

# **BRIDGING SOCIAL INEQUALITIES: RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND ITS SOCIAL EFFECTS IN THE VALLEY SCHOOL, BENGALURU**

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The Valley School, Bengaluru**

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**Introduction: Arriving at a Field of Study**

Environmental Studies Lesson, Medhni Classroom

*I walked into a junior classroom, where an environmental studies lesson unfolded in my presence and each child was intrigued in his or her work out of their free will in a mixed-age classroom.<sup>1</sup> It seemed to me like an ideal classroom scenario. The lesson for the day focused on tamarind trees and different age groups were asked to draw and label the tamarind leaf according to their age-groups. The complexity of labelling the leaf increased with the elder children as they were expected to label the leaf in detail. I was fascinated to observe every child glued to their notebooks and despite the presence of a support-teacher in the classroom, there was no child, who needed any sort of help. The Valley School doesn't have any kind of uniform for its students yet each and every child was dressed in a similar pattern of clothing without any inherent differences being noticed in any child. After the children finished drawing and labelling in their notebooks, the teacher asked the students to get ready for a Nature walk. The students got up from their low-floor desks, very patiently went outside the classrooms, wore their shoes and lined up for the walk. Before starting the walk, the teacher told them that the students have to look out for a tamarind tree during their walk and gather around it when they successfully find the tree. The students led the walk, followed by the teacher, support-teacher and me. After walking for almost fifteen minutes in the school premises, one student was able to locate a tamarind tree and called the entire group. While walking towards the tree, the teacher whispered to me, "That student is a RTE category student". Upon reaching the tree, the teacher explained the parts of the tree and the parts of the tamarind leaf to the students. After doing so, she paired up some tamarinds and asked the students how many tamarinds she paired and if it was an odd or even number. The transition of an environmental studies lesson into a maths lesson was done very beautifully and captured the true essence of experiential learning, which the school believes in. After the explanations, the students were left to*

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<sup>1</sup> The Valley School has Mixed Age Classrooms in the Junior School where learners range from 6-9 years old. Older children have the opportunity to serve as mentors and take leadership roles whereas the younger children have the comfort of looking upto an elder child in their own classroom setting.

*explore the other trees where I noticed a group of students climbing up the rain tree<sup>2</sup> very easily and were teaching others how to climb a tree. Upon enquiring, I learnt that these students belonged to the 'Economically Weaker Sections' who have gained admission in the school through the 'Right to Education' Act. The teacher told me that these students are physically strong and are able to climb trees very easily as compared to their 'upper middle-class' counterparts from the city. Thus, the Economically Weaker Section students in this school are able to easily negotiate and make their own place in the classrooms and outside the classrooms with their inherent strengths as the school's curriculum heavily relies on experiential learning and not on the mainstream rote learning method.*

This instance is the best to describe my journey of ethnographic exploration in The Valley School, Bangalore<sup>3</sup> that I embarked on. My field research intends to explore the methods and processes in which the Economically Weaker Section (hereinafter, EWS) students are made a part of an educational setting largely catering to the upper middle-classes of the society. From the very outset, it is to mention, that I will not be arguing that the classroom or the school are truly inclusive of the EWS students in all possible senses. As I move on, I will be developing the notion of inclusion of EWS students and the way it may be reworked inside a mixed-age group classroom in the junior school or a horizontal age-based classroom in the middle school. Moreover, these beginnings of an education, which are inclusive of the EWS students are evident and possible because The Valley School is visibly different in its culture and workings from any mainstream school. This paper aims at studying the way social inequalities are bridged and negated by the school authorities in the process of the pedagogic communications by providing an ethnography of a school run by the Krishnamurti Foundation; and understanding the pedagogic environment of a school with no religious affiliations and its influence to shape the students to practice social equality at all levels. Certain counters will also be highlighted, which the school practices adopted by the students and the way these practices are negated by the school authorities by engaging in dialogues. Thus, through this study, it is intended to show that this school provides a blueprint utopia, which other educational setting can look upto in order to successfully include the EWS students in their settings.

In Erving Goffman's perspective, we understand that the reason for failure or success in academics is totally dependent on the location of a EWS student within the social structure. His or her position may identify them as stigmatized and assign them various labels. In simple terms, stigma is nothing

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<sup>2</sup> Scientifically it is known as the *Samanea saman* and is a species of flowering tree in the pea family.

<sup>3</sup> This study was conducted at The Valley School, Bangalore under the Shiv Lal Sawhney Scholarship provided by the Department of Sociology (University of Delhi) in 2019. The field work for this study was carried out in June-July 2019 over the six weeks.

but some ‘undesired differentness’ that characterizes an individual as stigmatized. (Goffman 1963: 05) Goffman mentions three different types of stigma:

First, there are abominations of the body- the various physical deformities. Next, there are blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, rigid beliefs, dishonesty, etc. Finally there are tribal stigma of race, nation, religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family. (Goffman 1963: 04)

The last category of stigma, namely, the tribal stigma of race, nation, religion that contaminate all members of family fits into the current framework of relating stigma attached to EWS Students. In this research, it has been argued that their stigmatized identity typifies students of the EWS category and labels them in terms of their inferior social status, which allows the teachers of the Valley School to label them within their conversations as ‘RTEs’ or ‘RTE category student’ and also allows the students of the school to label them with different names such as ‘Fatso’, ‘Stinky’, ‘Nest Hair’ or ‘Kaaluu’, which was encountered during the field study. Goffman suggests, society establishes these means of categorizing persons, and the social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered in those settings. (Goffman 1963: 2) Against this backdrop, this paper aims to understand the processes the Valley School adopts, to bridge the gaps between students belonging to different categories and the successful inclusion of the EWS category students into its intuitional setting.

A school is considered as a very strong place for the total transformation of a child into a young adult as the transformation takes place within the processes of socialisation with peers and teachers in the school set-up. Different social worlds are meant to give different socialisation experiences to the children based on their social strata. This has been a general norm all over the world. However, The Valley School, (hereinafter Valley) is known for breaking all stereotypes of schooling systems in India. The Valley, tries to give all its students the same kind of experience and socialisation regardless of their caste, status or gender.

The Valley School is perceived as an elite institution catering to the upper classes of the society. The students at the Valley belong mostly from the “upper middle-classes” of the society. However, during the field work for this research, it was noted that since its inception, the Valley has always been welcoming the students and staff from lower socio-economic background. After the Right to

Education Act<sup>4</sup> was implemented, the Valley had to take admissions of 25% of the students belonging to EWS category. Initially, the staff of the school was quite apprehensive of the students from the EWS category, as there was a feeling among them that unknown people joining the school might not be in sync with the intent of the school and that the EWS students belonging to different strata could change the entire school dynamics.

What do you think is right education, not for any particular group of children, the children of the rich or the poor, the children of the village or of the town, but children? (Krishnamurti 1998)

But as Krishnamurti puts emphasis on an inclusive education and he says that right education is for all and not for a particular group of children, the school adhered to his teachings and decided to keep aside their apprehensions and open the gates of the Valley happily for the neighbourhood students who belonged to the EWS. These students got admissions in the school through the Right to Education Act.

### **Methodology**

This study was conducted over a span of six weeks spent in The Valley School in the months of June and July 2019. The field work began the very next day, I arrived on the campus. The first three weeks were spent in the junior school, where I actively observed four classrooms (*Mahi, Medhni, Oorja and Bhuvi*) and the latter three weeks were spent in the middle school acting as support teacher to classes fifth and sixth.

I was given the opportunity to work as a support teacher in both the junior school as well as the middle school. This helped me get an insider's perspective and I was able to successfully conduct a participant observation in the school. The participant observation method helped me build a qualitative report. I was also able to observe minute details of the school as a participant observer and was also able to conduct enriching interviews.

I stayed in the Gulmohur guest house which is exactly in between the girls and the boy's hostel. My co-residents in the guest house were 12 participants of the Teacher Education Programme, run by the Valley School. Staying on the school side of the campus allowed me to share six meals in a day

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<sup>4</sup> The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (RTE), is an Act of the Parliament of India enacted on 4 August 2009, which describes the modalities of the importance of free and compulsory education for children between 6 and 14 in India under Article 21a of the Indian Constitution. It requires all private schools to reserve 25% of seats to children (to be reimbursed by the state as part of the public-private partnership plan). Kids are admitted in to private schools based on economic status or caste based reservations

with the students, teachers, staff and participants of the Teacher Education Programme. This also gave me a boost to have informal conversations and build good rapport with them.

During stay in the school, I attended over 60 hours of classes, staff meetings, film screenings, one-day excursion of colonial Bangalore and participated in informal discussions among students, teachers and participants of the Teacher Education Programme. I was also engaged in a lot of sports and recreational activities after the school hours and on the weekends with the senior students of class 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, who were full-time boarders, teachers who were campus residents and participants of the Teacher Education Programme. All this helped me to gather a better insight of the school's socio-cultural environment and its functioning.

I have supplemented this study with key observations at the Valley School. Further, I have tried to make this study richer by bringing the Field quite literally in to the paper through the use of select parts of field notes, which include my observations and interviews.

### **The Field: The Valley School**

The Valley School is a co-educational private day school in Bangalore city in India. The school was founded in 1978 by a philosopher, Jiddu Krishnamurti, and the school is associated with the Krishnamurti Foundation India. The foundation has six schools across India and it endeavours to educate the children based upon the teachings of Krishnamurti.

The student population of the school is around 350 from classes 1 to 12. Students of the junior school and the middle school don't have any examinations and neither do they follow any conventional textbooks. Exams and tests only take place from class 8<sup>th</sup> onwards i.e. the in the senior school.

The highest function of education is to bring about an integrated individual who is capable of dealing with the life as a whole. (Krishnamurti 1992)

As Krishnamurti emphasized on integrated development of a child through experiential learning, the school, undoubtedly, follows this thought and has designed its curriculum in a way that gives equal emphasis to academic and non-academic activities. Preferably, the academic subjects are also taught in a practical way and by engaging in activities, wherever it is possible to do so. The school doesn't promote the method of rote learning or cramming the subjects, which at the end is to be reproduced on the exam answer sheet, rather, the school's emphasis is on conceptual clarity and meaningful learning of the subject.

The student, the teacher and the parent - all three are equally important in this process. (Krishnamurti 1988)

The Valley School believes in Krishnamurti's emphasis on the student, teacher and parent as equally important in the process of educating a child. The school tries to keep all three in the loop. There are frequent Parent-Teacher's Meetings organised by the school to discuss the performance of their child in detail. If the teacher feels the need for an interaction with the parents at any point of time during the session, the teachers are encouraged to call them, send a note through the student's diary or arrange a one-to-one interaction in the school. Not only do the teachers and students share an informal relationship but it is often seen between the parents and teachers as well. The teachers do not hesitate to discuss the child's progressive or regressive behaviour socially or their performance in the academic or in the non-academic areas with the parents.

The student-teacher relationship is also very informal giving the both teacher and student the space and understanding to discuss issues very informally. The female teachers are addressed as 'Aunty', 'Akaa' or 'Didi', whereas the male teachers are addressed as 'Uncle' or 'Anna'. The students also call some teachers by their names or by nicknames given to the teachers. The students and teachers sit together and have their meals in the dining hall and there is no dress code or uniform to be followed by them. All of these are markers of an informal relationship based on trust, care and friendship.

The Valley School, therefore, seems like a close-knit community, where everybody knows their fellows, because of the small number of students and teachers present in the school. The teacher – student ratio being just 1:6. The students and teachers look out for each other and there is a strong sense of belongingness to Valley that is present among them.

### **The Junior School**

The Junior School in The Valley School has different groups. Group Bulbuls is the entry point for students into the school and it gives them time to absorb their environment and the way the school functions. After spending one year in the group, the students are sent into Mixed Age groups, which is also known as Vertical age groups. It consists of students belonging to age group of 6 - 9 years. A student spends three years in a particular group before being promoted to the middle school. The structure of the junior school is as follows:

1. Mainas - It is the pre-primary class. This group consists only of children of the staff working on campus.

2. Bulbuls - Class 1 which is a horizontal age-group.
3. Medhni, Oorja, Mahi, Ila, Prithvi, Bhuvi - All these consists of vertical age groups and comprise students of Class 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>.

As of now, in the academic year 2019-2020, there are no EWS students in Mainas and Bulbuls. All the students, who belong to the EWS are present in Medhni, Oorja, Mahi, Bhuvi and Prithvi. In the junior school, there are a total of 15 EWS students of age group of 6 - 8 years.

### **The Middle School**

The Middle School is adjacent to the Junior School, with a basketball and a football court only for the middle school students, in between the junior school and the middle school. The middle school is in a very aloof place compared to the other buildings and is at a distance from the Senior School, dining hall, library, staff room and administrative centre.

It has horizontal groups of classes 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>. Each class has two groups, namely, Group 1 and Group 2. With roughly 18 students and two teachers in every class, the ratio of students to teachers is quite low at 9:1. A majority of the students are from upper-middle class background and a handful from the EWS backgrounds, who have gained admission through the Right to Education Act. Except the EWS students, all the middle school students travel by the school bus, which gives them more time for interactions and to make friendships. The involvement rate of the teachers with the middle school students is very high. The teacher-student relationship is very informal as the aim of the school is to negate authority and build relationships based on friendship, love and care. Therefore, teachers at the Valley school do not use their authority over the students but instead deal with them in a friendly manner. The relationship that they share is mostly like a mother-child or father-child relationship based on respect, trust and care. Students often joke around with the teachers, which is a manifestation of an informal relationship between them.

### **Thinking Inclusion, Practicing Exclusion**

The EWS students in the junior school have often been found to cluster together and play during their ragi, lunch or snack breaks. Their play time includes violent gestures and harsh language, which is sort of habitual for them. They don't allow the upper-class students to play with them and unite together to fight against the other students or to bully them. They have inculcated a counter



school culture among themselves, wherein they do not appreciate the presence of other students during their breaks. My conversation with Akshit<sup>5</sup>, an EWS student reflects the same:

Ankita: Why don't you play with the other students as well?

Akshit: They are not strong like us and they don't play games like us.

Ankita: What type of games do you play with your friends?

Akshit: We run and chase each other, go on the swings, sometimes climb trees or catch the frogs in the pond. The other students just sit in the class and do something like reading books or playing maths game, which we don't like to do.

The above conversation highlights as to how the child has created a strong sense of differentiation between 'us' and 'them'. It could have been a defensive response to his situation as a direct expression of his 'defect', and hence a justification (Goffman 1963: 6) of the way the other students treat him. According to him, the EWS students have a proclivity for engaging into physical activities, whereas the other students of his class prefer being involved in academic activities even during free time. During the field work, various instances were observed, wherein the students or the teachers were consciously or unconsciously behaving in a manner that excluded the EWS students. One major observation being labelling the EWS students as "RTEs" by the teachers in their conversations. Another major observation during my informal conversation with a senior dignitary in the school was that the person used 'other children' to refer to the EWS students as opposed to 'my children' to refer to the upper-class students. It was quite evident that there are varieties of discrimination, (Ibid: 5) through which the teachers and students effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce the life chances of the EWS students. The teacher's discriminatory behaviour, combined with parental lack of social capital, increases the likelihood that the school experiences of marginalized children are far more negative than those of the upper caste children, resulting in lower levels of academic skill acquisition. (Desai et al 2010: 250)

The RTEs, especially the boys, are very good with their hands. Sometimes even I am amazed to see the types of creation that they make with their hands. They also don't hesitate to put their hands in mud, clay or colours. They don't even care about their kurtas being dirty. Once they are in it, they just stop after completing it.

(Source: Interview with Pottery teacher at the Valley School)

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<sup>5</sup> The names of the students have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

She<sup>6</sup> is very strong and can run very fast so she brings the heavy soil faster than we can. Sometimes the digging tools are very heavy but she can pick them up easily. When I dig using my hands, the soil worms come up and I get scared but she doesn't get scared of soil worms. She can climb trees and has also taught me, so now I can also climb easily.

(Source: Conversation with a junior student during Landcare at the Valley School)

The two accounts mentioned above highlights some of the strengths that the EWS students have, and these strengths gives the other students a reason to look upto them and learn from them in an inclusive environment. There is a give-and-take kind of relationship among the EWS students and the other students in the junior school where they both learn from each other. Despite the fact that the EWS students may try to exclude themselves by practicing counter-school culture or the teachers or students may unthinkingly exclude the EWS students, there are other ways of practicing inclusion and recognizing their strengths at various levels. The exclusionary behaviour towards the EWS students turns into one that is inclusive at some point or other. This is the true beauty of the Valley School!

### **Learning Social Acceptance in Culture Classes**

“Education should not encourage the individual to conform to society or be negatively harmonious with it, but help him to discover the true values, which come with unbiased investigation and self-awareness.” (Krishnamurti 1992) Self-awareness and imparting values is the aim of the culture classes. A legacy which has been inherited from Krishnamurti is the art of asking questions and the art of dialogue. The culture class is the place to engage in dialogues. This is a unique class, which focuses on the emotional development of a child. Krishnamurti had set up schools where, apart from paying attention to only academics and activities associated with certification, there is simultaneous effort among both students and teachers to engage with their emotions and behaviour, and understand their own agency in the public domain. (Thapan 2014)

Fitting-in among the peers and gaining social acceptance is very inquisitively practiced by the EWS students in Valley. It is the situation of an individual, who is disqualified from full social acceptance that leads him to experience a discrepancy between the imagined and the actual identity, which may impact the presentation of his self in the society. (Goffman 1963: 19) A child's peer relationships can be characterized in terms of social acceptance by the other students and how well-connected

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<sup>6</sup> The student is referring to her classmate, who belongs to the Economically Weaker Section and has gained admission through the Right to Education Act.

they are to other students. Thus, EWS students have been found a number of times, lying about their social and economic standards to gain social acceptance of the rich students. For instance,

Most of the students talked about their vacations to foreign countries and the new experiences that they harvested. Meanwhile, one of the RTE, in order to fit-in among his peers, discussed about his vacation to Australia. While discussing his fictive story, he told rich details like boarding an Air India flight and staying in a hotel with swimming pool very precisely. The other students believed in his story as if it were real.

(Source: Interview with a group teacher at The Valley School)

During the snack time, a RTE student discussed with some of the rich kids that his driver will come to pick him up in his Honda City car as he doesn't travel in the bus like others. He also further told them that he lives in a four bedroom apartment in a high-rise building and he also owned a German shepherd dog, which was imported from China and the fourth room in his apartment is occupied by the dog.

(Source: Interview with the counsellor at The Valley School)

These were some of the many accounts captured during the field study. There have been constant dialogues and negotiations taking place in order to curb such instances at the Valley. The class teachers also try their best to keep away the differences among the students. The culture classes play an important role in order to negate the thoughts of needing to fit-in, in order to be socially accepted.

The culture class usually starts with an activity or a video clipping followed by questions to the teacher or a dialogue involving everyone in the class. For instance, the following examples of culture classes with groups of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> are worth citing.

**An activity with class fifth-** The teacher picks up two volunteers, among the students, one of them being a EWS student. She sends them out of the classroom and reads a set of instructions to the other students:

1. Team up into two groups not necessarily boys and girls.
2. Choose a topic and keep discussing on your topic until I say STOP.
3. Don't let the volunteers be a part of the group discussion when they come in.

She walked outside the classroom and asked the volunteers to go back inside the classroom and be a part of any of the groups. The volunteers walked in and tried to engage in the conversations in

both the groups but faced various sorts of resistance from the students. This went on for a few minutes after which the teacher asked them to stop and asked the volunteers to share their feedback.

EWS Volunteer: The members of the group were pushing me and not letting me be a part of the group. I felt bad all the time. Sometimes in reality also when I try to help people, they say to me ‘shoo shoo I don’t want your help.’ It makes me feel bad always.

The teacher then asked the feedback of the group members about how they felt while excluding a person from their group. The responses were:

Student 1: I felt really bad as they were our classmates and it doesn’t feel good to not let them be a part of the conversation, while others are engaged in it.

Student 2: I could understand the volunteer’s position as sometimes; I am also excluded from some group or conversations.

At the end, she started a dialogue with the group by asking them personal examples when the students were excluded and how they felt at that time. She tried to invoke a self-realisation process among the students. After the class got over, the teacher while explaining the activity to me mentioned:

“The RTE students are the ones, who are excluded the most in the middle school. The other students are mature enough to understand the difference between them and the RTEs. I have heard comments like ‘They stink!’, ‘Why do they put so much oil on their hair?’ or ‘Why are their clothes so tacky?’ They are in the most sensitive age group currently, which is the early teens and they are already going through so many biological and hormonal changes and that it is very difficult to understand their mind set. This exclusion activity was, therefore, a way to make them understand how the RTEs feel, when they are being excluded. I try to bring in personal examples in the class so that the students can relate to their experiences.”

(Source: Interview with the middle school counsellor at the Valley School)

The culture class therefore, is a space where the teacher conducts various activities and engages in dialogues. The topics that are picked up for the classes are linked to everyday reality, the students face on a day-to-day basis. The students are taught to sympathise with others by relating to their own experiences and to appreciate the self and others in their own ways. The culture classes are considered a great way to negate the differences between the EWS students and the other students.

## **The Outreach Programme**

The Valley School believes in sharing the resources and skills that we have amongst us and at the same time learning from people who are placed in a different context. Over the last many years, the Valley School has initiated and sustained a number of outreach activities that go beyond the regular activities of school.

The Outreach Programme was started in Valley School a year ago, i.e. 2018. The hostel facility was made compulsory for class 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> in 2018 and following that, a hand was extended by the hostellers voluntarily for helping the EWS students academically as a part of the outreach programme after the school hours. The school also felt the need to start such a programme as many EWS students started taking tuitions after school and the tuitions weren't beneficial as the course material and approach to education followed by the Valley School are very different compared to the other conventional schools. The tuition teachers were teaching the students from conventional textbooks and EWS students often ended up in a flux. This programme became a substitute for tuitions for the EWS students.

This programme is scheduled every Tuesdays and Thursdays between 3:40 pm to 4:40 pm. Each EWS student is paired up with a senior student of class 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup>, who has volunteered to teach in the programme. The duo works together for the entire academic year. The programme for the junior school mainly focuses on teaching them to speak, read and write in English. The approach towards the middle school is quite different and the students here are taught the subjects in which they are lagging behind. The class teachers also pen-down in their diaries, the help needed by the students and the senior volunteers, taking it into consideration and work accordingly. The volunteers are guided by senior teachers, who are actively associated with the programme.

Often, it is difficult for the volunteers to get the student to work. The volunteers rely on different tactics to gain the student's attention - like promising them to play after their work is done or teaching them dance or music or any sport. If the student is not able to concentrate on the work or are not willing to do any work on a particular day, then the volunteers close the books and switch to some word games to help improve their vocabulary or quizzes.

### **Two Case- Specific Observations:**

#### **Case 1: Shimona**

Shimona is a second grade EWS girl student, whom I observed, in her classroom, during her activities, play time and various other chores that she did on the day of observation. At

first, she seemed very shy, dependent and lost during her classes. She wasn't able to fit-in with her classmates. She would always be quietly sitting in a corner of the classroom and wouldn't interact much with other students or teachers. I was quite startled to see the same girl during the outreach programme as she was a completely different person then. A girl who didn't even speak a word during her classes or interact with other students went around the library actively, picking story books from the shelves and asking the teachers and volunteers, if she could recite them a story. She would often invite me before going to the outreach programme by saying 'Akaa, you come today?! I tell you story.' Her speaking and language errors kept getting rectified with each passing day that I spent in the field. She also started interacting with few of her classmates during the end of my field work. The outreach programme was the sole reason for the confidence that she developed within herself and it also gave her a push to explore herself and learn.

### **Case 2: Prithvi**

Prithvi is a fourth grade EWS boy student, who was considered the naughtiest kid in his class and he was also known to dominate and scare the other students. All his classmates maintained a safe distance from him. He told them (imaginative) stories, in which he would go on world tours, about his pet lion and his big mansion, where he lives. He was also known for abusing other students or physically hurting them. During interactions with the teachers, I found out that this child and his mother are victims of domestic violence and therefore Prithvi behaves violently in the school. His teacher also revealed that Prithvi thinks he might be able to make some friends, if he tells them he is very rich and therefore, he keeps reciting stories of his fake experiences. During the outreach programme, Prithvi, to my amazement was the quietest and the most cooperating student, he was willing to learn new things, work on his vocabulary and do his homework. His volunteer or the teachers in the programme had no issues dealing with him. While interacting with me during the field work, he said to me 'I study na, so I become big man when I grow up. I buy two cars, big house and dog'. His innocence and desire to be a successful man in the future is truly reflected by his statement. Despite of being in just fourth grade, Prithvi had already outlined a future for himself.

On close observation of these two cases, I was convinced how much empowering the outreach programme run by the Valley School is. It gives the EWS students a new dimension to look at things. It is a space, which makes the EWS students feel comfortable in order to explore their capabilities. The kind of one-to-one attention that they get during the outreach programme by the volunteers holds the power to bring a positive change in these students, who want to work upon themselves and be at par with the other students. This programme has been successful in helping

the EWS students to become more confident and self-reliant. As a result, there was an increased engagement and interaction of the EWS students with the teachers and their upper-class classmates. They may or may not find total acceptance by the upper-class students but the EWS students definitely became more engaged with them as a result of better communication skills and confidence.

Since independence, there had been a phenomenal increase in the number of children entering primary schools, however, the number of dropouts continued to be very large, as almost a third of children dropped out from primary schools. (Juneja 2011) On the other hand, the issue of dropping out was rather seen as ‘pushing out’ (Sinha and Reddy 2011) of the school system because of the insensitive curriculum that doesn’t cater to the first generation learners. Even today, there are millions of children, who are getting pushed out of the schooling system for not being able to adjust and grasp the curriculum. In such a scenario also, the Outreach Programme of the Valley School help the EWS students to bridge the gap between them and the other students. Valley, is proud to be able to resolve such differences and has been successfully able to retain all its EWS students with no student dropping out of the school.

The **“Centre for Performing Arts”** of the Valley School is another extension of the Outreach Programme that conducts regular classes beyond the school hours in different forms of classical music, dance, visual art, pottery etc. A number of EWS students and their parents are part of this programme. Artisans and craft persons from various parts of the country are invited to share their knowledge in workshops that are conducted throughout the year. Often, EWS students from other schools and parents from neighbouring villages also attend these workshops, as it is open for all. The School Mela is one of the biggest event that takes place in December. The Mela is open for the neighbourhood residents to explore the school and learn about it. There are various shows and stalls that are put up by the EWS students. The school clearly tries to incorporate the EWS students and their parents at every level possible, however, the authorities experience and see a blockage from the opposite side. As Goffman also said, when normal and stigmatized do enter one another’s immediate presence, especially when they attempt to sustain a joint conversational encounter, the stigmatized starts to exclude himself. (1963: 13-17) An account, which was recorded during field work reflects this:

The Valley School Mela is like a festival for them. They all come dressed up for the Mela as if it’s a wedding or Diwali celebrations. These activities often bring out a platform for the neighbourhood kids and parents to come and interact with the upper class people in the same space. The upper class members are seen to be very accommodating towards the lower socio-

economic classes during such events. The barrier that rises is from the lower socio-economic people as the adults carry a mental block within themselves that they do not belong to the upper class. Leave aside interaction, they are not even willing to talk or share the same space with the upper class guests in the Mela which is quite evident in the sitting pattern during a show where we notice that they occupy the side most chairs of the auditorium.

(Source: Interview with teacher in-charge of the Centre for Performing Arts and an active member in the Mela Organising Committee)

## **Conclusion**

This paper highlights the ways, in which the Valley School practices inclusive education and education for all. It rigorously follows the thoughts of its founder – J. Krishnamurti, which can be observed in its everyday working. Every space in the school tries to make learning meaningful by not just simply sticking to the textbooks but rather incorporating experiences and practical knowledge. During these learning experiences, the pedagogic communications reflects inclusion of the EWS students at every level and in every space. The school also believes that non-academic activities are as important as the academics and it is through the non-academic activities that a child develops his self. As a result, a child becomes more aware of his inner-self, his thought process and his emotions. The Valley makes an emphasis to sensitise the students towards the EWS students, the school staff engaged in non-academic work and non-admin work (gardener, plumber, cooks, bus drivers/ conductors, etc.) and EWS people in general. Therefore, Valley offers an environment that can proffer egalitarian lived experiences for all the students, with a special emphasis on the ones, who are stigmatized.

Use of Goffman's theory of stigma has helped to trace the observations in a theoretical construct and build a link between the EWS students as being 'stigmatized' in Goffman's terms. Goffman suggests that in everyday life, we encounter such social situations, where we are likely to interact with a stigmatized person and it might result in uneasiness. The stigmatized person may become self-conscious in presenting themselves and it might lead to self-exclusion as it was seen clearly in Shimona's case during the study. It is not enough to say that the EWS students fail because they are not intelligent or creative but rather because of the policies of the state and pedagogical practices of an academic institution that are not able to cater to the demands of the EWS students. If they do, like in some ways Valley does, students like Prithvi, whom I encountered during my ethnographic fieldwork, are given a platform to explore themselves and allowed to have aspirations and dreams of success.



A right to education can also be based on the need to train the younger generation as useful members of society and the world community. (Douglas Hodgson 1998) The school strongly believes that right education and right environment can transform an individual into a better human being. For instance, when an EWS student, who belongs to a village environment, where there is harsh language, violence, jealousy, revenge, etc., steps into a school like Valley, the child encounters an experience of totally different environment and space. It helps the child to develop his emotions and thoughts and transform himself. The child may then go on to become a small source of change in his own environment, which can eventually lead to a better, healthy and happy community. In India, caste, class and gender are the main societal divisions, which come in way of creation of an egalitarian society. Education is not simply an acquisition of reading and writing but it also means participation in society. (Sharma 2007) The Valley firmly believes in bringing a change in the society through these young school students, who might be doing things differently in their society and who will also grow up to become individuals willing to negate differences based on caste, class or gender. Thus, the students are sensitised from a very young age to overcome any barriers based on these aspects. Krishnamurti also believed, that norms based on caste, class or gender are man-made constructs and we need to overcome these at every level of our life and that is why the school practices the methods to overcome these norms and differences.

The school life is considered to be an important aspect, where a child inherits a major portion of his or her personality based on his/her socialisation. With the 25% infusion of underprivileged children into elite schools, rich kids will have friends among the classmates, who are not privileged, who do not speak good English, who may not be able to invite them to birthday parties in their homes. The view from the gated community will then change – perhaps the privileged will learn to speak an Indian language more fluently, perhaps they will learn to take responsibilities for their countrymen and women, to limit their own consumption patterns, for instance. The act has the potential to promote our collective identity as a nation. (Herzberger and Kumaraswamy 2011) Thus, Valley strives to inculcate these characteristics in the students them right from the beginning in order to nurture sensitive humans, who will eventually make the world a better place to live in.

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*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,*

*But I have promises to keep,*

*And miles to go before I sleep,*

*And miles to go before I sleep.*

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