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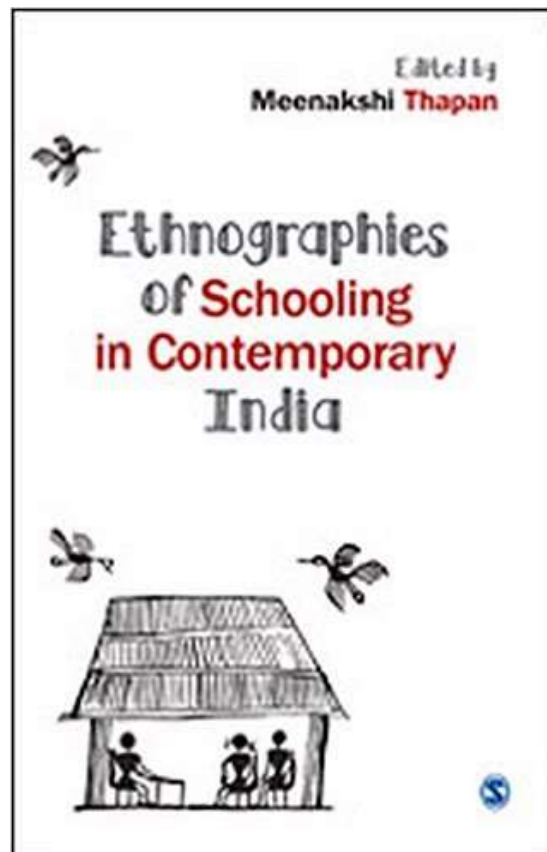
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*Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India*, edited by Meenakshi Thapan, is a rare and much needed collection of ethnographies on school culture, identity and everyday school life. Given that sociology of education has yet to be institutionalized in Indian universities, where conventional research remains largely empirical, the qualitative studies in this book offer a wealth of insight into the culture of schooling in India. A central argument conveyed throughout the book is that participants of schooling act according to their own diverse volitions, irrespective of the strategies schools undertake to construct a particular type of conforming, complacent citizen.

The book is divided into an introduction and eight chapters. Seven chapters contain ethnographic studies, while the final chapter contains autobiographical reflections about many of the authors' own schooling experiences. In addition to editing the book, Thapan authored the introduction and three chapters (including a co-authored chapter). The remaining chapters are



contributions by graduate students who worked with Thapan at the University of Delhi.

The ethnographies take place in a variety of educational institutions (private schools, religious schools, a government school, and an alternative school). However, it is noteworthy that the scholarship mostly reflects a North Indian perspective. Apart from one study on the Rishi Valley school, which is based in Andhra Pradesh, six studies are located either in New Delhi or Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Nevertheless, the book's themes are sure to resonate with scholars across many contexts of South Asia. School rituals of discipline and control, the conflation of values education and citizenship education, the marginalization experienced by minority students, and similar themes are common to schools across the region.

A key focus throughout the book is on how participants of the schooling process exert their own agency while negotiating multiple instruments of socialization, such as religion, politics, the media, and consumerism. In each chapter, the institutionalized ethos of a school are identified and analyzed, but the acceptance of these by students is not simply assumed. Students are shown to be dynamic, active participants who contribute to the production of school culture. Thus, despite an institutional set up designed to steer and mold them into a predetermined type of educated person, students do not always submit to the ideological conditioning attempted by school ideals, values and norms.

Deka, for instance, offers a robust analysis of student culture at a Delhi public school that caters to Hindu middle class families. Aiming to mold students into 'traditional' Indians, the school's founders and faculty attempt to discipline the body and mind through regulation of the students' physical appearance and through trainings in classical arts and spirituality. However, students contest these ideals with fragmented opinions about the school's rituals and many of them desire to consume western music

and brands. In other words, they assert their own attitudes, behaviors and perspectives.

Students, teachers and administrators attach different meanings and values to school charters and rituals. Whether overtly or covertly, they also respond to the regiment of rules and rituals expected of them. Gogoi demonstrates this in her documentation of a government school in Delhi, where everyday schooling experiences are constituted by ritualized activities. Most students at the school are from low-income families and convey an accepting attitude towards school authorities. They tend to shun expensive brand name products and admire simplicity. However, such perspectives are perhaps more reflective of their socio-economic status than their actual desires.

The investigation of peer relationships is another theme woven throughout the book. Drawing on poststructuralist ideas of gender performativity to examine ways in which age and gender shape peer interactions, Sharma describes situations of peer bonding at a private co-ed school for underprivileged children in East Delhi. In Bhandari's ethnography of a private girls' Christian school, we learn about tensions between groups of students on the basis of religion, class and social status, undermining the school's stated aims to promote equality among all pupils. Different peer groups – "the geeks", "the notorious group", "the average", the "looked down upon" group and the "hi-fi group" – interact with each other, sometimes dramatically, and often, in response to the economic and social backgrounds of students. In another chapter, Dore, an alumna of Rishi Valley, intimately narrates processes of growing up at the boarding school, student conceptions of ideas such as "coolness", and varied reactions to the socializing experience of Rishi Valley pedagogy. It is a rich ethnographic account of the school's rituals, culture and shortcomings, replete with insider information.

An important takeaway from the book is that meanings of identity and citizenship are always multiple and are always negotiated. Thapan vividly demonstrates this in her comparison of citizenship education across three schools: one North Delhi government school and two private schools located in Muslim communities in Ahmedabad. In all three schools, where compliance is encouraged and students are discouraged from challenging authority, ideas of “good” citizenship are conflated with “good” character. Citizenship education is also coated by Hindu nationalist ideology. This remains so even in the Ahmedabad schools, where minority institutions negotiate their marginalized status within the dominant culture.

In a similar vein, Matthan, Anusha and Thapan discuss the ways in which students and teachers in a girls’ school in Ahmedabad experience citizenship education in the aftermath of communal violence unleashed in 2002. The authors analyze the inherent tensions of imparting citizenship education while also aiming to cultivate the “good Muslim girl”. They also undertake a fascinating discussion of Urdu’s “ghettoization” in the context of education.

The book concludes with a valuable exercise in reflexivity by the authors. It is a creative presentation, weaving together author reflections on their own school memories, experiences, insights and misgivings. I found it curious though, that the reflections were conveyed anonymously. Although perhaps this was done due to discomfort with sharing such personal experiences, the disclosure of author subjectivity would have helped understand what influenced their approach to the research and their selection of field sites.

Another limitation of the book is that in the process of validating student voices, we

do not learn as much about the ways in which gender, class, and caste structure the differential capacities and thought processes of students, teachers and administrators. For instance, in what ways did students contest systems of patriarchy, caste and class privilege? It would be interesting to see further research done on how student perspectives interconnect with contemporary regional or national struggles, such as Dalit movements, feminisms, anti-sexual violence activism, environmental movements, and rights-based movements in the broader regional or national scene.

Overall, the book compellingly documents the complex, multivalent processes that underlie the production of culture and identity in schools. Many chapters also complicate understandings of citizenship education by attending to the ways in which students and teachers construct their identities in relation to other individuals, society and the nation. The use of thick descriptions reveal understudied aspects of the schooling process and a variety of responses to the ideological control that schools attempt to impose through rituals, school assemblies, the control of bodies, disciplining techniques, and so on.

This book is a crucial read for any student or researcher of South Asian education, citizenship education, identity formation, school culture and youth culture. While readers may occasionally feel underwhelmed by prolonged descriptive passages, much of the writing is both enjoyable and academically insightful. In the coming years, I would expect to see this book or parts of this book assigned in courses dealing with the sociology or anthropology of education in South Asia. Ideally, it will also catalyze further publications on educational ethnographic research in the region.

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## About the Reviewer

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Meera Pathmarajah earned her doctorate degree in International Education Policy from Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include teacher education, gender and international development. She works as an Adjunct Professor at the University of San Francisco and is the founder of Visions Global Empowerment, an international educational non-profit organization.



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