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‘Ours Is a Semi-English-Medium School’

Schooling Aspirations and a Neighbourhood School in Varanasi

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> English is in India today a symbol of people’s aspirations for quality in education and fuller participation in national and international life. Its colonial origins now forgotten or irrelevant … the current status of English stems from its overwhelming presence on the world stage and the reflection of this in the national arena.
>
> —National Curriculum Framework (2005)

Much of the discussion on the urban experience in India has been centred on life as experienced in metropolitan cities. Whether we examine the process of production and distribution of the urban space or the emergence of the consumption cultures that have come to characterise urban life, the bulk of the literature explores these themes in terms of ‘megacities’.[1] Despite academic attention towards reworked urban social geographies in studies of gentrification of cities, eviction of slum dwellers and the segmented residential patterns, there are few studies that examine unequal claims over the right to the city along lines of class, caste, gender and ethnicity in non-metropolitan urban settings.

I argue that the discussions on unequal claims to city life can gain from the insight that the unequal positioning of the metropolitan centres and the provincial towns, in material as well as symbolic terms, affects the experiences of city dwellers everywhere. Metropolitan cities are not just centres of employment opportunity but are also to be viewed as centres producing the normative ideal of middle-class practice. With a turn towards neoliberal public policies, a dominant narrative has emerged about the middle-class city dweller as primarily a consumer citizen, whose

identity and politics are based on their consumption practice.[2] Command over English has been one of the key aspects of middle-class identity which assumed a completely new form after the 1990s. A certain kind of English has become a prerequisite of entry into the 'new service industry', but access to the latter is severely restricted by one's social position. For school education, the imagery of the urban middle-class consumer dovetails with the idea of a quality-conscious parent opting for education offered by the private school and serves as a model of social mobility for the rest. The path to social mobility, however, is different for people located differentially in the urban space. A homogenous category of the urban poor is often constructed in contrast to the middle class, with little regard for the dynamics of varied classes and class fractions within them.

I set out to capture the nuances of class and status dynamics concerning schooling by focusing on historic shifts in the private school markets in the city of Varanasi and on how people from the lower classes reconstitute their relation vis-à-vis schooling. Increased investments in schooling are being made in families, which had little stake in formal education in previous generations. They are investing more in private schools for new cultural resources, at a time when their hopes for social mobility are thwarted within the older systems of work. A closer examination of the school of their choice, however, suggests how the realisation of such hopes remains difficult. In this process, I focus on the spatial aspect of the relationship between the school and the families who have been at the receiving end of the liberalisation policy and yet whose lives have been conspicuously omitted from the public discourse on education.

Unequal Access to Educational Resources in Urban India

In Indian cities, an examination of the distribution of educational opportunities along class-differentiated lines and the effect of the changing educational economies on urban space have only recently begun. It has become part of a commonsense understanding that the government schools, particularly the ones managed by the municipal corporations, are meant only for the poor, while high-fee-charging private schools cater to the needs of the urban middle class.

The category of 'urban poor' in many studies is often deployed with little analysis of the class, community and gendered intersections, which mark their lives and mediate their relationship vis-à-vis schools. This vagueness is a product of a public discourse that obscures the political–economic context of school education and foregrounds a market-based understanding of educational services in the urban context. Much of the literature on parental choice of school is based

on such a vision of an abstract individual consumer who makes an informed rational choice on the school market. The imagery of the market in the field of education is problematic for many reasons. It necessarily constructs education as a commodity that can be consumed privately and decontextualises the parents from their real social settings, viewing them as mere consumers. In a different context, Richard Bowe, Sharon Gewirtz and Stephen J. Ball (1994) have argued that rather than talking about an abstract individual unit of a consumer parent who is believed to be making the choice of a particular type of school over the others, we need to engage in a more context-specific understanding of the *social landscape* within which these actors articulate some actions as a choice. Padma Sarangapani and Christopher Winch, in their critique of a decontextualised understanding of the phenomenon of the expansion of private schools in Hyderabad, argue for an understanding of the regional, religious and linguistic factors that constitute an urban context. For example, it was pointed out that the use of a flat category of 'urban poor' for the slum dwellers of Hyderabad hides the differentiated linguistic practice of communities, which might be reflected in their aspiration for low-cost private schools that are run in the English medium (Sarangapani and Winch 2010).

The review of the existing literature in the domain suggests that the category of 'urban poor' located in the non-metropolitan centres is not just poorly researched and understood, but that the people this category seeks to describe are often omitted from the public discourse on city life.[3] There is an urgent need to begin unpacking the term for a more grounded understanding of the changing landscape of school education in India for the majority of its urban population. For this purpose, a renewed emphasis on the question of political economy in the urban space in the non-metropolitan centres is necessary, which is characterised by the informal sector. According to recent estimates, around 80 per cent of all workers in urban India are informally employed, making it the dominant rather than the exceptional sector (Chen and Raveendran 2012).

John Harris (2006) prefers the term 'informal working class' over 'urban poor' to better understand class politics in an urban space where the informal sector of employment plays a very important role. He also defines it in relation to the middle class to emphasise the differences in terms of material as well as symbolic capital. While 'middle class' includes people 'disposing of cultural capital' – which may consist of both identities and competencies – and those who have some property and well-paid employment, the *informal working class* refers to a category of people who are subaltern, who do not dispose of significant cultural capital and who also lack the advantage of protection through state regulation of their terms of employment or occupation. He adds that in the Indian context,

these tend to come from lower caste groups (Harris 2006: 445). The competencies that become markers of differential location include educational and linguistic skills and, more particularly, a facility for English.

Leela Fernandes explores the consumer-based identity of the new middle class of India in the post-1990s phase of liberalisation of the economy through the idea of 'middle-class practices'. She invokes the idea of 'class in practice' to understand class politics or the actions through which the middle class tries to retain its position of privilege. It is through these practices that those who are excluded from the 'middle class proper' in terms of objective positions try to build up their own identity. She argues that among the petty bourgeoisie, since their property is rarely sufficient to provide material support for the next generation, class practices often mimic those of the middle class proper (Fernandes and Heller 2006).

However, the approach might end up identifying the phenomenon of the spread of private schools as another trend of the blind following of the middle-class hegemonic practice by the lower classes. A clearer understanding of the spatial dimension of the unequal distribution of educational opportunities, however, cannot rely on a simplistic understanding of class without examining how it intersects with identities of religion, sex and language in a particular historical context. It also calls for a nuanced understanding of hegemonic practices, which become normalised to an extent that they need 'following' by everyone – namely, the preference for English-medium private schools among the lower classes. In the absence of the necessary cultural and social capital, resources like English that are valued in the new service sector can only be acquired by the lower classes through English-medium schools.

It is widely believed that social mobility can be attained through schooling in English. However, such beliefs do not necessarily materialise in reality. For Usree Bhattacharya, English language preference is rooted in an ideology that constructs English language education as the surest means of attaining social mobility. She argues that a view of 'homogeneity' and 'uniformity' is constructed around English education in India, while the actual schools are much more varied in terms of quality and resources (Bhattacharya 2013). It is important to note that the majority of studies on language ideologies and their interrelation with schooling choices for the urban population have been conducted in metropolitan centres. These centres are far more integrated with national and global service industries and have emerged as centres of production of normative ideals as well. Chaise LaDousa's account of the discourses on notions of schooling and language divide is particularly telling in this respect. The author argues that the educational market of the north Indian city of Varanasi is disparate and serves different ideals for different categories of parents. In the discourse of Hindi nationalism, Hindi

is associated with the nation; however, it is English that is perceived as capable of ensuring spatial and social mobility within the nation. From the perspective of the upper middle classes, none of the English-medium schools can really claim to impart training in a form of English which can fetch a job in the employment market at the national and global levels (LaDousa 2014).

These insights introduce a new dimension to the class-based differentiation of educational opportunities based on access to valued symbolic resources like English. Access to a certain kind of English which is valued in the new service industry is unequally distributed within and between the metropolitan and provincial urban centres. An appreciation of the close links between the cultural ideals of 'service sector jobs' and 'English of a certain kind' with the construct of the 'middle-class identity' can lead to a better grasp of the expansion of low-cost private schools in non-metropolitan cities. The low-cost private schools invariably serve the underprivileged urban populations with a promise of a better quality of education than that of the government schools. The promise of quality is dependent on an ideal of English which remains a common component of educational aspiration across different segments of occupational groups.

A huge challenge in this respect remains in mapping out the highly differentiated segments of private schools which cater to the differentially located urban dwellers in terms of class, community history and spatial locations. But, more importantly, such mappings need to be complemented with a clearer understanding of the changing sociopolitical context of city life as well as the processes through which the lower classes approach the schools in the urban space. One such attempt at exploring the relationship of a school with its location in the city of Varanasi will be attempted in the later parts of this chapter. Initially, however, I will first map the historic trajectory of private schools in the city of Varanasi and their response to the threats posed by the colonial school system in the form of the Hindi movement in the late nineteenth century and 'Banish English' movement in the late twentieth century. These developments configure the private school markets in contemporary Varanasi in a particular way.

Education and the Urban Landscape in Varanasi

Varanasi has been one of the major centres of trade and commerce in the eastern Gangetic belt since the precolonial period, situated as it was on the trade route that linked Bengal with Maharashtra. The urban centres in northern India in the eighteenth century, as Chris Bayly has argued in his seminal work, relied on a form of associational civic life that had developed in the eighteenth century through corporations (Bayly 1983: 4).[4] The common feature of such urban centres was

that they were nodal points for trade and commerce, and they sustained and patronised certain forms of literary, educational, religious and leisure activities (Bayly 1983; Freitag 1992). The powerful groups which sustained a particular form of urban life in the city of Varanasi included the landowning Bhumihar caste group which acquired dynastic status; the mendicant trader-soldiers, or the Gosains; and the merchant bankers, organised and operating through joint-family networks. These three groups patronised and promoted a Hindu merchant-style culture which was reflected in the city's celebration of events, organisation of commercial activities and leisure activities.[5] They also patronised educational institutions in the city which contributed to the reputation of the city as an important centre of education in the Gangetic belt.

Varanasi emerged as an important centre of learning. Though it was known for Sanskrit and Buddhist learning, it had numerous schools which catered to the needs of the urban population along community-specific lines of learning. Nita Kumar in her account of the history of education in Varanasi has captured the heterogeneous nature of the educational system in the precolonial period with varied systems of schooling among competing groups (N. Kumar 2000). In her account of precolonial Varanasi, there were Sanskrit schools, meant for the Brahmans; *mahajani pathshala*s for the merchant caste Hindus; Koran schools, or *maktab*s, for the lower-class Muslim weavers; and Persian schools for the upper classes of high-caste Hindus and Muslims. Each of these learning systems helped maintain and reproduce the existing class-, caste- and gender-based hierarchical social order and transmitted the cultural values necessary for such reproduction. For example, Persian schools were more 'career-oriented' and emphasised literary knowledge of the Persian language necessary for the official work among the better-off population of Hindus and Muslims, in contrast to the schools attended by lower-class sections of Hindus and Muslims alike (N. Kumar 2000: 121–123). She argues that the system of formal education thrived because of the patronage of the power-wielding groups at the local level. The city's position as a centre of commerce and education via indigenous traditions of learning therefore makes it an interesting site to study the shifts in educational systems as well as the native responses to the colonial interventions in the field of education.

In the late nineteenth century, the close relationship between communities and schools was disrupted when the colonial model of schooling emerged as the dominant one. This period saw a proliferation of 'new' private schools, maintained by community leaders from Hindu merchant banker families and social reformers. As per Kumar's account, these would provide 'modern' education without compromising on the community-specific values of education. For example, in the arena of girls' schooling, community-defined notions of suitable

education for girls were incorporated into the school curricula by introducing components of household skills or domestic education. Such schools were set up all over India and played a role in giving a form to the political and cultural resistance to colonial education. This was most acutely expressed in the language used in education and administration, which construed colonial education as the major site of contestation.

Historically, the upper-caste Hindus, comprising the merchant castes, the Pandits or Brahmans, and the Bhumihars, occupied strategic positions in the political economy of Varanasi. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of these groups supported and participated in the mobilisation around the recognition of Hindi in Devanagari script as an official language of the United Provinces in addition to Urdu (King 1989). The active participation of the 'vernacular elite' in the Hindi movement made the city of Varanasi the epicentre of linguistic nationalism in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, which eventually culminated in elevating the status of Sanskritised Hindi to a national symbol in independent India. The role of institutions like the Nagari Pracharini Sabha and literary and cultural icons like Bharatendu Harishchandra from the city, who pioneered the attempt at developing a form of Hindi for the national role, have been extensively studied in this respect (Dalmia 1997; K. Kumar 1990). In this mobilisation, popular regional varieties like Brajbhasha, Bhojpuri or Awadhi were subsumed within Hindi and were relegated to the status of 'dialects' of Hindi, which led to the polarisation between the elite and popular languages (Bhokta 1998; Rai 2001). In the post-independence period, Varanasi witnessed another language movement – this time in defence of Hindi and against the continuation of 'imperial' English in the form of the Angrezi Hatao movement in the 1960s. The resistance to the hegemony of English was relatively short-lived and could not sustain itself in the long run. Meanwhile, the informal popular languages like Varanasi *boli* and Bhojpuri continued to flourish outside the official domains in the everyday life of the city, in its neighbourhoods in the older parts of the city and in the popular culture industry.

Simon Beth's work on the diglossic situation in the city testifies to the co-presence of the two language varieties: one representing the standard Hindi and the other Varanasi *boli* or the variety of Bhojpuri specific to the city (Simon 1998). In contrast, with the formal service sector that functioned in and through standardised Hindi, the informal sector of work which relied on a complex and intricate network of relationships within and between clan and community members continued to operate in the city-specific variety of Varanasi *boli*. However, the educational implications of the complex political underpinnings of language use in urban life have not received due attention.

LaDousa's work on the varied meanings of the term 'mother tongue' has demonstrated how in the school context people demarcate between Bhojpuri and Varanasi *boli* on one hand as *gaon ki bhasha* (the language of the village) and Hindi on the other as *rashtra ki bhasha* (language pertaining to the nation) while admitting that both can be considered as a mother tongue (LaDousa 2014). However, popular varieties like Bhojpuri and Varanasi *boli* are excluded from the formal sphere of learning in school, despite their popular appeal (Goswami 2017).

Residential Segregation and Private Schools

Residential segregation along community and caste lines is a distinctive feature of the old city space in Varanasi. Nandini Gooptu, in her study of the 'urban poor' in the nineteenth-century towns of north India notes how the city administration, through town planning programmes, targeted the urban poor, strived to create separate areas of habitation for them and ghettoised them in certain pockets of the city. Among other things, such spatial arrangements were meant to protect the relatively wealthy from the threats posed by the 'unsocial' elements represented by the poor in the city (Gooptu 1997). The town planning mechanisms, rather than addressing the problem, ended up ghettoising the poor, and the resultant physical mapping of the city also reflected the social and class differences. The areas marked for settlement of the poor had lower access to civic amenities.

Though the town planning of the city has gone through many changes, different communities in the older parts of the city continue to live segregated life. The development plan of the city submitted in 2015 refers to three distinct areas in the city: the old city, the central city and the peripheral areas. The report also identifies the old city and the central city as areas where the manufacturing and retail areas for traditional crafts are based (Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission [JNNURM] 2006).

The areas marked for handloom weaving and embroidery work like Kacchibagh and Koylabazar are identified as slums in the same report. The industrial cluster of silk weaving in Varanasi is an industry, which can be called informal in its organisational structure[6] and in manufacturing, employs the largest number of employees (JNNURM 2006). Apart from the weavers, these areas are inhabited by small-scale traders, petty businessmen and wage workers from Muslim and low-caste Hindu groups. The residential and commercial areas tend to overlap in the labyrinth of narrow lanes which connect the inner residential pockets to civic amenities like hospitals, schools and main market areas. A distinctive aspect of life, particularly of master weavers and small-scale manufacturers and traders, is that their residential settlement is earmarked in one of the three weavers' clusters.

These are separate from the main market area at Chauk, where mostly rich Hindu traders live and engage in the retail trade for finished products (Figure 8.1).[7]

Both areas are densely populated and connected through narrow lanes, but these areas vary in terms of status and prestige. In local parlance, the wealthier areas of the old city are termed *pakka mahal*. It refers to the neighbourhood of *pakka* construction, denoting membership to the most central part of the old city. The settlements like Alaipura, Lallapura and Reveritalab are on the outskirts of the main part of the old city where weavers' pockets are located. Even though there has been a steady expansion of schools in the city and, as in many other

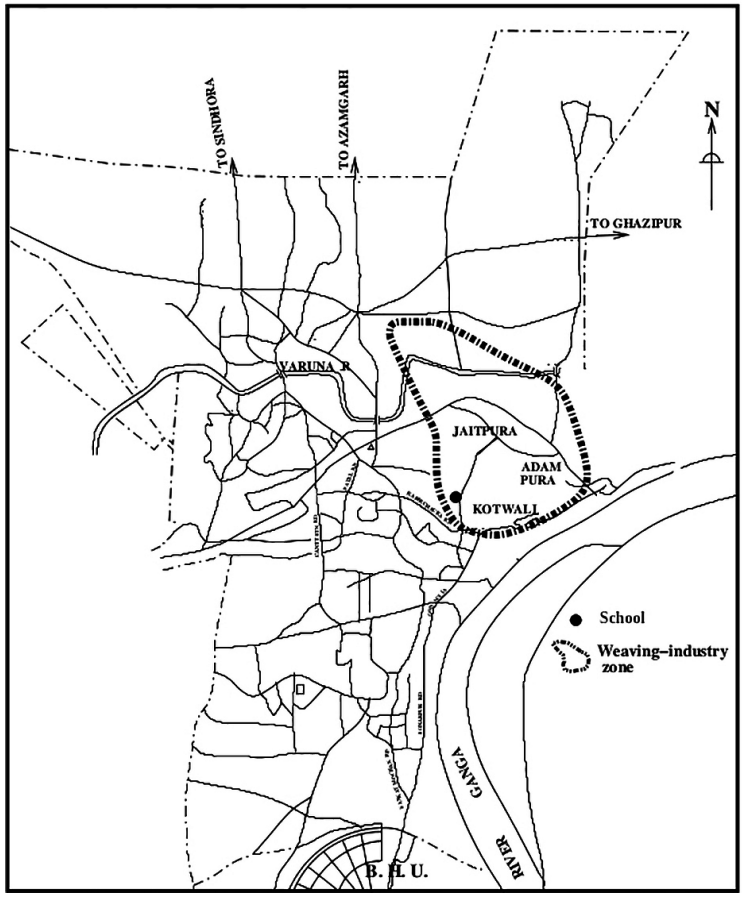

Figure 8.1 City map of Varanasi depicting the school and the weavers' community
Source: Prepared by Vivek Mehta.

places, the share of private schools in the enrolment of students is increasing vis-à-vis the public schools, not all of these become available to the residents of these settlements.[8] Given the history of town planning and the high density of population in the older pockets of the city, the distribution of the private schools in the city has a particular pattern and rank hierarchy out of which only those private schools that are at proximate locations are accessible to people settled in these neighbourhoods.

In the following sections, I examine the case of a private school in its relationship with the families located in the nearby residential settlement. The case of this particular school is useful in illuminating how the lower classes are negotiating their location in a particular spatial setting and working their way towards attaining higher social prestige.

Semi-English-Medium School in the *Mohulla*[9]

In the past two decades, most of the high-fee charging English-medium private schools catering to the upper classes in the city were set up in the urban fringes because of the scarcity of land in the central areas of the city. Such schools are accessible to the wealthier city residents only through private bus service. Most of the existing and older private schools in the central areas of the city have now been reduced to a secondary status in terms of social prestige among lower- and middle-income groups (N. Kumar 1998). In a more recent account of the schools and their distribution in the city, the upwardly mobile middle class of the city lament the lack of quality schooling in the city as far as training in a global/national kind of English is concerned.

The school that is examined is located in a busy commercial lane that connects the weavers' settlements to the main market area in the city. It caters to a smaller catchment area where students come from a distance of 1–2 kilometres. In contrast, the bigger schools located on the outskirts of the city draw students from higher-income groups irrespective of their location. Nevertheless, this school has a dubious status of being a 'standard' school located in a *mohulla*.[10] The school is owned and managed by a wealthy family of Shia Muslim descent from Allahabad (now Prayagraj). It was seen as a relatively higher-status school than other schools in the vicinity. While the other schools were either free or charged lower fees, this school charged a relatively high fee.

The school staff also talked about their school as mainly catering to the students from 'business-class' families. There was another aspect that distinguished it from other schools. One of the senior teachers and the person in charge of the primary section claimed that the school is perceived as a 'semi-English-medium' school

by the residents because of the relatively high status that it enjoys among other schools in the same locality.

The school, through advertisements and annual function, sought to project an image of being a pro-English school, that is, a school that gave due emphasis on learning English. During the annual day celebration of the school in January 2007, achievements of the school in this direction were presented by the principal before an audience consisting of parents, children and other invited guests from the city. Highlights of students' success in the high school–leaving certificate examinations were presented along with the commitment to the promotion of market-friendly skills. One key skill in this arena was identified as mastery of English, and the school administration claimed to be working actively towards the same. The other themes like claims of a 'child-friendly learning atmosphere', 'emphasis on extracurricular activities' and 'personality development classes' emerged as secondary but related to the primary theme of the school's academic success. And, finally, the effort that the school administration was making towards turning the school into a completely English-medium school in near future was highlighted. While the primary section already made the transition, the older batches were being taught subjects like mathematics, science and basic computer science in a bilingual mode in the Hindi-medium school.

However, the stark mismatch between the stated goals and the resources that the school possessed towards the realisation of the same was visible in its everyday functioning. The administrative staff often complained that the parents do not tolerate even a small fee hike and threaten to withdraw their children from the school. This limitation affected all aspects of school operations. For example, the school did not have a functional library or laboratory for its students, nor could it hire trained teachers. Teachers were paid low salaries; and, as a result, most teachers stayed for a very short period. Most of the male teachers in the school were constantly looking for recruitment and openings for jobs in the government sector. Because of their low income, the teachers invariably relied on additional sources of income from coaching and private tuition in the after-school hours.

The English teacher at the school was a young man from a nearby village and was given the responsibility of all the classes at the secondary and senior levels. He was staying in a rented room in the city and spent most of his after-school hours on private tuition. He spoke at length about the problems of teaching English to students who always speak in Bhojpuri and Varanasi at home and, at times, even in school when the teacher is not around.

The spatial embeddedness of the school in a narrow lane and its inability to draw students from distant places have weighed on its financial resources and put severe restrictions on its claims and aspirations of achieving a higher status

concerning the more expensive private schools which cater to the more upwardly mobile sections of the middle class in the city. The families of students live in residential lanes not very far from the school and have recently started sending their children to modern schools. Their relationship with this school is examined in the next section by closely following the intergenerational educational mobility in families representing the lower middle class and/or the informal working class.

Here, my analysis is structured around 14 families following two kinds of occupations. First, nine self-employed families worked as small-scale traders and the rest are engaged in the private service sector without the benefits of permanent wage work. Among the self-employed, six are engaged in the saree industry and three have made transitions as retailers or as traders and sellers of garments. In terms of community, six are Muslims from Ansari community and three are from Jaiswal caste Hindu group. All of them have been settled in the city for several generations. In all these families, the men who look after the family business are supported by elder sons, while women stay at home and provide care work for their children and other family members. Their position demonstrates socio-economic vulnerability despite property ownership. This can be attributed to the shifts in the handloom weaving sector in the post-independence period in which periods of the upward rise were followed by stagnation and downward growth. In the 1960s, there was a gradual upward socio-economic mobility among some of the Muslim weavers. In more recent years, there was a shift towards power loom–based operation. Because of the lifting of restrictions on imports of raw silk as well as finished silk goods, the weaving industry started facing stiff competition from the manufacturing centres in Surat as well as from China. These developments have hit the weavers the hardest but have also affected the prospects of small-scale traders and master weavers. The availability of readymade garments at a cheaper cost has lowered the demand for locally produced manufactured goods.

Among the service category, five families migrated from the rural areas of eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar. Three of them are working as employees in retail shops in the city, one is working as an insurance agent and another is working in a private firm. These are employed in the service sector but lack the necessary social security or the cultural resources characteristic of middle-class groups. They are living in rented rooms and do not own any property in the city. They maintain their social ties with the villages during their holidays. None of these families showed any of the characteristic features of the 'middle-class category' outlined in the earlier sections of the chapter. The men working in the service sector are better educated than the traders as all of them have had tertiary education. However, the difference becomes negligible in the case of mothers as almost all the mothers were educated only up to the high school level.

Both because of the differences in their employment profiles and because of the nature of work in the informal sectors in Varanasi, it is difficult to classify these families under distinct categories of the lower middle class and/or the informal working class, and boundaries tended to overlap in terms of their distance from significant cultural resources valued in school. They use the Bhojpuri or Varanasi *boli* at home and among family members. The Ansaris claimed to have their own style of Varanasi. During interviews, everyone used their styles of Hindi. Given the gendered division of space and work in these families, I mostly interacted with the women of the families, mothers and older sisters, which enabled insights into the work of mothering concerning school education.

Educational Experience and Aspirations of Mobility

The life of people in the saree industry is sustained by a complex web of familial and inter-community relationships among retail traders, suppliers, master weavers and weavers. These families live in the narrow lanes of Alaipura, Jaitpura and Kacchibagh. These locations are known as the weavers' settlements; however, many of these families are running power looms and hiring workers. Their houses are multi-storied where the weaving work is carried out on the ground floor and upper floors are used for residence. They live in shared family settings with or without a shared kitchen. Among the Ansaris, the married women of the family have had very little exposure to formal schools; most of them have been to a school or a madrasa only for the elementary years.[11] They started investing in modern forms of schools for the children after the shift from manual to power loom weaving. Most of the older men and women were exposed to madrasa education, unlike the younger generation. The younger siblings are moving to private secular schools in the vicinity and their families seemed open about sending their younger sons into higher education, a luxury that is not given to the eldest son and daughters.

These transitions, however sluggish they might seem, are not without their tensions. For example, having made the transition to school education, these families continued to arrange for private instructions in the reading of Koran along with school subjects like science, maths and English (Goswami 2011). The families would not send their children to English-medium schools in distant locations nor allow their daughters to continue in a co-educational school beyond the upper primary levels. A daughter's education might have become affordable for some but has to be pursued following gendered norms of control and security.

However, not all 'business families' associated with the school have a similar experience with school education. There are other families of caste-Hindu traders,

predominantly from Jaiswal and Yadav castes, who are going through a phase of transition from the traditional joint-family business to newer business ventures, which are less dependent on kin networks, such as traders of machine-embroidered cloth and shop owners. In these families, future aspirations for social mobility are more closely tied up with investments in the formal education of their sons, as compared to the Ansari families. The younger siblings in the families were admitted to an English-medium school, while the older ones attended the school discussed previously. The eldest daughters in all the families attended a Hindi-medium, all-girls school. Like the Ansaris, these families appeared to be more invested in gendered school choice for their children; but unlike them, they considered investing more in boys' schooling, exploring good schools for their children even outside the *mohulla*. In terms of linguistic practices, these families are making a clearer shift from the exclusive use of Bhojpuri Varanasi towards using Hindi at home which has important implications for their school life as discussed earlier.

The families in the service sector present a very different home environment. These families living in smaller rented houses, bereft of capital and connections in the city, had higher stakes in school education for creating opportunities in life. As they are migrants from rural areas of eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, their native language was used only by the parental generation and not by the children who made a clearer switch to the standard Hindi.

All these families, differentially placed in occupational terms, are invested in the schooling of their young generations as is evident in their association with a private school. However, making sense of their investment in school education requires a careful analysis of the socio-spatial dimension of their relationship with the school at hand, which is seen as 'the standard school of the *mohulla*'.[12] The school comes with higher costs in terms of fees and other associated expenditures in comparison with a madrasa or a government school, preferred in the earlier generations by the Ansaris and the caste-Hindu groups. It organises annual festivals, exhibitions, excursions and picnic trips, all of which entail expenditure for families. Most families also invest in private tutors of some kind. Though it adds to their family expenditure, it is located closer to home for most of them.

The distance from school is a significant factor in many studies focusing on school choice for the poor. Distance has cultural as well as physical properties if we account for the different meanings people ascribe to places in urban contexts. People's association with the urban space and how they make sense of their place of living has implications for studies exploring the parental choice of schools (Bell 2007). The physical aspect of distance is closely associated with the costs of commuting to school and the inconvenience of aligning the working hours

of parents with school time. Apart from being costly, the distant schools are situated in a completely unfamiliar sociocultural milieu, which might offer better training for the children but seems out of reach to most of these families. This is most clearly articulated in parental accounts of the importance of English in determining the prospects of their children. While almost everyone seemed to believe that English is essential for future employment in the service sector as well as in the expansion of business networks, and arranged for private tuition in English at home, they did not take the step of sending their children to a distant English-medium school. They felt that a complete shift to an English-only school would be difficult to achieve in terms of both costs and the possibility of failure in such schools.

For the families of the traders, the cultural barrier of approaching a distant English-medium school discouraged them. For them, even the current school represented a culture that intimidated parents who did not have much access to higher education. Their attendance at the parent–teacher meetings was significantly lower than their actual proportion. They felt more hesitant to approach the school on their own and participated minimally on such occasions. Similarly, the teachers' conceptions of students from such families were marked in less favourable terms; they often saw these students as lacking in terms of a 'culture of education'. The construct was drawn based on middle-class notions of 'culture' which contrasted with an educational, occupational and linguistic background of students coming from families employed in saree trade.

Among the service sector families, concerns were articulated in different terms. The mother of Ayush, whose husband is working as an accountant in a shop, preferred English-medium education for her son's future, but she fears that he might not be able to cope with a sudden change. Though she expressed satisfaction with the academic quality of the present school, she felt that there must be enough 'practice' of English at school. For such families therefore, the school presented an optimal choice that was proximate and approachable because it promised possibilities of learning English without the threat of intimidation and failure. It still called for a lot of investment in terms of money and energy on the part of these families to make this transition to a private school in this generation.

In the next section, we look at some of the ways through which mothers from these families were invested in making their children compatible with school culture. I have focused on their controlling and disciplinary tactics employed in sanctioning or encouraging specific uses of language. As I have already highlighted in the previous sections, the language variety used in these families

is different from the ones preferred in schools. Elsewhere, I have discussed the pedagogic implications of these differences in school life (Goswami 2017). Here, I will focus on the parenting strategies adopted by mothers in promoting a more respectable form of language in their children by disciplining the use of *mohulla*-specific ways of speaking.

'Standard' Speech as an Educational Resource

That the use of 'official' and 'standard' language varieties accrues specific benefits in the educational domain and has been examined extensively. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, scrutinises the notion of 'official language', often seen as the standard language, as a 'normalised' product. In his view, educational institutions, grammarians and teachers act as agents of legitimisation of such languages and underline the importance of family and school in transmitting linguistic competence with implications for their returns in linguistic and other markets (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991).

At the family level, we can discern a variety of educational strategies employed to achieve this end of learning better languages. As discussed earlier, these families used a non-standard Hindi variety in the intimate sphere of their family life, among friends, with relatives and in the neighbourhood. However, all of them made efforts, often initiated by the mothers who are 'conscious' about their children's education, towards refinement of the speech of their children. The role of mothers has been carefully examined in the literature on the class and race-differentiated parenting strategies which have come to mark the home–school relationship in much of the industrialised West. Deane Reay highlights the skilful use of linguistic capital by middle-class mothers to the advantage of their children in a school context (Reay 1999). However, the literature on mothering practice as contributing to the social reproduction of class-based advantage is often criticised for sidestepping the question of the agency of working-class mothers.

In this setting, most women from the lower middle class and the informal working-class groups are actively involved in their children's educational future while being acutely aware of the socio-spatial constraints that keep them tied down. Married women in these families expressed a sense of shame with the use of non-standard language used in their family and worked towards the cultivation of standard speech among children. Though these varieties thrived in their families and the *mohulla*, they devalued local ways of speaking and distanced themselves from their use. Many women used the term *dehati* – that is, 'belonging to the village' – to describe Varanasi and complained about its use.

The social space of a *mohulla* is usually associated with leisure activities such as playing, gossiping among peer groups and indulging in other idyllic activities. It represents an unregulated space where the popular language varieties described as 'Urdu–Hindi mix' and 'Varanasi *boli*' are commonly used.

As a gendered space, it is an area that is experienced differently by men and women. For men of different age groups, it connotes a relaxed space meant for camaraderie and fun. For married and unmarried women, it is construed as a threatening space that must be crossed as soon as possible and preferably in daylight. Most of the mothers shared concerns about their daughters' safety during their commute from school and otherwise because of the presence of the gang of men. Sometimes they also complained of lewd remarks from them. Almost all the women complained about the behaviour of the men in the neighbourhood as lacking in manners and respectable speech, which posed a threat to their children in general and girls in particular.

Some mothers managed to restrain their children, both boys and girls of young age groups, from playing outside their homes. One of them even suggested that she regulates her children's playing habits by arranging for indoor games. The perceived threat of the *mohulla* is very pronounced among mothers and is also articulated in their preference for standard languages like *khadi boli*, *shudh* Hindi and Urdu over the ones used in their neighbourhood.

While all the families strived towards refinement of their young in matters of speech, the mothers in joint-family settings engaged in traditional occupation of the saree industry were faced with greater difficulties. These families value different cultural resources in different domains – namely Varanasi or Urdu–Hindi for trade and interaction with the elderly and the neighbours, but standard Hindi and English for their children's future. In such a context, the mothers' effort towards speech correction was often a solitary affair in the family, often inviting scorn from the elderly.

However, attempts are made by all these mothers to make their children more refined and cultured in their mannerisms and speech. Through such engagement with the upbringing of their children, they seek to achieve higher moral status. These micro-processes of parenting are important to understand the spatial embeddedness of the experiences of these families and their struggles implicit in the process of shifting towards higher-status schools and the associated school cultures. Their negotiations with the spatial aspects of their life in the neighbourhood are a necessary component of their hopes for a better future for their children.

Conclusion

The class-differentiated access to education in Indian cities needs to move beyond the dichotomy of 'middle-class' city dwellers and the 'urban poor' and focus on the spatial aspects of the relationship. These two categories are often invoked to draw attention towards the decline of state-supported educational institutions on one hand and the unprecedented growth of the private-for-profit schools for the poor on the other. One aspect of life in private schools that seems to be adding to their popularity is their promise of English as a cultural resource. The growth of the new service sector in the Indian economy which relies on English language proficiency has further strengthened the hegemonic position of English-language schooling in the imagination of an urban life (Sonntag 2009). A focus on the cultural implications of the rise of such industries helps us to re-envision the notion of spatial justice in terms of the centrality of metropolitan consumption cultures in the discourse of mobility and the subsequent marginalisation of popular cultures and languages associated with the non-metropolitan cities.

In this chapter, an attempt is made to examine the relationship of schooling with aspirations among lower classes in a non-metropolitan city. Historically, Varanasi has witnessed class-, caste- and community-segregated modes of settlement that have shaped the relationship of schools with city dwellers in specific ways. The exploration of a private school that promises access to English while catering to families from lower classes reveals how the spatial embeddedness of the lives of people shapes their aspirations and relationship with schooling. It is pertinent to note how a family's access to a particular school is mediated by not just costs and physical distance of the school but also by their comfort with the associated school cultures. The shift to an English-medium school is not made directly but is made through several intermediary steps, including one of learning standard language cultures preferred in schools. In a changing economic context of occupational shifts to the new labour market which is more integrated with the standard rather than local, neighbourhood languages, switching first to Hindi seems more plausible. The gendered work of mothers is significant in this regard who invest in a variety of disciplinary measures to cultivate specific values. The school, which is accessible to them, however, is not equipped to fulfil this promise because of the limitations of resources.

To conclude, the apparent shifts in the educational choices of the lower classes in urban settings are not just about monetary investments in private schools. They also entail investment in symbolic resources, like the hope of learning English and the ability to use standard language in everyday interactions. Attention to such micro-processes against the political and economic context of city life can strengthen our understanding of how spatial and social inequities of urban life shape the school choices of different classes.

Notes

1. There have been notable exceptions that call for an examination of issues beyond the megacities. See Scrase et al. (2015)
2. The notion of consumer citizen, in the Indian context, is usually employed to examine the implications of neoliberal policy shifts in civic life. See Fernandes (2006) and Lukose (2009).
3. Nandini Gooptu (1997), in her examination of the urban poor in colonial India, examines the social implications of the massive migration of the rural population to the cities in north Indian cities.
4. Bayly identifies two types of urban centres as they emerged in the north Indian towns: *ganj* and *qasba.* What made them different from each other was that while *qasba*s relied more on the service-based economy of administrative centres under Mughal rule, *ganj*s thrived more on merchant-based trade and commerce activities. The former manifested in a civic culture that thrived on and sustained the Indo-Persian literary style while the latter thrived on associational forms organised around Hindu caste groups and sustained by the close ties of kinship networks.
5. For an alternative reading of the significance of Islamic cultural symbols in the urban life of Varanasi, see Kumar (2000).
6. The informal sector of economy is characterised by a different structure of labour relations, described variously as an 'imperfect market' and as 'fragmented labour market'. For Jan Breman, such markets are fragmented because of the scarcity of the available work and the way it is structured around 'traditional forces' of caste, region, religion and not being driven by forces of the free market. In his work, the mediation of caste and community is specific to the nature of labour market in India. See Breman (1976).
7. According to an estimate, the labour force involved in the silk industry of Varanasi is around one to three lakh weavers; 1,500 traders, mostly Hindus; and around 2,000 *girasta*s, or master weavers, mostly Muslims. See Varman and Chakrabarti (2007).
8. The district report cards have shown a consistent increase in the proportion of private school enrolments in urban areas.
9. Some of the observations presented in this section and the next ones are based on fieldwork conducted in Varanasi during 2006–2009. Some of these findings have also been discussed in Goswami (2017: 77–120).
10. A *mohulla* refers to a neighbourhood that is central to the urban life in Varanasi. It is characterised by a dense network of social relationships based on commerce and common living space among neighbours in narrow lanes of the city.

11. The Ansaris have been at the receiving end of colonial profiling and were identified as the *bigoted julaha* in colonial documents. They are still viewed as an educationally backward community, sometimes referred to as *jahil*, or illiterate, and as resistant to modern schooling, as compared to other communities and castes as suggested by Kumar (2000).
12. The school was described in these terms by several parents with whom I interacted. Some of the details have been provided in Goswami (2017: 121).

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