Dalit children who attended 'poor' government schools characterised by dilapidated buildings, lack of drinking water or toilet facilities and prone to pest infestations. Furthermore, the staff suffered from lethargy, apathy, absenteeism and no accountability. Some respondents said they were not given any information regarding facilities and scholarships. Dalit girls suffered more because such municipal schools closer to home were their only choice of school as parents did not allow them to travel long distances.

Thus, the *chhadi* operated in numerous forms, discouraging Dalit students from seeking an education or staying on in school. Apart from teachers, upper-caste classmates too discriminated against

Dalit girls. Sadhana Kharat³³—now herself a teacher—stated, ‘Upper-caste girls used to tuck their skirts in so that they would not touch mine when we sat on the benches. They had separate groups and stayed away [from us]. I never had friends from the upper castes.’

Thus, students congregated in caste groups. Dalit girls found it difficult to infiltrate other caste groups, and kept their own caste company.

Although verbal abuse, discrimination, degradation and contempt were pervasive, there were exceptional teachers as well as students. Some teachers played an important role in the lives of Dalits. Ambedkar’s³⁴ Brahman teacher who gave Ambedkar his last name is one such example. Poonam Rokade,³⁵ an engineer, praised her teacher:

During my school days, my teacher did help me in Mathematics. He spent extra time to coach me and did not take any fees. He asked me to solve previous question papers and to get them reviewed by him. I followed his advice and succeeded.

A few teachers took keen interest in and counselled Dalit students on further opportunities. Sandhya Meshram³⁶ attributed her interest in social work to her teacher who advised her to pursue a Masters in Social Welfare, advice that Sandhya was happy to follow. These respondents have different experiences of teachers at different levels of schooling. Occasionally, a few teachers were innovative and implemented pedagogic changes to interest and benefit their students—they asked them to teach in class or to help other backward students.

Indirect Costs of Education

Sometimes, students were not allowed inside the classroom for want of certain accessories. Some of the first-generation and some of my second-generation informants dropped out of school for want of books, bags, and so on. Bharati was not allowed to sit for her school examination for want of ribbons for her two plaits. The school authorities wanted all the girl students to look smart with

oiled and braided hair, decorated with ribbons. Can all Dalits afford oil and ribbons? Bharati's mother tore a piece of cloth to make two ribbons for her. The teachers would not have treated an upper-caste girl this way. I agree with Karlekar (1983: 198) that free schooling (for the poor and lower castes) is only part of the picture.³⁷ Dalits are not only untouchable, poor and badly treated but also burdened with the cost of books and stationery.

The 'Magic Wand' of Education and Parental Policing of Dalit Girls

Despite such adverse circumstances, some Dalit girls continued to educate themselves to the extent possible. Most of the informants believed that education was 'good' for them, and that they were privileged to get an education, however little. They believed that 'education was a magic wand' which would bring about their advancement. They believed in the human-capital approach to education: that is, 'if they invested in education, they would be investing in techniques which would help them to better their life-chances' (Karlekar 1983: 185). In the parents' view, education is a valuable asset and, of course, part and parcel of the modernising process.

Many Dalit parents were illiterate and lacking experience in school culture, so they were unable to provide much useful help to their children in their studies.

Despite this, there was a general valorisation of education among Dalits, who saw it as a means for upward mobility. Many Dalit parents had imbibed the prevailing high-caste attitude towards learning, seeing it as something to be forced on reluctant children through strict discipline, including physical beating to make them memorise their lessons. They believed, like the high-caste teachers, that learning can be acquired through formulaic verbal repetition, reminiscent of the *shlokas* chanted by Brahmins. Alaka and Rani³⁸ recalled how:

My mother used to work outside. As soon as she came home in the evening, she would get ready to sit near the stove. She used

to make us sit near the *chul* [a mud stove] beside her. *Eka hatana bhakri thapayachi, ann dusaryana kalvan karayachi* [She used to beat the *bhakris*, with one hand and stir the curry with the other hand]. She used to continuously ask us to read the lessons aloud. She said that the louder we read the lessons, the better we would memorise and hence we had to read aloud. She also beat us occasionally to make us study.

Dalit parents were happy if their children could read like upper-caste children. Most of the time, it was the mother who had to shoulder the responsibility, in the absence of the father, of overseeing the children's homework but getting to school was hard. Village children had to walk miles, sometimes crossing oscillating river bridges to get to school. These experiences have been vividly described in the Marathi Dalit literature. The stories depict children enjoying their walk to schools, running on roads/pathways, playing pranks, stealing mangoes, guavas and berries on their way to school. This was more fun than school. In rural areas, children seem to accept quite long walks to school and regard it as normal. Even now, in remote parts of India where there are few or no modes of transportation, this is the case.

Since village schools do not teach beyond class four, or at times, class seven, children have to go to the town to attend higher classes. Many girls were discouraged from travelling such long physical distances for reasons of 'safety', and lack of transportation. The parental *chhadi* expected girls to be *saat chya aat gharaat* (literally: be home before dark/7 pm). Further, the absence of women teachers results in parental reluctance to send girls to school. Parents who sent their sons to prestigious schools which demanded higher fees rarely sent their daughters there. It was thought that money spent on a girl's education was a waste because she would leave them for her in-laws house, whereas sons were '*vaunshacha diva*', the 'light of the lineage/family', who would support parents in their old age.

I observed that in most cases, the eldest daughter in the family was raised to assume the role of a mother so that she could stand in whenever the mother was away from home. Eldest daughters tended to suffer particularly badly in regard to access to education.

Some Dalit parents sought to impose a particular 'middle-class' notion of female domesticity on their daughters, prioritising *gruhini* (lady-like) ideals over education. They focused on training their daughters to do housework—cleaning utensils, washing clothes, rolling 'round' *chapattis*, learning arts and crafts, decorating the home and adopting a respectable demeanour towards their future husbands. Alaka *tai*, laughing sarcastically, recalled her mother, 'She wanted us to be capable on all fronts. She asked me to first engage with housework and study later.' Many Dalit parents insisted on 'domesticating' their daughters; impeccable housework was the primary qualification to turn them into respectable women.

Many respondents were considered unsuited to education, and were given minimal encouragement to study. If they then failed, rather predictably, at school, they were heaped with insults and abuses. Relatives would join the parents in blaming the victim and in calling the girl a dullard. They said that being a girl, her brains would not work properly and that she was not fit for further studies. Faced with such pressures, many girls lost their interest in education, and once again, the *chhadi* reigned supreme.

Some Dalit parents held a very low opinion of their daughter's calibre and aspirations. Poonam Rokade's father did not want to spend money on giving her a science-based education and told her that she should take up Arts or Commerce, which would cost him less money. He also thought that the disciplines of science and engineering were for men and were no good for girls. 'What were girls going to do with science and engineering?' he asked. In this particular and exceptional case, Poonam's mother supported her decision to take up the subject of her choice. Alaka's³⁹ father considered that the arts, drawing, painting and crafts were best suited for girls. Teachers also often believed girls to be less capable than boys in subjects such as mathematics; consequently, they failed to use teaching techniques that might have improved the achievement of girls in particular subjects. Girls thus tend to be channelled into domestic science, handicrafts and biology, while boys are directed towards chemistry, mathematics and vocational subjects. As is well known, separation of spheres in education and activity is a universal phenomenon.

On the other hand, some Dalit parents wanted their children to reach great heights unknown to the community in the past. Manini, Malavika⁴⁰ and their brother were under constant pressure to perform better. All three were coerced against their wishes by their parents, who wanted their children to be doctors, towards the science stream. When I asked their mother about this, she said:

There was no doctor or any other professional of that high rank in my house. Most of them were in clerical services or were teachers. Both of us, my husband and I, were earning and we thought that we could afford the education of our children. We wanted our children to avail of this opportunity and do their best. We had no facilities or choices, but we could bestow them upon our children. In those times, we could think of making them doctors or engineers and so we pushed them towards that. However, we did not take into consideration the children's choices. Also we did not think about their non-English background and how they would have to fight the English world. Those were different times, we acted in a craze.

The two sisters were critical of their parents even after 14 and 16 years. In families which believed in education, schooling was compulsory for girls as well. Urmila *tai* did not like school but attended it because she was afraid of her father. Kamal *tai*⁴¹ said, 'my father saw to it that I was never at home, never missed school'.

Conclusion

Caste and the education system have worked ruthlessly to discourage Dalit entrants but Dalits have set great store by education. This in itself provided a counterweight to the discrimination practiced in schools, and by sheer hard work and perseverance, significant numbers of Dalits were able to obtain educational qualifications that opened up new jobs and worlds. Dalit girls faced double discrimination; 20 to 30 years ago as we have seen, they were often not encouraged by their parents to excel in their studies. This raises questions about practices of patriarchy among the Dalits themselves. There were of course exceptions. Change will not come

through movements for Dalit assertion—as is the case in the battle with the higher castes—but through the assertion of Dalit women against the men of their own community.

Notes

1. This paper is based on my dissertation which focuses on Dalit women's experiences of formal education in post-colonial Pune (western India).
2. I use the terms 'girls' and 'women' interchangeably. Most of the informants interviewed were married women; responding to my questions they were transported into their past, their childhood (as girls) when they boarded the school bus.
3. Marx, Antonio Gramsci (1971), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Giroux (1997), Apple (1995, 2004) and many others talk about this crystallisation of hierarchies in the education system.
4. I conducted 180 interviews with some predominant SC communities in the city of Pune. These were women from Mahar, Mang, Chambhar, Valmiki, Khatik and Dhor castes. (Presently, I do not want to enter into the difference among these castes.) I interviewed three generations of women mostly belonging to the same family. From this sample, I have selected only a few interviews for the purposes of this paper. Of this larger sample, the majority were above 26 years of age, three were below 20 years, while 15 were between 20 and 25 years. Most of the first-generation respondents were illiterate and had never been to school. Most of the second and almost everybody from the third generation were literate and had attended school. Their minimum education was class seven; though 60 per cent of them had entered college, only five went to the university. Therefore, the respondents had completed different levels of education. Most of the women I interviewed were employed and some were self-employed. Hence, I had to schedule interviews according to their availability and convenience. I have maintained anonymity for some of the respondents who did not want to be identified or changed their names.
5. I am drawing on the works of Alessandro Portelli (1990, 1997) and Massey (1994: 4–6).
6. I am drawing upon some excellent exercises in oral history. Some of these are Atkinson (1998), Bhavé (1988), Hardiman (1987, 1995, 1996), Lalita et al. (1989), Omvedt (1980), Thompson (1978: 88–90) and Thompson (2000).
7. This refers to the concept of 'critical consciousness' (Freire 1970: 12) that implies learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality. For Phule, Marx, Gramsci, Ambedkar, Freire (1970, 1974) and others, this means the 'awakening of the slave to the idea of his slavery and thus leading to a rebellion' (Freire 1970: 12). I am also drawing on Thompson's insightful work on working-class women's education in England. See Thompson (2000) and Allman (1999).

8. Chakravarti is also concerned with symbolic violence as being more corrosive.
9. I am referring to Dalit women who are slaves to Dalit men, who in turn are slaves of the upper castes.
10. *Tamasha* dancers are mostly Dalit women who perform the traditional folk dance form called *tamasha*. It includes singing, dancing, acting in skits, and story telling. As a lower genre of art, it has become a vulgar dance form and *tamasha* dancers are considered loose and are stigmatised. However, the women dancers I interviewed were economically well off and proudly declared that they could feed a troupe of 150 artistes. Currently, *tamasha* is not merely public entertainment but incorporates social messages, touching upon contemporary issues and debates. *Tamasha* dancers are harassed by both the state and the local mafia, political as well as non-political. These artists are demanding security and different kinds of concessions from the government. I am planning to write a paper on *tamasha* women in the near future.
11. See Mohanty (1994). Also see Ilaiah (2002: xi–xii). Drawing upon feminist methods, Ilaiah emphasises that narratives of personal experiences are the best contexts in which to compare and contrast social forms.
12. I do not have the name of this mother. I had just started talking to her but she had to leave in order to attend to her *bhaji* cart, her vegetable cart. She was a vegetable/*golya* (sweets)/biscuit vendor and had to get back to her cart, which was her source of livelihood.
13. Mrs Snehlata Kasbe, a senior administrative officer, studied until B.A., interviewed on 15 June 2001, Pune.
14. Jyotsna Rokade, a senior officer with the Sales Tax Office (Mumbai), a Commerce graduate, interviewed on 8 and 15 August, 2004, Yerawada, Pune.
15. Paulo Freire (1970) refers to 'banking education' meaning that education has become a one-way process in which instructions and teaching are from the teacher to the student. It is never the other way around. Antonio Gramsci (1971) also calls for a two-way process of education between the educator and the student for a healthy give and take of knowledge. Unfortunately, this is rarely practiced even at the higher echelons of education.
16. Professor Kumud Pawde, a Dalit feminist writer, interviewed on 16 October 2005, Dhantoli, Nagpur.
17. Mrs Hirabai Kuchekar, Class XII, Diploma in Education, interviewed on 8 January 2002, Sinhgad-Road, Pune.
18. Champabai Bhalerao studied until Class VII. She was interviewed on 20 May 2000 at Yerawada, Pune.
19. Bama refers to similar discrimination in schools in her autobiography, *Karukku*. See Bama (2000).
20. Bharati Kale, Masters in Marathi literature, interviewed on 18 June 2002, University of Pune, Pune.
21. Monica Tapase, Masters in Social Work, interviewed on 13 February 2000, Pune.

22. In the mid-1970s, Ramanamma and Bambawale found that while an urban child in Class 1 comprehended on an average 96 per cent of the curriculum, the SC/ST or rural child comprehended only about 60 per cent. As children progressed up the school ladder, this lack of comprehension heightened (cited in Karlekar 1983: 240).
23. Apple (1995), Steedman (1986), Torrey (1973), Willis (1977) underline this misfit between middle-class teachers and lower-class children.
24. I am drawing upon a study by Jane Torrey about a Harlem ghetto that argues that teachers were systematically imposing white values, culture and language on black children. Such studies helped understand a parallel process in education on Indian soil, where teachers imposed Brahmanical norms. See Torrey (1973).
25. My experience, observation and argument are analogous to Pierre Bourdieu's in his most insightful ethnographic observations about French schooling showing how French schoolteachers reward good language style, especially in essay and oral examinations, a practice that tends to favour those students with considerable cultural capital who in general are from privileged family origins (Bourdieu 1999: 48–81). See also Swartz (1997: 75–78).
26. Derogatory/contemptuous words for untouchable castes like *Mhardey* for *Mahars*, *Dhedgya* for *Dheds*, *Mangtya* for *Matangs* and so on.
27. I am principally drawing on Rosenthal and Jacobson's excellent work which is very provocatively titled, *Pygmalion in the School* (1993) and which dwells on teachers' attitudes that make or mar students.
28. Urmila Pawar, Masters in Marathi literature, interviewed on 5–7 September 2004, Borivili, Mumbai.
29. Draupadi Nagare, Sandhya Meshram's mother, Class 7, interviewed on 11 September 2004, Ramtekdi, Pune.
30. Meena Mahajan, studied until Class XII, interviewed on 29 April 2002. Her mother was present during the interview.
31. Mahar is a dominant SC community in the state of Maharashtra.
32. Here, I am using *vasti* to mean ghetto/slum.
33. Sadhana Kharat, Diploma in Education, interviewed on 11 April 2002, Bibwewadi, Pune.
34. I am referring to the great leader Dr B.R. Ambedkar who is considered a 'messiah' by Dalits.
35. Poonam Rokade, Bachelor in Engineering, interviewed on 15 August 2004, Mundhwa, Pune.
36. Sandhya Meshram, Masters in Social Work, interviewed on 11 September 2004, Ramtekdi, Pune.
37. The Education Commission observed that 'in fact, the greater financial burden is not so much tuition-fees as these other [books, stationery] costs' (cited by Karlekar 1983: 198).
38. These two are sisters. Alaka Kamble, B.Com., and Rani Kamble, Class 12, Tadiwala Road, interviewed on 30 October 2001, Pune.

39. Alaka Kale, Buddhist, M.A., Lecturer, Karve Road, Pune, interviewed on 1 July 2002.
40. Malavika Pawar, Masters in Education, and Manini Pawar, Bachelor of Science, interviewed 5–6 September 2004, Borivili, Mumbai.
41. Kamal Jadhav, B.A., interviewed on 16 September 2001, Kasba Peth, Pune.

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Mrs Jyotsna Rokade, Commerce graduate, a senior officer with the Sales Tax Office, interviewed on 8 and 15 August 2004.

Miss Bharati Kale, Masters in Marathi literature, a telephone operator, interviewed on 18 June 2002.

Mrs Champabai Bhalerao, housewife, Class 7, interviewed on 20 May 2002.

Mrs Sadhana Kharat, Diploma in Education, teacher, interviewed on 11 April 2002.

Miss Monica Tapase, Student, Masters in Social work, interviewed on 13 February 2000.

Mrs Meena Mahajan, housewife, Class 12, interviewed on 29 April 2002.

Mrs Poonam Rokade, engineer, Bachelor in Engineering, interviewed on 15 August 2004.

Mrs Sandhya Meshram, social worker, Masters in Social Work, interviewed on 11 September 2004.

Malavika Pawar, researcher, Masters in Education and Manini Pawar, Bachelor of Science, interviewed from 5 to 6 September 2004.