

What It Means To Be a Dalit or Tribal Child in Our Schools

A Synthesis of a Six-State Qualitative Study

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The findings of a qualitative study commissioned by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in six states – Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan – during 2011-12 to look at inclusion and exclusion in schools may not be original. But they make it possible for policymakers to officially acknowledge the prevalence of exclusionary practices in schools and the urgent need to address them. One of the overarching insights from this study is the need to view inclusion and exclusion from different vantage points: from the outside (who goes to what kind of school); from the inside (what happens inside the school); and in society (who is visible and who is not visible; for example, seasonal or new migrants are often invisible in data on out-of-school children). Equally significant is the influence of the larger society and social norms on what happens inside a school, the attitude and behaviour of teachers and the involvement or lack of involvement of parents and community leaders. Political and social assertion of the rights of dalits and adivasis also influences practices and attitudes.

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It is common knowledge that children from marginalised social groups drop out of schools in greater numbers as compared to other children. It is also widely acknowledged that the schooling experience of thousands of children from diverse poverty situations is not positive. There have been a large number of press reports about caste discrimination, community-specific exclusion and gender-related exclusion, sexual harassment and violence against children in schools.¹ Researchers have also repeatedly pointed to the problem of exclusion and segregation in schools. Yet, the education departments at the centre and in the states, respectively, do not officially admit to this phenomenon. Therefore, it was a positive development when the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) commissioned a research study to look at inclusion and exclusion in schools. This qualitative study was done in 2011-12 and involved a team of researchers from six states – Andhra Pradesh (AP), Assam, Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Rajasthan. The findings from these states may not be radically new but the study does make it possible for policymakers to officially acknowledge the prevalence of exclusionary practices in schools and the urgent need to address them.

The ability of children to access a school, participate in school activities, learn and grow, and most importantly, develop a sense of self-worth is influenced by a wide range of issues, variously related to school, to family and to the society. The National Policy on Education (1986) saw universal education as a powerful tool to help neutralise distortions of the past and give children a level-playing field. The Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 attempted to take this forward by guaranteeing all children the right to go to school, the right to be treated with love and care, and most importantly, the right to be treated equally and with dignity. However, despite these good intentions, we are far from creating a level-playing field for all our children.

Education is not only about reading and writing; it is also about preparing for life. It is in this context that the issue of inclusion and exclusion, or to put it more starkly, discrimination and unequal treatment, acquires a new meaning. In this study, the researchers tried to explore blatant, subtle and hidden practices that influence the ability of children to learn, grow and become confident young people.

1 Methodology and Coverage

This was a qualitative study. Twenty schools were selected in each state covering a total of 120 schools in six states. Classes IV and VII were observed during the school visits (see Box).

Sample of Schools

- 1 Sample Size
 - Six states: Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan
 - Four districts in each state: total 24
 - 20 schools in each state: total 120
- 2 Location of sample school in each district
 - One near or on the main road (access)
 - One interior village at least 5 km from the main road
 - Two schools somewhere midpoint
- 3 One school in the block headquarter
 - 50% elementary schools (coeducation) without a high school in the same compound
 - 25% elementary plus high schools
 - All schools mix representation of different communities – with at least two different communities in the same school
 - 50 % with children with special needs
 - All serving mid-day meal (MDM) and 75% where MDM is cooked in the schools
 - All had toilets according to District Information System for Education data 2010-11
 - At least one school per district had adverse pupil-teacher and student-classroom ratio

A team of four investigators including at least one woman conducted the fieldwork in upper primary schools and a team of three investigators including one woman conducted the

study in primary schools. The team spent three working days in each school and the afternoons and evenings were spent in the village talking to parents and adolescent boys/girls. The basic data with respect to enrolment (by social group and gender) is given in Table 1.

1.1 Research Tools

The following tools were used to capture gender and social equity dimensions of discriminations within schools and classrooms: (1) classroom observation; (2) school observation; (3) semi-structured interview of teachers; (4) focus group discussions with teachers; (5) focus group discussions with adolescent boys and girls who had studied in the sample school; (6) focus group discussions with parents of children in the most deprived community in the village; (7) structured activities with children in classes IV and VII – to record their daily experiences in the school.

2 Overarching Insights

It is fairly well known that in most areas, elementary schools run by the government primarily cater to the very poor while the not-so-poor opt for private schools, even in rural and remote areas.

There are, however, significant variations among the states. In Rajasthan and MP, the government elementary schools are not as exclusive and they serve children from almost all social groups, especially girls from the forward castes. In AP, most upper or forward caste children do not attend government schools which primarily cater to backward caste (BC), dalit (SC) and adivasi (ST) children. There has been a significant growth in residential schools and as a result, many dalit and adivasi children who do well academically shift to residential schools, after completing primary school (Class V).²

In Assam and Odisha, habitations/villages are quite distinct and so are the schools that children attend. A major distinction in Assam is between the tea garden community, the non-Assamese migrants and the specific tribal areas for Bodos, Karbis, Mishings and Chakmas. As these communities live in distinct habitations/villages, their children often go to schools that are fairly homogeneous.

Given the social norms in Indian society, overt discrimination against dalit (SCs) was more prevalent than against adivasis (STs), with Rajasthan being a notable exception (especially with respect to children from the Bhil and Sahariya communities). This may be attributed to the fact that most ST communities live in exclusive habitations/villages where they are often in a majority. On the other hand, dalit communities are spread across the state and are often a minority in the villages. However, dynamics were noticeably different in a village where the dalit community was in a majority.

Table 1: Enrolment in Sampled Schools

State	Class	Total		SC		ST		Muslim		BC		General		CWSN	
		B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G
Andhra Pradesh	IV	349	358	100	101	68	65	6	16	153	153	17	22	5	1
	%	49.4	50.7	14.1	14.3	9.6	9.2	0.8	2.3	21.6	21.6	2.4	3.1	0.7	0.1
	VII	533	413	119	65	67	40	14	13	307	264	25	30	1	1
Assam	IV	215	224	43	42	12	26	42	51	106	94	11	7	1	4
	%	49	51	20	18.8	5.6	11.6	19.5	22.8	49.3	42	5.1	3.1	0.5	1.8
	VII	337	347	44	69	26	45	137	109	103	106	26	18	1	0
Bihar	IV	1040	1002	200	195	22	27	118	110	586	568	114	102	3	4
	%	50.9	49.1	19.2	19.5	2.1	2.7	11.3	11.0	56.3	56.7	11.0	10.2	0.3	0.4
	VII	1563	1376	266	246	75	99	244	199	821	713	157	119	9	10
Madhya Pradesh	IV	963	1165	290	400	154	174	16	12	436	520	62	75	6	4
	%	45.3	54.7	30.1	34.3	16	14.9	1.7	1.0	45.3	44.6	6.4	6.4	0.6	0.3
	VII	849	1085	296	364	178	215	42	29	267	388	66	89	7	8
Odisha	IV	186	218	46	49	82	85	2	4	53	78	3	2	1	0
	%	46	54	24.7	22.5	44.1	39	1.1	1.8	28.5	35.8	1.6	0.9	0.5	0
	VII	307	283	82	67	96	82	4	1	123	131	2	2	3	2
Rajasthan	IV	143	213	42	63	38	44	2	5	37	67	24	34	-	-
	%	40	60	29.4	29.6	26.6	20.7	1.4	2.3	25.9	31.4	16.8	16.0	-	-
	VII	221	278	58	65	71	90	13	10	45	73	34	40	-	-
%	44.3	55.7	26.2	23.4	32.1	32.4	5.9	3.6	20.4	26.2	15.4	14.4	-	-	

SC: scheduled caste; ST: scheduled tribe; BC: backward caste; CWSN: children with special needs; B: boys; G: girls.

One of the overarching insights from this study is that we need to view inclusion and exclusion from different vantage points: from the outside (who goes to what kind of school); from the inside (what happens inside the school); and in society (who is visible and who is not visible, for example, seasonal or new migrants are often invisible in data on out-of-school children). Equally significant is the influence of the larger society and social norms on what happens inside a school, the attitude and behaviour of teachers and the involvement or lack of involvement of parents and community leaders. The political and social assertion of the rights of dalits and adivasis also influence practices and attitudes. The differences between AP, Bihar and Rajasthan are a case in point. While all three societies are highly stratified in terms of social and community identities, explicit caste-based discrimination is not so evident in schools in AP or in Bihar while in Rajasthan discrimination was explicit. This may be due to the political environment in this state. Bihar and AP have experienced social and political movements led by dalit and Other Backward Classes (OBC). In fact, dalit and OBC communities have started playing a significant role in politics due to social mobilisation in the last two or three decades.

On the other hand, Rajasthan has not witnessed similar social mobilisation or movements by dalits. Further, the composition of the student community is more homogeneous in AP while it is diverse in Rajasthan as children from the forward castes also attend government schools.

2.1 Language

Language is an important site of exclusion. This is particularly evident when the teachers' language or the official state language is different from the mother tongue of the children. In Odisha, teachers from coastal districts do not know the tribal languages, and therefore, are unable to communicate with the children in these parts. Equally, Odiya, which is spoken in the coastal areas, is considered as the standard official language and is used in books and for classroom transactions. As a result, students from rural western Odisha and tribal students (who speak a different dialect) usually face difficulties. Therefore, language is an important caste marker in Odisha. In other states, language is a big exclusionary issue for migrant children. For example, Assamese is the main medium of instruction in Assam, which is very different from the mother tongue of tea garden workers or of workers who come from Hindi-speaking areas of the country. Similarly, in the border areas of AP, the medium of instruction is different from the mother tongue of the children. In Rajasthan, local dialects vary with each district and the children may not be familiar with the standardised Hindi used in schools.

Even though language is an important indicator of exclusion, in this study, it has not been explored in detail, since many studies have already highlighted it.

Mid-day Meals

The mid-day meal (MDM) was one area in which social and community prejudices invariably surfaced, e.g. in the appointment

of cooks (belonging to a caste/community that would enable all children to eat, mostly the non-scs), seating arrangements for eating, and access to water for cleaning and drinking. However, a difference was seen in schools that had dynamic and strong headmasters/teachers who were committed to equality.

2.2 Infrastructure

Infrastructure facilities were poor in almost all the states. There were inadequate classrooms and usable toilets were few. In fact, providing toilets means little unless equal attention is paid to ensure that they are usable, have running water and are cleaned regularly. A minuscule proportion of schools had usable and functional toilets for girls. And where there were such toilets, girls from the poorest or the most socially disadvantaged groups in that village were asked to clean them.

2.3 Teachers

Availability of adequate teachers was also a big issue. This was not only because of teacher shortages, but also due to the fact that all teachers are not present in the school on every working day and many of them do not come to school even when they have been appointed. The responsibility of the educational administration at the district/block level to ensure that all posted teachers attended school every day was uneven.

Another important similarity in these states was that the present structure of school management committees (SMCs) or the erstwhile village education committees (VECs) was not effective enough to ensure the involvement of parents, especially from the most backward communities in the sample schools. They admitted that their voices were rarely heard and they did not participate regularly in school-level committee meetings. They were also unaware of exclusionary practices in schools and often accepted the situation as something that could not be changed. They were also unaware of the RTE Act.

2.4 Common Perceptions

Discussions with teachers from the six sample states also highlighted a common perception: children from very deprived social groups did not perform well in school. Interestingly, information from the same school revealed that this was a misconception and that many children from deprived social groups were actually performing well academically. There is a disjuncture between the teachers' perceptions and reality, and it is noteworthy that even though the teachers pointed out children who were "bright" and keen on studies (many of them dalit/adivasi), they had their own prejudices and stereotypes. When asked about this, they said that the bright children were exceptions.

Across all states, regular attendance was a serious issue among children from extremely poor and marginalised communities. This could be due to various reasons including poor health and recurring illnesses, short-term migration by parents for work, taking on household responsibilities (especially among girls), parental absence for daily wage labour and children being neglected. Frequent absence essentially meant that the children were unable to keep pace with learning. When

they fell behind, the teachers ignored them. In all the six states, teachers mostly focused on “bright” children who sat in the front rows, resulting in exclusion.

2.5 Enrolment and Attendance

In all the six states, the proportion of children from socially disadvantaged groups, mainly backward castes, scs and sts, was much higher in the sample schools than their share in the population. This confirms available evidence that government elementary schools essentially cater to the poor and marginalised and that children from forward castes do not access government schools to the same extent. However, there were statewise variations, which are given in Table 2.

Equally significant is the finding that attendance rates were also fairly uneven. There was a gap between attendance reported in school records and the number of children present on all three days of field visits (the highest attendance in the three days). While this phenomenon is fairly well-established,

Table 2: Enrolment in Sampled Schools

State	Class	Total		SC		ST		Muslim		BC		General		CWSN	
		B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G
Andhra Pradesh	IV	316	290	81	72	60	54	5	11	160	153	–	–	–	–
	VII	433	340	97	56	50	29	14	13	272	242	–	–	–	–
Assam	IV	91	103	27	28	15	14	13	15	33	42	3	4	0	0
	VII	215	135	49	27	44	12	22	55	34	40	66	1	0	0
Bihar	IV	456	516	75	98	11	13	38	41	267	294	41	49	2	2
	VII	666	785	122	101	44	60	73	97	351	409	51	57	1	5
Madhya Pradesh	IV	172	247	61	69	30	48	2	3	66	116	13	27	3	2
	VII	310	357	109	123	64	73	3	1	121	136	26	25	4	6
Odisha	IV	140	155	34	38	62	60	2	4	39	51	3	2	1	0
	VII	226	210	62	48	76	64	4	1	83	96	1	1	3	2
Rajasthan	IV	105	160	33	42	21	32	2	2	31	59	18	25	–	–
	VII	184	217	48	48	54	69	12	9	44	62	26	26	–	–

children from extremely poor families (landless daily wage labourers, seasonal migrants) tended to miss school more often. Equally, girls from very poor families were also irregular and many children from such families reached school late. They were, therefore, not involved in school activities like leading the morning assembly and participating in other school functions.

It was therefore important for this study to understand what happens to children who are absent frequently when they do attend school. The study found that in all the states such children were excluded from active participation in class because they were not able to keep pace with the lessons being taught. They also tended to sit in the back rows and were often ignored by the teachers. The combination of being poor, first generation schoolgoers, scs or sts and being absent frequently were perhaps the most compelling reasons for their exclusion from school activities.

3 Infrastructure, Facilities and Children's Access to Them

Despite compelling evidence spanning over five decades that the mere availability of a building, toilet or a handpump/borewell does not necessarily ensure access, school-level data that is compiled every year continues to record availability without any other information on its status (Table 3). This study also

found a huge gap between the availability of such infrastructure, status of its use and even its usability. Another important issue that was confirmed in this study is that water, toilets and mechanisms used for cleaning them, is a site of caste-based and community-identity-based exclusion. It is important to clarify at this stage that schools are not the only sites of such exclusion. Equally significant is the fact that a committed headmaster or head teacher can go against dominant social practices and instil an egalitarian and equal environment in a school. The findings of this study on these issues would therefore have to be viewed in this perspective.

3.1 Water Woes

The study found a range of exclusionary as well as inclusionary practices. In Rajasthan, in most of the schools, the forward caste children drank water first/or washed their MDM plates before the sc and st children. In one school, a water pitcher was not accessible to the sc and st children and other children poured water from the pitcher for them.

Interestingly, in three schools, children from one st community (the Meenas) did not use the handpump because children from other castes/community were using it. Rajasthan perhaps revealed one end of the spectrum of exclusion, with rigid caste-based societal norms playing out in the school as well. In AP, almost all children brought water in bottles from home, mainly because water from the school pump was considered unhygienic. In three of the 20 schools visited, sc and st children were seen standing away from the handpump/tap, even to wash their hands or plates. They had to wait for the other children to pour water for them.

In Odisha, 90% of the schools had some drinking water facility in the form of a tube well, open well or piped water. The study did not find any water-related exclusion or discrimination in Odisha. Water portability is a big issue in this state and the study found that in two schools water was contaminated with fluorine.

Table 3: Infrastructure Facilities in Schools (in %)

SlNo	States	Available Toilets		Drinking Water	Playground	Kitchen	Library Books*
		Common	Girls				
1	Andhra Pradesh	63**		78	67	67	78
2	Assam	95	75	55	95	80	20
3	Bihar	75	80	100	40	95	60
4	Madhya Pradesh	23	5	80	53	65	13
5	Odisha	80	55	90	10	100	90
6	Rajasthan	50	50	90	60	85	60

*Facilities available but not necessarily accessible, especially in the case of toilets and libraries.

** Where the toilets are usable, they are used mainly by teachers and in a few schools girls were also allowed to use them.

In Assam, six out of the 20 schools visited did not have any drinking water source. However, like in AP, almost all the children carried water bottles from home and no discrimination/exclusion was observed in using the handpump or tap to wash hands, plates, etc.

In MP, most of the schools had a proper water source, mostly a handpump. In five of the 20 schools studied, children had to fetch water from a little way off. In almost all the schools, children could drink water from the handpump. In one or two schools, the upper caste children brought water from home. However, only children from the upper castes were asked to fetch water for teachers and guests. In most of the schools, water was not stored and children drank directly from the handpump. However, subtle discrimination was observed during this process. For example, the SC children often had to wait for their turn by standing at a distance. In two schools, where water was stored in steel tanks, a bucket was used to carry the water, as SC children were not allowed to touch these vessels. The OBC girls and also those from the general category were found practising untouchability with their schoolmates in two schools more than the boys. During focus group discussions girls informed us that they had been asked by their parents to conform to prevalent social norms. The state report noted that teachers, who should ideally be leaders of change, got their own water or asked upper caste children to get it from their homes or to get it from the home of a forward caste family near the school.

In Bihar, drinking water from handpumps was available in all the sampled schools and District Information System for Education (DISE) (2011-12) figures for the state show that 93% of the schools had access to drinking water. However, it was observed that children from economically better-off families got their own water bottles from home. With regard to the issue of drinking water directly from the source, it was observed that girls often drank water after boys and children from deprived communities often got the last chance. Further, in the minority dominant district of Katihar, in a majority of the schools it was observed that girls generally used the handpump for drinking water after the boys. A similar trend was also found in 50% of the schools in Bhojpur and Muzaffarpur. Thus, there was discrimination not just on the visible basis of access, that is, who can touch the pump and who can drink water from it, but also more subtly in the order of priority of access.

3.2 Toilet Tribulations

This study found overwhelming evidence of gender as well as caste-based discrimination in practices around cleaning of toilets. To begin with, very few schools actually had usable toilets with proper water facilities. Therefore, wherever toilets were being used, children cleaned them using water from the handpump or tap. In AP and MP, persons were hired to clean the toilets, but girls (mostly from the SC community) had to bring water from the handpump and pour it. In several schools, usable toilets were locked for the use of teachers and even in these schools the girls were asked to clean them.

In Odisha, none of the sample schools had separate usable toilets for boys and girls. In Assam, all toilets were unusable and wherever there were toilets for teachers, girl students were expected to clean them. This was also the case in Bihar, where 75% of the schools had usable toilets but most of them

were locked for the use of teachers. In Rajasthan, the situation was similar and the teachers said that they kept the toilets locked because children “spoil and dirty them”. In AP, parents said that their children were used to going out to the fields and therefore toilets were not that essential, an arrangement preferred by many children if the alternative meant cleaning the toilets.

3.3 Sports Facilities and Libraries

One of the most notable findings of this study is a glaring absence of sports facilities for children in the sample schools. In schools where sports equipment was available, only selected boys, based on their perceived academic abilities, were able to use them.

In most cases, teachers considered these boys “bright” as they attended school regularly and sat in the front rows. The study did not find any caste-based discrimination in the access to and use of sports facilities, probably because sports is not a priority in schools and children were seen playing with their friends.

Like sports facilities, libraries too were noticeable by their absence. Even if the schools had books, they were not given to the children. Therefore, it was not possible to see if there were any exclusionary practices. One school in AP, however, was an exception. Although library books were issued to the students, teachers did not allow the SC students to take the books home or use them because they were considered dirty and were likely to soil the books.

4 Participation in School Activities and Tasks

Observing the activities the children participated in and tasks that were assigned to them by teachers were important elements of this study. School and classroom observation schedules tried to capture various roles and responsibilities of students and the conditions in which they performed various academic and classroom-oriented tasks.

Democratic practices were not the norm in any sample schools. Teachers decided the roster of tasks to be performed both in the classroom and around the school. These included routine duties like sweeping the playground, classrooms, veranda, toilets and the place where the MDM was served. Then there were high profile tasks such as leading the morning assembly and participating in school functions by dancing, singing, giving a speech and reading out from newspapers, and personal tasks such as fetching water or the register for the teacher, making and serving tea, cleaning the blackboard, collecting notebooks/papers and carrying desks/chairs. These tasks were allotted to students depending on the teachers’ perceptions on what is the prevalent norm in the community and their own personal assessment of what each child can or cannot do.

The study observed clear gender and caste-based behaviour in the classroom and also in the school in the chores that the teachers assigned to the children (Table 4). With tasks that involved home-like chores such as filling water for teachers, making tea or washing teachers’ lunch boxes, there was an

Table 4: Tasks Assigned by Teachers

Task	Gender-Based	Gender and Caste	Caste-Based	Ability-Based 'Bright', 'Intelligent'	All or Randomly Assigned
Cleaning the classroom	Assam (G), Odisha (G)	Rajasthan (G, SC/ST), MP (G-SC)			AP
Cleaning the playground	Assam (B),MP (B), Odisha (B)	Rajasthan (G, SC/ST)			AP, MP
Writing on the blackboard, coming forward to read out or recite or lead the class in an activity				Assam, AP, Rajasthan (FC, OBC), Odisha, , Bihar	
Class monitor	Odisha (B)	Rajasthan (B, FC)		Assam, AP, Rajasthan	
Cleaning the toilets	Odisha (G)	MP (SC, G)	Rajasthan (B, SC/ST), AP		AP , Assam
Fetching water for the teacher	AP (B), Bihar (B)	Rajasthan (FC G),	Odisha (non-SC) MP (FC, BC)		MP, Assam
Preparing tea for the teacher/guests	Bihar (G)	Rajasthan (FC G), Odisha (FC G), MP (G, FC)			
Arranging books	Assam (B), Bihar (G)	Rajasthan (FC, B)		AP, Bihar (G- Bright)	Assam
Ringling the bell	AP (B), Odisha (B)	Rajasthan (FC, B)			
Washing the teacher's lunch box		AP (G- SC), Odisha, Raj (SC/ST G)			
Cleaning the floor after MDM	Odisha (G)	Rajasthan (G- SC/ST)			
Leading the assembly		Rajasthan (G, FC), MP (G, FC, BC, Muslim)		Assam (G), Bihar (G- Bright), AP (G- Bright)	AP, MP
Cultural activities	Assam (G)	Bihar (G, FC, BC)		Bihar (G- Bright), AP	
Sports activities	Assam (B), Bihar (B), Rajasthan (B)			AP (B&G)	
Seating arrangement	Separate rows for boys and girls or girls occupying the first few rows in AP, Assam, Bihar, MP, Odisha, Rajasthan			Front benchers: Assam (B&G-Bright), Bihar (Bright), Rajasthan (Bright- FC), Odisha (Bright-FC), MP (Bright)	

G: girl, B: boy, FC: forward caste, BC: backward caste, SC: scheduled caste and ST: scheduled tribe.

overwhelming preference for girls especially from the forward castes or OBCs. In tribal areas where almost all the children belonged to the ST category, teachers asked any girl to do the task. There also seemed to be a clear hierarchy of tasks from menial to educational and teachers invariably called those students who according to them were the best and the brightest to perform the better tasks, while poor and marginalised children were asked to do menial tasks.

4.1 School Functions, Morning Assembly

The day began with the morning assembly. The teachers selected students on the basis of two criteria for leading the morning assembly: gender and perceived academic abilities. Girls were given precedence over boys as the teachers felt that they sang tunefully and were more disciplined.

While the criterion of using gender was straightforward, the second criterion of perceived academic abilities was influenced by class and caste biases. Teachers perceived those students who attended school regularly as "bright". As a result, these children performed better in studies and some spoke English as compared to students who were not able to attend school regularly. Therefore, the regular students were given opportunities to lead the morning assembly while the not-so-regular students generally lost out on opportunities. It was noticed that the upper caste students (where there were upper caste students) were often more regular and were

therefore identified as bright and eligible for more prestigious responsibilities.

An exception to this rule was one school (out of 20) in Odisha where a SC boy was seen leading the prayers. Again, in schools where a majority of the students belonged to the ST category, bright girls were asked to lead the prayers. Parents in almost all the states did not seem too concerned about the assignment of tasks and were largely silent on this form of discrimination.

This pattern in leading the morning assembly was repeated in all the major school functions like those for Independence Day, Republic Day and Teachers' Day. Similar patterns were also found during the celebration of festivals. For example, wherever a formal "puja" was performed, it was led by teachers with the help of "bright" students.

Interestingly, the issue of discipline was closely linked to being a "good student" across all the states. Only children who were perceived as "good" or "bright" were selected to be class monitors, to speak in the morning assembly, to participate in national day functions and so forth. Although this form of discrimination was not blatant, it was a consequence of certain conditions. The teachers had clear views on what boys and girls could do. When it came to leading the prayers, teachers preferred girls. As there were no special school functions during our fieldwork, we could not observe if all the children participated in these functions.

4.2 Corporal Punishment and Sexual Harassment

Scolding children was common across all states. Physical punishment was not that common, or it could be possible that due to the RTE Act teachers were more careful about overt forms of punishment when the research team was in the schools. In Odisha, we found a small stick in almost every class and with every teacher, even though the government has painted “No Punishment Zone” in all schools. In 20% of the schools, students reported some kind of punishment. In some schools in two districts, children reported verbal abuse, with caste or community identity often being used as a peg for the abuse.

During discussions with teachers and parents in Assam, it emerged that teachers blamed the recent ban on all forms of corporal punishment as an important reason for lack of discipline in schools. On the other hand, parents complained that the teachers were not strict.

In Rajasthan, teachers carried sticks and some of them were observed hitting/slapping the children. In Andhra Pradesh, children reported that physical punishment was common, for example, teachers pulled the girls' hair and twisted the ears of boys.

In MP, discussions with teachers and parents revealed a complex understanding of discipline and learning. According to parents, the difference between a “good” teacher and a “bad” teacher had to do with how much s/he punished children. Along with this, for parents, the quality of a teacher was measured in terms of her/his teaching “well”, which meant explaining lessons to the children, assigning work in class and as homework, conducting classes on time, coming to school daily and being punctual and maintaining discipline. The RTE Act notwithstanding, teachers and parents were quite vocal about the need for punishment.

We did not find any direct connection or link between caste discrimination and physical punishment in any of the states though verbal abuse using caste/community identity was observed in several schools. However, there seemed to be a visible link between the attitude towards women and girls and the kind of punishment that was meted out to them. As it was considered taboo to touch a girl after puberty, teachers usually scolded the girls.

A matter of disquiet was that there were at least three schools in AP where sexual harassment was mentioned by the parents. Girls had complained that some male teachers touched them and also abused them, both verbally and physically. Their parents corroborated these statements. In one school, a complaint was registered with the district collector and the teacher was reportedly suspended.

5 Mid-day Meal

It is no surprise that the MDM emerged as the single most important site for inclusion and exclusion. In this study we came across a range of practices:

5.1 Who Eats and Who Does Not?

- In all the states, children from better-off families (regardless of caste/community) did not eat the MDM and went home for lunch.

- In AP, where a majority of the children in government schools were from very poor families, we found that extremely poor children from the Gondi and Lambada tribal communities did not eat the MDM as the food was cooked by a backward caste or forward caste person.

- In Assam, many forward caste children, especially brahmin and OBC children went home during the MDM.

- In Rajasthan, children from the rajput, brahmin, jat, bishnoi and gujjar communities did not eat the MDM. Children from the Meena (ST) community ate only if the cook was from their community.

- In Odisha, adolescent girls did not eat the MDM because of sociocultural taboos that restrict adolescent girls from eating food made outside their homes.

5.2 Who Cooks?

- By and large, cooks from the OBC category cooked the MDM, while the SCs worked as helpers.

- In Odisha, 20% of the sample schools had SC cooks and in the rest, they were either from the OBC (40%) or ST communities (40%). This was a common practice and SC women worked as helpers.

- In Assam too caste identity was observed as an important criterion in the selection of cooks.

- In Rajasthan, most of the cooks belonged to the forward cast, OBC or ST (Meena) communities. Older children from relatively forward community in the village served food.

- The situation was not different in AP. Cooks were from the backward caste (in five of the 20 schools) or from the forward cast (in 15 out of the 20 schools) communities. Although the SC and ST women were appointed as helpers, they were not permitted to touch the food.

- The situation in MP was quite ironical. The state government had taken a decision to allot the MDM work to women self-help groups (SHGs) from the SC community. However, given the caste dynamics in the villages, almost all cooks belonged to the OBC community.

- In Bihar, cooks belonging to the forward cast or backward caste community were found in a majority of the sample schools.

5.3 Who Sits Where?

- In Odisha, children were observed sitting in their own community groups. While teachers did not ask them to sit separately, they did not encourage them to sit together either.

- In Assam, there was no pattern as to where the children sat during the MDM. They were found sitting in small single groups of twos or threes, girls with girls and boys with boys. In one school, teachers said that Hindu and Muslim children sat separately.

- In AP, the children sat in rows segregated by gender, while in some schools they were seen sitting community-wise, sharing food brought from home along with the MDM. Children from the upper caste went home for lunch.

- In Bihar, the MDM was irregular. Children were observed sitting with their friends in caste-specific groups.

- In Rajasthan, children sat in caste groups, with a clear demarcation between boys and girls.

- While the children were found sitting in caste-specific groups, what was noteworthy in MP was that even teachers from different castes sat separately. For example, the SC teachers ate separately. In one school, children from the SC community were not allowed to eat in the plates provided by the school. When a child forgot to bring his/her plate, food was served on a roti.

6 Seating Arrangements and Teaching-Learning Practices

The study found three different seating patterns:

(1) The brightest/more active and engaged students sat in the front rows, with boys and girls in separate rows. In Assam, roll numbers were assigned according to academic performance and children sat according to their roll numbers. Similarly, in AP and Odisha bright students or those who were active and regular sat in front. Other children sat at the back along with students who were irregular. A similar situation was found in Odisha as well.

(2) Children from the forward castes or from better-off families or those who were better dressed sat in the front rows. Children who were poor or were poorly dressed sat at the back. In Rajasthan, children from adivasi and dalit families sat in the back rows and remained passive and silent throughout the class. In one school in AP, one girl Manjula was made to sit separately on the last bench because she did not wear proper clothes (due to her poor economic status she would get little time to bathe regularly as she had to perform household chores). She was ignored by both students and teachers. It was also noticed that students who were absent often and the children with special needs (CWSN) were normally ignored by the teachers. Similarly, in Nuapada and Keonjhar districts in Odisha, poor and poorly dressed children sat at the back and were ignored by the teachers during classroom transactions.

There was no pattern and children sat wherever they found space. This was most common in overcrowded and multigrade classrooms.

In all the six states, boys and girls sat in separate rows or in clearly demarcated spaces. In observations in Classes IV and VII, it was seen that boys and girls did not interact much with each other and sat separately. Teachers also did not encourage any interaction between boys and girls.

6.1 Peer Interaction among Students

In all the states, children seemed to sit and play with their own "kind", as defined by their environment. While caste identity was not so significant in peer interaction in AP, children did not necessarily eat together. Children seemed to draw a line between eating together and playing together.

6.2 Teachers' Perceptions and Practices

Interviews and group discussions with teachers revealed some startling biases:

- AP: Teachers did not voice any caste-based prejudices, however, they said that "some communities" were uneducated, unaware, unclean and were only interested in employment and "they were not bothered about the performance of their children in school".

- Assam: Most of the teachers did not articulate any caste- or community-specific biases. However, almost all of them said that they focused on academically bright children. They also said that girls were not interested in sports and that girls should be trained in household duties. Some non-ST teachers attributed lack of cleanliness to community practices.

- Bihar was not very different from Assam. Teachers did not voice any caste-specific biases and they were very careful in what they said. They were dismissive of children from extremely deprived/poor families and believed that they would not be able to learn.

- MP: Teacher-pupil interaction was mostly formal, related to assignments and tasks. Teachers were also observed favouring children who were "active" and were of the opinion that children who were not "bright" were left behind in class. According to them, since education was not considered a need in their homes it was difficult to motivate the children.

- Odisha: The general perception was that children from SC and ST (and some OBC) communities were "dull and lagged behind in studies". They attributed this to lack of interest among parents. A majority of the teachers exhibited a strong bias against some SC children (especially very poor ones) and called them "unhygienic and dull".

- Rajasthan: The reticence visible in Assam and Bihar was absent in Rajasthan and teachers freely talked about caste/community patterns and stereotypes. All of them said that they paid greater attention to children who were bright and attentive in class. Only in two schools were teachers found to be making efforts to reach out to all students academically. A majority of the teachers said that parents of SC/ST children were often not educated and they eventually pulled their children out of school or did not ensure regular attendance. They were aware of caste hierarchies that played out during the MDM and in accessing water resources.

6.3 Children's Perceptions

This study captured children's perceptions through structured activities with those studying in Classes IV and VII and through discussions with adolescent boys and girls (in separate groups) who had studied in the sample schools:

- AP: In all the schools, children said that girls did the cleaning and boys carried and dumped the collected dirt. Children in schools did not refer to toilet cleaning duties however, they said that sometimes teachers asked girl students to throw water in the toilets. In all the schools, children said that they brought water from home in bottles. However, in one school in Adilabad district, the SC children were not allowed to drink water from the well. Girls led the prayers and the daily pledge that was taken by the children.

- Assam: In almost all the schools, children said that teachers paid attention to bright children. In a few schools, the ST children said that teachers used derogatory language when they referred to tribal children or to those from tea garden areas. Children also said that boys cleaned the playground and girls cleaned the classrooms that girls led the morning assembly and all the children had equal access to the handpump. Overt forms

of exclusion were not an issue with children and they did not have anything to say about those who cooked the MDM or where they sat. They also shared that everyone participated in school functions (national days) and that no child was excluded.

- Bihar: A majority of the children said that the cleaning tasks in schools were mostly assigned to children from deprived communities. Children from the upper castes would generally succeed in excusing themselves from such tasks. Though all children had equal access to drinking water but during rush hour, such as break time and during MDM, children from upper castes and boys got first preference for using the handpump. In case of participation in school functions and the assembly, it was mostly children from the upper castes who got more opportunities, particularly girls, in leading the assembly.

- MP: Children were quite articulate about the tasks assigned to them and they were also aware of the caste that they belonged to. They said that by and large none of them cleaned the toilets or classrooms. If and when the children were required to do the cleaning, teachers would often ask students who were poor or from disadvantaged communities, rather than forward caste girls to do the task. While in most schools all children had access to handpumps/taps, the SC children were not allowed to touch water stored in a bucket or in a tank. However, adolescent girls in one village said that the SC children could not touch the handpump and that forward caste children pumped water for them. Like in several other states, girls who could sing well and were academically good led the morning assembly.

- Odisha: Children were quite clear that only girls did the cleaning, with older girls also cleaning the veranda, while the cook and helper cleaned the open space used for the MDM. Toilet cleaning was not a regular activity. However, when they had to clean the toilets, boys poured the water and girls swept them with a broom. In one school, SC boys and girls said that they were not allowed to touch the handpump. During puja (*Saraswati puja* and *Ganesh puja*), boys took the lead.

- Rajasthan: Children were quite articulate about the tasks assigned to them. In almost all the schools, they said that sweeping was invariably done by girls from the SC or ST communities. While most children used the handpump, there was an order in which children could access it, boys from forward castes used it first while girls from the backward caste/community and CWSN used it last. Most children washed the mouth of the handpump before they drank water. However, when water was stored in clay pots, the SC and ST children were not allowed to touch it. Older girls (from senior classes) led the morning assembly and teachers picked girls who could sing well.

7 What the Parents Had to Say

Discussions with parents from the most deprived/poor communities in the villages were illuminating. Like other studies have shown (NUEPA, A K Singh VEC Study 2011) parents were by and large unaware of what happened inside a school, in particular about the tasks that were assigned to students by teachers. In Rajasthan they were not aware that cleaning duties were assigned to children, while in Assam they were aware

that girls swept the classrooms and boys cleared the playground. In MP, parents had almost nothing to say about what their children did in school. They believed that barring a few forward-caste children, others ate their MDM and used the handpump and water source without discrimination. Awareness levels were also very low in Odisha and discussions with parents on what children did in school did not yield much except that children did not use toilets in schools and that those from better-off families were given priority in school activities like the morning assembly and special functions. Parents in Rajasthan had more information about cleaning duties being assigned to girls, but did not have much to say about it. They believed that forward caste children would naturally get more attention from the teachers. In AP, they were largely ignorant of what was happening in the schools. The parents were not aware of issues like sexual abuse of girl students and seemed to be unaware of such incidents reported in the media.

7.1 Inclusion and Positive Practices

The study also tried to understand and identify inclusive and positive practices in schools and classrooms. There were a few inclusive practices that were observed by field investigators across all states. For example, in some schools, head teachers were committed to certain issues or teachers taking the initiative in promoting inclusion of students regardless of caste, gender or physical disabilities.

Some positive practices in the states include:

7.2 Mid-day Meal

In AP, out of 20 schools visited, only one school set an example of inclusive practices in terms of access to food and water for all children. During the MDM, all children were observed eating together and no one was seen skipping a meal or sitting in segregated caste groups. Teachers also monitored the MDM to ensure that good food was served and that the quality was maintained. Similarly, during classroom transactions it was observed that teachers paid attention to all the students. Further, during school activities, equal participation of children was ensured through rotation and students shared responsibilities during the morning assembly, special days/events and school functions. Similarly, in Odisha, 30% schools had MDM managed by women SHGs who ensured that the quality of food was good and proper hygiene was maintained, thereby leading to greater participation of children in the MDM.

7.3 SMC and the Community

Cooperation and communication between the local community, the teachers and the SMC was another factor that led to promoting inclusion in schools. For example, in Assam it led to better infrastructure and classroom transactions and 100% participation during the MDM, irrespective of caste and religious backgrounds. In this context, the role played by the SMCs was quite crucial. In Odisha, it was found that the SMCs played an active role in appointing voluntary teachers to address teacher shortages, which led to better classroom transactions.

7.4 Good Infrastructure

Even though improving infrastructure facilities in schools has been a major focus of the SSA, a majority of the sample schools did not have adequate infrastructure. However, some schools had adequate and good facilities. In MP, good infrastructure facilities were seen in some schools. These schools also opened on time, the teachers were supportive of students' need and active classroom transaction was observed.

8 Prominent State-Level Initiatives

The Bihar government's initiatives like the *tola sewak* (a volunteer in a village or habitation who takes the responsibility of getting children to school and interacting with them in school) and *hunar* programmes have gone a long way in promoting inclusiveness and cohesiveness in schools. Tola sewaks have been appointed at the school level and their prime responsibility is providing support to students, and more importantly, bringing them to school. Their second major responsibility is ensuring that no discrimination takes place in the smooth participation of children in school activities.

Hunar is a programme for empowerment of minority Muslim girls. It was launched by the state government in collaboration with the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). Field investigators interacted with girls who have benefited from it and found them to be confident in their outlook and behaviour.

9 Children with Special Needs

It is important to note that in all the schools visited there were either very few or no CWSN. This raised a serious question: Were these children actually being included in schools or not? Under inclusive education, the SSA framework clearly mandates that the programme will ensure that every child with special needs, irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided education in an appropriate environment and that SSA will adopt zero rejection policy so that no child is left out of the education system (GOI, SSA website).³ In all the six states, factors such as availability of CWSN friendly infrastructure and a positive and supportive attitude of the teachers and students towards CWSN did not seem to reflect this mandate. Even though ramps have been provided in some schools and there was also a CWSN friendly toilet in one school in Andhra Pradesh, their usability still remains a big concern. However, there is a silver lining as in the case of one school in AP where teachers and the headmaster were observed taking an active interest in school activities and being supportive of the needs of the CWSN and children from deprived social groups.

10 Can We End All Forms of Exclusion/Discrimination?

As the research teams travelled across the sample states one question kept cropping up: "When and how will the situation change?" There are no easy answers and given our track record of the last 65 years, some prejudices have only become more palpable. Issues such as caste, religion, and economic status, place of residence and knowledge of English have become

significant markers in our social and political life. Many older teachers admitted that the feeling of national unity and of being one is fading. Many of them attributed this to the way our electoral system has evolved whereby mobilisation of political support is done on the basis of social, religious, caste and cultural identities.

However, despite the fact that the larger sociopolitical environment is becoming more stratified and divisive, there are islands of hope across this vast and diverse country.

Taking the Constitution as the guiding spirit, teachers, administrators and community leaders need to be told that any violation of the right to equality and the right against discrimination will invite strict penal action. A non-negotiable code of behaviour needs to be communicated to all those who are involved in school education. This needs to be done in writing and prominently displayed in all schools and educational institutions. Simultaneously, children need to be involved in activities that enable them to understand and appreciate diversity, respect differences and formulate school level norms of behaviour. Involving children in creating an egalitarian atmosphere could bring moral pressure on teachers, administrators and local leaders to not differentiate or discriminate.

Teacher orientation and training is often limited to administrative requirements and subject knowledge. There is also growing evidence of training fatigue among teachers. Equally, short duration training programmes are not able to do justice to supporting basic subject knowledge and pedagogy issues. Creating alternative forums/platforms where teachers and community leaders can come together to communicate the need to ensure that schools are free of discrimination may well be a worthwhile exercise.

Essentially, what is required is that we start looking seriously at inclusion-exclusion in schools and work at all levels to bring about lasting change on the ground. There are no shortcuts and government and civil society organisations need to take this issue seriously and address it in every context.

NOTES

- 1 Notably articles published over the years by P Sainath in *The Hindu*, reports and articles by Navsarjan Trust (Gujarat), Dalit Solidarity Network, working papers of the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies and writings by Geetha Nambissan.
- 2 The Andhra Pradesh Social Welfare Residential Institutions Society was created in 1987 and runs 289 residential schools for SCs.
- 3 Source: http://ssa.nic.in/page_portletlinks?foldername=inclusive-education

Web Exclusives

EPW has introduced a new section, "Web Exclusives" on its new and improved website (<http://www.epw.in>).

This section will feature articles written exclusively for the web edition and will normally not appear in the print edition. All visitors to the website can read these short articles written mainly on current affairs.

Readers of the print edition are encouraged to visit the EPW website and read these web exclusives which will see new articles every week.