RELATED LIVING: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF CULTURE AND COMMUNITY IN SAHYADRI SCHOOL, PUNE

Madhuparna Sen

2020

This paper is an outcome of the Shiv Lal Scholarship which is awarded every year to M.A.(P) Sociology students of Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University

Related Living: An Ethnographic Study of Culture and Community in Sahyadri School, Pune

- Madhuparna Sen

The schools run by the Krishnamurti Foundation India (KFI), by employing distinctive values and practices, aim to build for growing individuals, educational spaces which enable them to realise their full potential as human beings. These practices of schooling are deeply embedded in Jiddu Krishnamurti's guiding philosophy. He believed that the building of relationships with one's surroundings and with people inhabiting those surroundings is one of the fundamental aspects of human life, whereby one moves from existing as an isolated individual to becoming a complete human being. He believed 'relationship is life, relationship is the foundation of existence. Relationship is absolutely necessary, otherwise you cannot exist' (1991: 58). The importance placed on living related lives in Krishnamurti's thought came alive to me during my brief fieldwork conducted in Sahyadri School, Pune, the second youngest of the schools set up by the KFI. I observed how ideas of building relationship percolate into the values put forward by the school as well as in the everyday processes that play out within the school space, amongst the various actors inhabiting it. In this paper I, therefore, attempt to understand how the building of relationship plays out at different levels within the school - with respect to the school's particular location, in its academic practice, in peer and teacher-student interactions and in how the school negotiates with the institutional structure which can be a controlling and limiting mechanism.

Located in Khed district, Maharashtra, on top of Tiwai Hill, overlooking the Chas-Kaman dam, in the midst of the considerable natural beauty of the Western Ghats, Sahyadri School is a coeducational boarding school with students from grades 4 to 12. There are around 250 residents on campus including students, teachers and their families and the administrative staff. Together with this, the service staff who mostly commute every day from the nearby villages, make up the population functioning within the school campus to be around 400 people. The students mainly come from upper-middle class, affluent, urban households where the parents are working professionals like architects, accountants, engineers, lawyers and often engaged in businesses. Some of the teachers' children are enrolled in the school and come to be known as the day-scholars. A handful of children, whose parents are part of the service staff, are enrolled in the school on full scholarship.

It was in such a setting that I had an opportunity to conduct fieldwork for a duration of five weeks in the months of June and July, 2019. During my stay in the school, I sat in on over eighty hours of classes, attended staff meetings, and participated in informal discussions among students, attended film club gatherings. I was also part of the 'Freshers' hike' and the 'Dorm hike' which took place on the first and second Sundays respectively of the first month of the term. I visited some of the girls' dormitories in order to observe their interactions in the more informal spaces within the school. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with the students of grade 8 and with a few students of grades 6 and 12. I also interviewed a number of the teachers as well as those in the management team.

Bhavya Dore in her ethnographic research in RVS identifies what she calls 'the "Bubble Effect" – a sense of sealed-offness built through a smorgasbord of rituals, practices and strictures'. (2014: 272) 'The bubble also creates forms of socialising that often stand in contrast to what happens in other urban, Indian co-educational schools. It creates a language, a student culture and a unique kind of community'. (2014: 273) Located 75km away from Pune city and 25km away from the nearest town, on top of a plateau, disconnected from villages at the foot of the plateau, Sahyadri School presents the very picture of an isolated, island-like entity. It is in this particular context of seeming isolation that the practice of relationship building becomes a significant aspect of sociological enquiry. How relationships play out within the school and without, with what is the "outside", becomes significant, especially in the formation of a sense of community within the school.

In this locational, social and pedagogic context, this paper looks at how Sahyadri School, Pune and its students attempt to challenge the rigidity of institutionalised boarding school structures in diverse ways. It then goes on to examine pedagogic techniques employed within the school and identifies the efficacious role of relationship building amongst various actors within and beyond school boundaries. The paper then looks into the nitty-gritties of forging relationships, the specificities of the actors involved and the methods taken up, thereby focusing on the role of dialogical action. Finally it identifies a sense of a unique community and the construction of a distinctive identity among the students. The paper therefore looks into the specificities of Sahyadri School space, the near homogeneity in class-backgrounds of the students and the various attempts to challenge conditioning and prejudice, and argues that relationships forged among diverse actors offer up complex manifestations, sustained through contradictions – identity and difference being central to such relational forms.

Institutionalised Structures and Krishnamurti-school Values

The boarding school as an institutionalised space has been studied extensively by scholars. Goffman's idea of the 'total institution' has been very often applied to the boarding school. Goffman defines the total institution 'as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time together lead an enclosed formally administered round of life' (Goffman in Srivastava, 1998: 13). Sanjay Srivastava in his study on the Doon School has referred to Foucault's concept of the 'the technique of 'enclosure': 'the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself' (Foucault in Srivastava, 1998: 56). Foucault also suggests that modern Europe 'discovered the body as the object and target of power…the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces' (Ibid). Thereby he puts forth his concept of 'docile bodies' where human beings come to behave as docile, obedient objects following rules under institutions like schools, prisons and asylums. When it comes to looking at students in their everyday interactions in schools, such an understanding of unidimensional subordination to authority offers a very reductionist understanding. Such an idea implies that students are, merely and entirely, robotic performers of roles that authoritarian structures of the school impose upon them. However, there is a vast body of ethnographic work done in schools that contradicts this notion. These show how the culture that develops within schools, through the interaction between the various agential actors (students and teachers) and institutional arrangements, is complex in nature with actors often engaged in contentious relationships with one another. There are counter-cultures that come to exist within the very structures of the school. Paul Willis's (1977) work has shown the significance of a 'counter-school culture' (1977: 22) whereby working class boys, or 'lads', in a British school form their own "counter-culture" through acts of dissent – rejecting school authority, bunking classes, glorifying hard, manual work and looking down at school etiquettes as middle-class fancies that do not actually improve their lives in any way and only expect working-class subordination. While such acts of active dissent are often rare, more often there are subtle negotiations that students employ in the face of school authority. Peggy Froerer's (1996) work on RSS schools in India has depicted how although the schools primarily intend to inculcate 'Hindutva' ideology among their students, the students themselves very often reflect mostly utilitarian attitudes where they give precedence to academic evaluations and how employable the school will ultimately make them. She therefore argues that despite being under manipulative structures, students themselves negotiate and resist in various ways. Such

3

examples show how schooling processes therefore cannot be seen as one-dimensional – they constitute multitudinous and often contentious interactions which together give rise to the specific culture of the school.

In this regard, Krishnamurti schools offer a unique field for sociological enquiry. Sahyadri School like most other boarding schools, functions according to the mechanism of structured time. The child's life is minutely scheduled and divided into time-blocks assigned for classes, assembly, meals, games, 'Ashthachal'[1], baths, recreation, prep (where students sit in the classroom and do their own studies) and sleep. This along with the island-like 'enclosed' nature of the school, present a picture akin to the 'total institution'-like structure which tends to and is sustained by students as docile objects. However such an analysis would be naïve to the complexities of the values and practices prevailing in the process of schooling that negotiate and counteract this institutionally imposed quality of the boarding school space.

Despite the organisational mechanism that is prevalent in the school, the school's intent for its students is something that aims to negate the effects of this mechanism. Drawing from Krishnamurti's world view, Sahyadri does not intend to create obedient, skilled individuals who can grow up to be incorporated into the human work-force outside the school's enclosed space. Here the structured time-table is meant to instil discipline in the student, but discipline is conceptualised differently. The values that teachers attempt to inculcate in the students here are those of leading fulfilling and wholesome humane lives, developing an understanding of one's own self through inward contemplation and sensitive attitudes to the perception of others in the outward direction. An interaction between scientific thinking, technological aptitude and emotional sensitivity is sought to be achieved. It is in the midst of this contradictory juxtaposition of mechanism and intent that the rituals[2] and practices of the school play out, in building interrelationships between various actors.

Most of the rules and norms that are implemented by the school are introduced to the students through discussion. House parents and class teachers have regular conversations with the children, often individually, about why certain rules are enforced and how adhering to these rules is the student's responsibility in the pursuit of acquiring self-discipline. The culture

---

[1] Asthachal is a unique Krishnamurti school ritual where students and teachers sit together, outdoors, in silent contemplation during sunset time.

[2] Rituals in schools have been defined as "an expression and an affirmation of the school's ultimate values". See Thapan 2001: 54.

classes, one of the distinctive features of KFI schools, create an atmosphere for discussion of various topics that constitutes the individual's very being. A culture of looking into one's own being and contemplating about one's own actions is cultivated in these classes. Topics discussed range over concepts like freedom, responsibility, fear and authority, attachment and dependence, true beauty among other things. The intent is therefore to move away from a supra-rationalised method of rote learning and skill development. In the junior grades, the culture classes often become that space where various day-to-day conflicts between the children are resolved. The children are told to be sensitive in their relationships with others, not to attack the other but look into one's own actions to identify and rectify one's own mistakes. The fresher's hike and dorm hike I was part of, put forth a picture of an exercise in building relationships between the students of all classes and notions of responsibility for the other as the senior students were chosen as group leaders responsible for ensuring the younger children's welfare. The music assembly is another ritual which brings together the entire community as students and teachers sit in concentric circles and sing songs from various parts of the country – Sanskrit, Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Bengali, Telugu amongst others. One teacher pointed out in a group discussion that it does not matter if one understands the language, or whether the songs are religious – the intent is the coming together of the community and to together be transported by the music. 'Asthachal' is another such ritual which brings together the community. The intent behind it is to make one aware of the power of silence, what one can learn about oneself and the world if they stop speaking for some time and just listen. It becomes clear therefore that the school intends to create a free, open atmosphere where the child can grow, breaking away from coercive, controlling structures.

The institutional structure also comes to be contradicted by the everyday practices of students and teachers. The students are adept at negotiating with the rules especially when it comes to the dress code. Often there exist certain alliances between the student and the dorm parent, where certain allowances are decided on. Many students actively criticise the teaching of Krishnamurti in culture classes – one even questioned why they do not talk about other philosophers in these classes. I was also informed that the female students of 11th grade had staged an agitation against the dress code in the previous year, although they had not been successful. Often they are quite eager to point it out when a teacher somehow defects with some rule. I observed this when one student noticed that their class teacher was wearing a pair of ripped jeans (which is not allowed in the school) during an extra-curricular event. Despite the very informal, almost friendly interaction between students and teacher under normal

conditions, in such moments of contention the students tend to form a solidarity against the teacher whom they identify as an enforcer of rules, who nonetheless does not uphold it herself. Seeking out loopholes in the structured daily schedule is an act that is as commonly carried out as the rule itself. All these negotiations and subversions are evidence to the fact that despite the disciplining mechanism of the everyday schedule and the spatial isolation of the school, the students here are not mere docile objects following orders.

That the school employs practices to inculcate fellow-feeling and actively invests in building sensitive relationships among the various actors within the school is evident. This entails that multiplex axes of power come to interact within this field, which gives rise to complex manifestations. Despite the attempt to construct a free space, processes of surveillance[3] built around the students' lives in the boarding school give rise to complexities. At Sahyadri, the students and teachers come to inhabit the school space throughout the day – all their activities take place within the space of the school. At the same time, the student population is small and close attention is paid to the whereabouts and activities of every child. In a staff meeting I attended, the important issue that came up for discussion was that some students were engaged in too many co-curricular activities which was seen by many teachers to affect their academic performance. The conclusion that teachers came to was to maintain meticulous records of each student's activities through google sheets that would enable teachers to easily identify when too many extra-curricular events were affecting a student's academics. The importance accorded to academics in higher classes can be accorded mainly to parental expectations from the school. It is clear that the school is therefore trying to impose its goals of achieving parental and societal approval, by making a distinction between academics and the extra-curricular and this is being enabled by the culture of interconnectedness that prevails in the school and by the very fact that it is a boarding school. All of this demonstrates how the school attempts to break away from a rigid institutional mechanism but also succumbs to certain power mechanisms, and how students add to the dynamicity of the process through their everyday interactions, acts of criticism and rebellion. Relationships actively pursued among the actors within the school thus take up complex, shifting forms.

---

[3] Madhulika Sonkar's work in RVS also discusses notions of surveillance where students feel scrutinised in their everyday lives, especially if the house parent takes up a paternalistic role. The students are known to challenge blanket bans on 'heterosexual romantic relationships' and Sonkar points out how "the school as a surveillant entity is challenged time and again by students through humour, sarcasm, and frank opinions shared with teachers" (2018: 173).

Location, Academics and Related Living

The location of Sahyadri School itself plays an important role in shaping its sociality. Pedagogic and academic practices within the school are deeply embedded in and influenced by the specificities of its location. Accessible only by private and hired cars and a single state transport service bus, the interiority of the location, especially for the vast majority of students coming from urban centres, very often big cities from all over India, becomes quite significant. Having lived all my life in urban metropolises, the long drawn out drive from Pune along the hilly roads of the Western Ghats on the way to the school found me empathising with the predicament of the child being left, for the first time away from home, in a far-off boarding school. The child thus enters a world insulated from the hyperactivity of the hi-tech life outside – one where the child can play around and climb trees in gay abandon, plucking 'jamuns' to share with friends and teachers, something I was witness to in my first hour of stepping into the campus. This is often exactly the very expectations with which pupils and parents opt for Sahyadri School – 'being away from gadgets', 'for simple-living', and 'to have fun' are some of the responses children give when asked why they chose to come to the school.

The natural surroundings play an important role in the student's learning process as students are familiarised and sensitised to the surrounding environment from a very early age. Students are closely involved in plantation activities, nature walks, and are seen to eagerly participate in the hikes that give them the chance to go exploring all over the neighbouring hills and forests. The everyday ritual of 'Asthachal', where the school comes together to spend fifteen minutes in absolute silence in the company of one another, takes place when the students and teachers gather at the edge of the hill to look at the glorious sunset overlooking the Chas-Kaman dam and the neighbouring hills and plateaus. This is also where the birdwatching population of the school gathers for sightings of rare birds like the Paradise Flycatcher. On the hiking trips the children are put through the test of endurance and students of all ages come to work together and help each other. They learn about local flora and fauna and the necessity to be unobtrusive when in the presence of nature.

The students come to cherish this exposure to untamed nature, something they acknowledge would be difficult to come across in the cities where they come from. 'Something about being among nature just calms you and shapes you in a way that you become a fuller human being, living a fuller life', says a 12th grader when asked why she thinks the location of the school is important for their education. The day after the 'Dorm hike', two weeks into the term, I come

across Aditya, an 8th grader already keen on tinkering with tools and mechanical devices, breaking a small red crystal with a hammer into tiny pieces in front of the school's Tinker Shed. When I enquire he tells me that it is a crystal he collected during the hike and is now breaking into shapely pieces so that he can make pendants for his sisters. 'Such crystals I would never find near my home, would I?' he points out. Certain teachers also bring in the surroundings into the classroom as they teach. The 6th graders in their biology class set out one day to collect different types of leaves from all over the campus. They would then stick these leaves to their notebooks and learn about the various types, shapes and arrangements of leaves. The teacher explains, 'There is so much richness out there. Students should get the chance to explore and learn for themselves from things that are around them. Often it so happens that even after spending years in this place students don't know what trees have been growing around them which is simply unfortunate'. The effort put into developing an enriching relationship between the child and his/her natural surroundings and the children's ready affinity to such processes, thus becomes evident through these observations.

Similar sensitivity is also employed in academic practice. Teachers work on probing beyond the confines of the subject to make what students learn more relatable and universal. These can be identified as attempts made by the teacher to establish a relationship between the students and the subject, such that the students' experience of learning the subject is intricately connected to who they are, what experiences they have gathered in the course of their lives, what kind of things they relate to and therefore what they want to learn about. By employing such methods the school aims to enable the student to engage critically and intimately with the subject and not just persist as passive readers of didactic texts. The glimpses I got of such methods being employed in the classroom made me register the potentialities held in these practices. Often these techniques are implemented through very small, seemingly irrelevant actions. The 6th grade social science class on a certain day go hunting into their atlases, at the instruction of the teacher, looking for the Bhīma river[4] and thus the location of the school. Suddenly one of the children remembers that there is a visitor in the school who comes from Czech Republic and the entire class, burning with curiosity, jumps back in to locate Czech Republic on the map of the world – the teacher hardly needs to initiate in such a case and learning takes place. Something similar happens in biology class, where the teacher asks students what they want to learn among a small assortment of topics. As the students choose to study plant life, the teacher asks what it means to be living. Amidst various answers one child

---

[4] The primary topographical landmark of this area.

suggests that feeling is living. The teacher in turn asks if plants then have feelings, and the class falls into contemplation. The teacher then decides to take up this topic for further investigation in the class project.

It has therefore been my attempt in this section to depict the processes through which the schools aims at establishing a close relationship between the child and its surroundings, as well inculcating a culture of academics deeply rooted in creative and critical thinking. It is in the light of such attempts at relationship building by the school, that the following sections of the paper will further examine the development of a sense of community within the space, complexities in the various interactions between actors and perceptions of identity and difference among these actors.

Dialogical Action in Relationship Building

Dialogue plays a very important role in the building of relationships between people, especially in pedagogic setups, as theorists like Paulo Freire[5] (1970) have pointed out. It is therefore imperative to examine the practice of dialogical action or lack thereof in everyday interactions within and beyond the boundaries of the school. As the earlier sections have illustrated, it is the intent at Sahyadri to move away from the rationalised, isolated existence of modern life to a more involved, fuller mode of living. The culture of relationship building that prevails in the school can also be found to permeate into the every interactions of the students amongst themselves. Class teachers and House parents attempt to solve any conflicts that come up amongst students by initiating dialogue. What is significant is that on numerous occasions I came to observe that the students themselves were adopting the same methods of resolving conflicts, of their own accord, in their inter-personal interactions.

On my third day of residence at Sahyadri, I came across a group of girls from the 6th grade playing hide and seek in the classroom clusters. Soon enough a fight broke out, resulting in a number of them crying. However when the time came to resolve the issue, the children raised hands and took turns to speak about their respective grievances. Soon a decision was arrived at and play resumed, although some were dissatisfied and decided to walk away. Few days later I was visiting one of the girls' dormitories and I came across six 5th graders, sitting in a circle, talking about complaints they have with one another and about things happening to them in the

---

[5] Freire's discussion on critical pedagogy and cultural synthesis are relevant here. See Freire, 1970.

school. The culture of dialogue initiated in the classroom percolates into the everyday activities of the children.

When it comes to the relationship between teacher and student, the school attempts to do away with the possibility of the student viewing the teacher as an authority figure to be afraid of. Interactions between these two parties are most often informal and take place with considerable encouragement outside the classroom. The most intimate relationship that students develop is with their house parent, who is the teacher responsible for their needs and welfare in the dormitories. The children live in close association with the house parent and the relationships often take up a familial nature. Anjana akka, house parent to girls of classes 9th-12th explains why she participates in the house-duty (chores) the girls have to perform. 'This is so they know that there is no force involved in making them do their work. I'm also working with them because it's my responsibility to keep my home clean'. The door to akka's house is always open for anytime the girls might require any assistance or advice. Thus a sense of connectedness lingers over the residents of the school, especially the students. They are kept involved in the various activities of the school to ensure they stay connected.

However, during my stay, I also observed paternalistic tendencies among the decision making bodies within the school, especially with regard to students' resistance – notions that automatically give rise to a situation where dialogue cannot be initiated. On my interactions with teachers in staff meetings and discussion groups, I came to observe that resistance by students to rules implemented in the school is perceived as resulting from misunderstanding said rules on the part of the students. 'It is because they misunderstand the reasons behind these rules that they resist them', said one of the senior teachers. Such a notion overlooks the student's own reason behind an act of resistance, deems it as a naïve, insensible act and takes away the power held in that act. Such tendencies on the part of school authorities act as fetters to the building of supportive, dialogical relationships with the students which the school otherwise attempts through various processes as discussed previously. A similar sense of paternalism is also observable on the part of the school and its students when it comes to interacting with those who live their lives beyond the school's boundaries and exist in difference from those within the school. This can be understood in the light of the interaction of the students with the people living in the neighbouring villages many of whom work as service staff in the school. These are the people the children come to know as the 'dadas' and 'didis' as opposed to their teachers who are called 'sir' and 'akka'. Interaction of students with

the service staff is negligible which is in stark contrast to the free, open and often informal interaction between the students and the teachers.

In a bid to connect with the local population, the school runs a rural outreach programme which is working extensively with the local farmers, enabling them to opt for organic produce and also working for a rejuvenation of native seeds in the area. Extensive farming activity also happens within the campus space, but the student and teacher community is largely unconnected to these activities. Currently it is only the senior school students, who have opted for Environmental Science as a part of their curricula, who visit the outreach office and participate in the farming activities. The only connection of the rest of the school has with the rural outreach programme is when students of 7th and 8th grade visit the schools in the two nearby villages, once a week, for a month, in order to interact with the children in those schools – to teach and play with them. This is an attempt made at building social responsibility among students that is observable in many other schools in different parts of the country. Parul Bhandari's (2014) work on a Christian, minority institution in Delhi shows how that school runs a programme where students are required to complete ten hours of teaching under-privileged children, to be allowed for their examinations. Bhandari argues that a system like this does not convey the importance of social responsibility to students who only view the activity as the means to an end. In Sahyadri, however, there is no such compulsion imposed and the students' interaction with the children from the village is attempted through more organic approaches. The notion of responsibility is present among the students, especially the older ones. In one culture class I attended, 11th graders expressed their discontent over the fact that this activity is conducted only in the 7th and 8th grades, which is a very limited interaction and at a time when students do not comprehend the importance of such work.

In this regard it is necessary to examine the efforts put in by the school in sensitising the students towards this activity. What is observed however is that there is little engagement or discussion about it within the teachers and the students, in class or in more informal spaces. This activity is performed as a part of the routine. Little emphasis is put by the school on the importance of this activity and how it contributes to the students' learning experience. When I asked some of the 8th graders why they go to the village schools, one of them replied, 'Earlier the people down in the villages thought that those who live on the top of the hill are different and strange. So the school started this programme so that we can interact and they come to know that we are like them'. While is evident that the children view these people as the obvious "other", there are somewhat complex perceptions that are more telling. On my trip to one of

the village schools with some of the Sahyadri children, one student pointed out, 'The school kids in this village are much nicer, they are calm and know their studies. The kids in the other village are very stupid, they are unruly and throw chalks and dusters at people'. This was met with vehement disagreement from the other students who maintained that calling them stupid is not right. Later when I ask them about what they feel about this activity they do, the children point out that this year the kids they are working with are much smarter, 'They know both English and Hindi. The ones in the school last time only knew Marathi'. That these encounters with the "other" arouse certain notions of identity and difference thus becomes clear. Paulo Freire (1970) has suggested that identification of difference when arrived at in a dialogical process can lead to better understanding between the interacting parties, opening up greater possibilities of learning from one another. Neither party then imposes its own values on the other, but identifies the cultural contexts which leads to the difference. Liberatory education thus takes place with what he calls 'cultural synthesis' – and such education liberates both the oppressor and the oppressed from a dehumanising existence. However, in Sahyadri's case, no such active engagement in developing dialogue with these people who exist in difference can be identified. Although the children and teachers approach the activity with great sensitivity, the motivation to actually work for a liberatory outcome is mostly absent. What ultimately follows is a one sided paternalistic approach where the children in the village schools are seen as passive objects, lacking the particular kind of the education that the students from Sahyadri receive.[6] Their specific talents, cultures and knowledges remain untapped, in an interaction that is sans dialogue. The Sahyadri students thus merely descend upon the village schools, in what resembles a philanthropic endeavour, to impart the knowledge which these less privileged students appear to not possess.

Dialogue and sensitivity thus emerge as crucial in forging healthy relationships between people. While in interacting with teachers and among themselves Sahyadri students show adeptness in dialogical action, their interactions with those who come from the "outside", who exist in obvious difference with them are markedly different. There exists a perception of being related, while in actuality it is only a one-sided interaction where the "other's" voice and experiences have little role to play in the practice of relationship building. The school's and its

---

[6] M. Thapan's work on minority institutions has focused on this idea of lack and limitations among minority communities – whereby, such institutions seek to redress such lack through "citizenship education", thereby reinforcing stereotypes about minorities. Drawing parallels from this, in this regard, a similar argument can be made about children in rural schools whose abilities are measured by urban, elite, upper-middle class knowledge standards, ignoring completely their specific talents and lived experiences.

students' participation in the rural outreach efforts thus require better critical engagement in order to establish a more dialogical, synthetic process of relating to one another, especially when the geographic location of the school presents the potential for such engagements. This discussion also brings light to prevailing notions of difference and identity, which will be examined with greater detail in the following section.

Perceptions of Difference and the Construction of a 'Sahyadrian' Identity

Drawing from Krishnamurti's body of thought, an idea that is taken forward by educators at Sahyadri is that of overcoming the effects of conditioning, i.e. how one's family and position from early childhood conditions the child into a certain kind of existence and therefore the school attempts to inculcate qualities of critical thinking in the child that would enable them to overcome it. In one of the staff meetings, a member of the management suggested, 'One must know when to stand alone, away from a group, in order to stand for what is right'. Another anecdote made by the same person was, 'We do not make any attempt to build a sense of pride in the school; a sense of community that leads to forming divisive separate identities which means you separate yourself from the world'. However, in the relationships that are forged between various actors within and beyond the school, that have been illustrated and examined in the paper so far, it becomes evident that certain notions of difference emerge in the collective psyches of actors, which in turn lead to constructions of self-identity and everyday embodiments among people within the school, and to the development of a distinct sense of community. These variations between what is intended and what prevails need to be examined in greater detail.

One of the main ways in which such a perception of difference is identifiable is in the way students refer to their lives before they came to the school or when they go back home during vacations. Almost every child alludes to the idea that Sahyadri constitutes a space that is different in some unique way from other spaces that are "mainstream" – especially other schools. The idea of the school as an "alternative" space holds great significance in students' beliefs. The fact that Sahyadri is a boarding school ensures that cultures from the home are held at bay for long periods of time during the academic year which in turn implies that the school potentially has stronger influence over the child's mind and body. During my interactions with the children of grade 8, I had asked them whether they feel a difference between their lives at school and at home and also between the kind of friends they have there and the ones in school. The majority of them claimed that school and home are like two different worlds, while a select

few suggested otherwise. With respect to their friends from outside school, most of the children agreed that conversations with them are held on rather superficial topics compared to the deep issues that are discussed amongst their peer groups in Sahyadri. People outside are more likely to just talk about various gadgets and Bollywood all the time. Some of the students had identified one of their classmates, who is from a smaller town in India, as someone who always only talks about Bollywood movies and they made a comment that most people outside, in other schools are practically like this classmate of theirs. In my personal interactions with some of the children from the class, what emerged is that some of them, often hailing from smaller towns, find it difficult to find acceptance among the greater milieu owing to differences in tastes and demeanours. One girl in particular, who had trouble adjusting in her first year, told me, 'In my last school people were normal, they talked about normal things. I was confused when I came to Sahyadri and met these people, they were not like me. Then I realised that I must adjust and be like them to be accepted. That is what I am trying'. Another student pointed out how she sometimes feels excluded from her peer group because they view her as a 'loud' person. Another student from the 12th grade, in a moment of reflexivity, informed me that there is a culture amongst the students that if you dress, appear and talk like an intellectual, you are considered cool.

There are various factors which come to play in this regard. Drawing a comparison with Choudhury's (2018) work, I take forward his argument to suggest that in Sahyadri School's case too, the selection procedure and steep fee-structure ensure that students enrolled belong mostly to a homogeneous, upper-middle class background. This gives rise to a community within the school which is characterised by the consumption and embodiment of a homogeneous 'high-culture'[7], with emphasis on proficiency in English speaking. This is reinforced in many cases by values held by educators who deem certain kinds of culture as morally less appealing than others and encourage student to avoid these.[8] Meenakshi Thapan in her work on minority institutions, suggests, 'Identities… remain encapsulated within (this) culture of the known, which emphasises sameness and eliminates or marks difference as problematic'. (2014: 176) A similar phenomenon can be identified in this regard where above

---

[7] Priyanuj Choudhury discusses a similar kind of 'high-culture' and English proficiency preference in The Valley School, Bengaluru. He further discusses the homogeneous class-category of the students, which I have also referred to in this context. See Choudhury, 2018.

[8] Sonkar's work refers to ethnographic instances where teachers in Rishi Valley School have been known to disapprove of students singing Bollywood songs like 'balam pichkari'. See Sonkar, 2018: 170.

examples show how children from different backgrounds feel the pressure to assume like-ness or sameness with the peer group.

Such perceptions of difference can also be observed in the interactions between students of Sahyadri and people from the neighbouring villages, as pointed out in the earlier section. One very significant manifestation and reinforcement of the prevailing perceptions of difference is the fact that despite students in Sahyadri not having uniforms, the kitchen staff is expected to be in uniforms – the kitchen being the site of a major chunk of outside interaction faced by students of the school. Such a policy immediately sets the working class population inside the school at a difference with others – especially in a space that otherwise aims to celebrate freedom and individual growth. In the interaction between students and the village children, as discussed earlier, it becomes clear that the students are more impressed by the children displaying better proficiencies in English and Hindi than they had expected, than adeptness at Marathi displayed by some others. Such foreign language skills along with orderly behaviour are considered by the Sahyadri children as indicators of smartness and goodness. The unruly, Marathi speaking village child is therefore not quite up to the mark in their perceptions, represents a cultural "lack" and is thus held at a distance. The students maintain a sensitive approach which nonetheless reinforces stereotypes.

It is therefore evident that among students, a distinctive 'Sahyadrian' (a term that is often in use among students) identity gets constructed – one which is generated out of a difference established with people "outside" and with those who are culturally different in their everyday embodiments and practices. This is enabled in turn by the homogeneity in class-backgrounds of most students within the school. The 'Sahyadrian' identity, therefore, constitutes of confident, independent individuals, proficient English speakers, consumers of 'high-culture' who make their marks in life. Simultaneously, an awareness of the 'bubble-effect'[9] also exists among students and teachers, which becomes evident in the way they talk about and give meaning to the isolated location and prevailing culture of the school. Some senior students especially feel that the secure, supportive, sensitive space created within the school provides a cushioning effect from the difficulties and problems of what is 'out there' in the world. This supportive space is perceived by students to be distinctive of a 'Sahyadrian' culture and identity - something that creates a sense of a unique community within the school. The distinctive 'Sahyadrian' identity, therefore constructed within and through the student culture, enables

---

[9] See Dore, 2014.

perceptions of difference which in turn are instrumental in reinforcing certain stereotypes among the students. The gap between Krishnamurti school values which reject notions of identity formation[10] and actual processes unfolding within these schools is made evident through the above discussion.

Conclusion

Living in relationship with one another is one of the primary elements of the everyday values and practices prevailing in Sahyadri School. It has been the aim of my paper to trace these various practices of related living as they operate on various different levels within the school. The paper has looked at the diverse ways in which the school and its students negotiate with the institutionalised mechanisms of the boarding school system. The importance of educating the child to forge relationships with nature and community is another aspect that has been examined. A dynamic processual culture is therefore seen to prevail within the boundaries of the school, in the everyday engagements of pedagogy, relationship, sensitivity and care.

The school's attempt to break away from a rigid structure in a way facilitates the diverse interactions that students execute within its premises. The school also works actively to inculcate a culture of interconnected-ness among actors within. These processes together ensure that students are never merely passive receivers of imposed knowledge and directives, but actively involved in debates and discussions relating to almost every aspect of their lives within the school. The paper however has also shown how the same quality of inter-connectedness can enable surveillant tendencies on the part of school authorities – often guiding students' choices into falling in place with parental aspirations.

In its engagements with the surrounding environment and pedagogic techniques, the school births a rich culture of creativity and critical thinking. In their focus on building relationships among people, dialogue is accorded an important place. In this regard the paper discusses how dialogical action works best when practiced within the school community while it falters when encountering differing and diverse cultures, subjectivities and experiences. The school culture within remains diverse and dynamic while simultaneously crystallising into a community characterised by a distinct 'Sahyadrian' identity when in presence of heterogeneous cultural embodiments. It can be therefore be argued that complex manifestations of culture and identity

---

[10] Thapan, referring to Herzberger, suggests how in Krishnamurti's philosophy, 'freedom implies a loss of individual identity to the extent that the individual would always find himself in another'. See Thapan, 2014: 178.

emerge in the forging of relationships within and beyond the school where sensitivity and exclusion intertwine with one another.

Acknowledgements

References:

Bhandari, Parul. 2014. "In Quest of Identity: Student Culture in a Religious Minority institution." In *Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India*, (ed.) Meenakshi Thapan, 182-224. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

Choudhury, Priyanuj. 2018. "A Space Sans Fear: The Valley School in Bengaluru." In *J. Krishnamurti and Educational Practice*, (ed.) Meenakshi Thapan, 183-215. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Dore, Bhavya. 2014. "Living in the Bubble: Rishi Valley School and the Sense of Community." In *Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India*, (ed.) Meenakshi Thapan, 271-332. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

Froerer, Peggy. 1996. "Disciplining the Saffron Way: Moral Education and the Hindu Rashtra" *Modern Asian Studies* 41(5): 1033-71

Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Continuum.

Krishnamurti, Jiddu. 1991. *A Wholly Different Way of Living.* London: Krishnamurti Foundation Trust Ltd.

_____. *On Education.* Available at:
        http://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/oneducation.pdf

_____. 1992. O*n Relationship*. Krishnamurti Foundation Trust Ltd.

Pathak, Avijit. 2002. *Social Implications of Schooling: Knowledge, Pedagogy and Consciousness.* Delhi: Rainbow Publishers.

Sonkar, Madhulika. 2018. "'Right Relationship' between Teachers and Students: Ethnographic Unravelling of Krishnamurti's Ideas in Practice at Rishi Valley School." In *J. Krishnamurti and Educational Practice*, (ed.) Meenakshi Thapan, 147-182. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Srivastava, Sanjay. 1998. *Constructing Post-colonial India.* London: Routledge.

Thapan, Meenakshi. 2006 (1991). *Life at School: An Ethnographic Study.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

_____. 2014."Schooling, Identity and Citizenship Education." In *Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India*, (ed.) Meenakshi Thapan, 154-181. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

_____. 2001. "Adolescence, Embodiment and Gender Identity in Contemporary India: Elite Women in a Changing Society." *Women's Studies International Forum* 24 (3/4): 359–371.

Willis, Paul. 1977. *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Boys Get Working Class Jobs.* New York: Columbia University Press

For contact: madhuparnasen7@gmail.com