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### **Schooling the Working Class**

Public Education in Bombay's Mill District,  
1920s–1940s

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Bombay's cotton mills and their relation to the city's emergence over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as India's prime metropolis have been extensively studied from various perspectives, and this is a wide and ever-expanding area of critical scholarship. Within this rich corpus of literature, the development of public education in the city of Bombay and its place in the wider imagination of the emerging industrial city remain a virtually uncharted area. The diverse historical trajectories of state-funded education in the city point to how education discursively constructed the 'public' in Bombay in the early part of the twentieth century.

This chapter attempts to trace these developments in the mill district of colonial Bombay (now Mumbai). It provides a descriptive and thematic account of the expansion of education through the implementation of free and compulsory primary education (FCPE) in Girangaon, literally 'the village of the mills'. The wards that make up the Girangaon area were selectively chosen for the FCPE when it became operational in the city in 1925. Girangaon covers the administrative wards of F and G, as well as parts of E ward, although this was not included in the initial scheme. With the caveat that the archive we have had to work with is largely limited to official records,<sup>1</sup> we look at debates on FCPE in the city and attempt to chart the contexts within which policies on primary education in the Girangaon area were being discussed and enacted. The chapter aims to move away from colonial and nationalist narratives of well-known elite educational institutions in Bombay to interrogating the contexts within which children of the working classes were intended to be educated.

## Setting the Context: Bombay to Mumbai

The first cotton mills were set up in the colonial port city of Bombay in the 1850s. By the late nineteenth century, Bombay emerged as the country's leading commercial and financial centre, and the largest cotton market in Asia. In terms of population, Bombay was the second largest urban centre in the world after London – its elites proud of its status as 'Urbs Prima in Indis' (Kosambi 1985). The city's dramatic growth was due in part to changes in international trade and industry in the mid-1800s, especially the American Civil War, which increased the demand for Indian cotton and gave the development of Bombay's textile industry a crucial impetus, and the opening of the Suez Canal, which strengthened the city's links with the world economy. The development of the docks, transport and railways further enhanced Bombay's position, bringing capital into the city and simultaneously promoting a unique cosmopolitan culture as a result of an imperial policy that promoted an influx of migrants. Among these migrants were workers who laboured in Bombay's emerging industries, especially in the cotton mills, and also merchants, artisans, traders and bankers from across the country who settled in the city. By the early twentieth century, the population of Bombay was nearly a million, of which only a quarter were actually born in the city (Prakash 2010; Bhide 2014). The growth of the city's population was accompanied by changes in its geographical contours, from a fragmented stretch of seven small, fairly inhospitable marshlands which were converted into a single land mass through projects of urban development.

Bombay's history of educational development and philanthropic investment in educational institutions has been well documented by several scholars (Nurullah and Naik 1943; Parulekar 1957). The nineteenth century witnessed the setting up of a number of educational institutions in the city, including schools, free libraries and reading rooms. Several social and educational societies and associations were established by social reformers, Indian businessmen and colonial administrators. Parsis and the traditionally literate upper and commercial castes benefitted most from English education, and this gave them an advantage in government employment and teaching positions in English-medium institutions. Many were instrumental in setting up grant-in-aid schools<sup>2</sup> (Ramanna 1992: 716–724). Social reproduction through education thus mapped onto the city's social landscape, influencing its modernity and the nature of its intelligentsia in distinct ways. By the late 1920s, when the city's overall literacy had reached 24 per cent, literacy in English was around 11 per cent. With half the literate population literate in English, a significant percentage

of Bombay's citizens was bilingual: 9.2 per cent according to the 1931 census (Hazareesingh 1999: 8).

The real backbone of Bombay's economic prosperity and the culture that defined its unique urban ethos was its large industrial workforce, primarily composed of millworkers. By 1926, 1.48 lakh workers were employed in Bombay's 82 mills (Bhide 2014: 8). Migrants from famine-ravaged areas around the Konkan coast and the rural hinterland of Bombay came to the mills in search of work, followed by others from different parts of the country. In the early years, it was mainly single men who made their way to Bombay to work in the mills; by the 1920s, families were coming into the city, and women and children were also joining the mill workforce. In the early twentieth century, the city presented stark contrasts of opulence and extreme poverty in patterns of social segregation whose roots lay in the earlier racial divisions of the colonial and native towns. The most impoverished residential settlements were in the working-class areas around the mills and the docks.

Located in the south-central part of the city, the mill district or the 'village of the mills', Girangaon, roughly comprising the present-day areas of Parel, Worli, Dadar, Lalbaug, Prabhadevi, Byculla and Saat Rasta, was the epicentre of the city's working-class culture and militancy. Girangaon witnessed the birth of India's first trade union in the Girni Kamgar Union, the first industrial strike in the 1920s and the longest working-class strike in history that lasted 18 months between 1982 and 1984. The latter signalled the death knell for the mills and the vibrant life of the area itself. The closure of the mills in the 1990s, the retrenchment of workers and progressive informalisation of the workforce led to the forced dispersal of many millworkers and their families from Girangaon. In the name of regulation and redevelopment of the mill lands, the area was gradually gentrified by the manipulation of laws and rules governing land use, and later through the active intervention of local and global corporate entities (Adarkar and Phatak 2005; D'Monte 1998, 2002). The post-industrial landscape in the area, captured in the much-referred description 'mills to malls', has seen the disappearance of the large mill compounds and chimneys that dominated the skyline, which are now replaced by high-rise residential buildings, glitzy shopping malls and global business centres. Underlying these physical symbols of 'progress' and internationalisation that mark the imagination of the global city and a country's financial centre are the hard realities of forced erasure of a history of working people who, across communities, languages and regions, were the face of the city and its growth (Adarkar and Menon 2004).

## Background to Free and Compulsory Education in Bombay

The demand for education of Bombay's working population emerged as an issue of public debate as the city evolved into a leading industrial centre from the early twentieth century. The growth of primary education in the city and particularly its mill district developed against a backdrop of deliberations and conflicts between various stakeholders: government bodies, the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC), elected representatives of the Bombay Schools Committee (henceforth SC), social service organisations, the city's elites and the mill owners. Issues related to the provision and management of primary education were extensively discussed in local newspapers and created public opinion that influenced decisions on schooling for the urban poor (*Times of India* 1914a, 1914b).

A key moment in the history of school education in Bombay was the introduction of FCPE. Moves towards making schooling universal were initiated as early as 1905, when the business magnate Ibrahim Rahimtoola proposed FCPE in a memorandum to the BMC (Kidambi 2007: 217). By 1908, a section of Bombay's educated professional men exerted influence on the corporation to expand schooling (*Administration Report of the Municipal Commissioner for the City of Bombay* [henceforth *Administration Report*] 1908–1912). The tide turned decisively in favour of FCPE with the challenges that urban planning in Bombay was beginning to face at this time. Poorer areas of the city, especially the congested housing settlements around the mills, faced enormous public health crises following the plague and influenza epidemics that broke out in the region in the late nineteenth century and lasted well into the second decade of the twentieth.<sup>3</sup> These areas became the focus of new housing and sanitation reforms in the city, the sustenance of which demanded the cultivation of a certain civic consciousness about public health and sanitation. A degree of 'elite paternalism' (Sarkar 2018) towards the urban poor and compulsions of planning are what made Bombay's working-class residents ideal subjects for education; in this sense, we see education emerging as a 'middle-class project of civic modernity' of the city (Kidambi 2007: 215).

In Bombay, expansion of opportunities created certain aspirations for a better life perceived to be associated with education. Mobilisation for workers' rights and the winning of demands for higher wages, shorter working hours and better working conditions enabled the extension of educational aspirations. Unlike earlier times when male millworkers came to the city alone, leading precarious lives and leaving for their villages in times of crisis, there was a trend towards bringing families to the city and investing in children's education. Social and

labour organisations which had emerged in the first decade of the century started articulating demands for schools at the national level too; FCPE was widely debated, especially after the 'Baroda experiment' and G. K. Gokhale's submission to the Imperial Council between 1910 and 1912 which was turned down by the colonial government (Manjrekar 2017). As early as 1920, N. M. Joshi, who worked with Gokhale in the Servants of India Society and later set up the Social Service League to work with industrial labour in Bombay, wrote of the need to set up an educational association for workers (Joshi 1920).

The SC, which began work in 1909–1910,<sup>4</sup> was a statutory body to oversee primary education in the city. It was the only executive committee of the BMC which was independent of the commissioner, who only intervened in matters of funding (Manshardt 1935: 9). Members of the SC were elected by the BMC. It had 12 members, all elected councillors, 4 of whom had to be Muslims, 3 from the 'intermediate classes' and 1 from 'backward classes'.<sup>5</sup> The legislature in 1920 mandated that four more members be added to the SC, of whom two had to be women (Manshardt 1935; Bombay Primary Education Act 1920).

The SC was dominated by members of the city's elites, highly educated people associated with business enterprises including the mills.<sup>6</sup> Regular weekly meetings were held at which the committee reviewed the status of expansion and proposals from caste and community associations for setting up schools in different areas. It oversaw the renting of premises, inspection of schools, appointment of teachers, procurement of school equipment, and so on. Records of meetings were meticulously maintained and submitted to the BMC's Education Department. From 1916, the SC submitted proposals to the Bombay government concerning the expansion of education in the city. In 1917, one proposal stated:

The driving factor was that free and compulsory education was an absolute need for the good of the country and Bombay should take the lead in introducing it. It had to be turned into an efficient working system so as to secure full hold on people's minds and willingful [*sic*] co-operation. (SC Proceedings 1921)

Debates on the SC proposal focused on FCPE as related to the expansion of education at the national level, for 'every child ... to be trained to put forth the best that is in him, for himself and his countrymen' (Education Department 1919). The SC's proposals argued for a state-maintained system of FCPE, where compulsion is an 'inevitable corollary to the principle of free education' (Education Department 1919).

In 1917, the same year when the SC's proposal was submitted, Vithalbai Patel, a prominent lawyer and member of the Bombay Legislative Council, moved a bill in the council to permit municipalities to introduce compulsion in municipal areas of the Bombay Province (Legislative Council of the Governor of Bombay 1916). The 'Patel Act' passed by the Bombay Legislative Council was the first legislation on compulsory primary education in British India. It was facilitated by the introduction of dyarchy following the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms in 1918 that allowed for a degree of local 'native' control over the management of education. This in turn provided the context for the passing of the Bombay Primary Education Act in 1920 and the SC's proposal to introduce FCPE in the city in a staggered manner: from A and D wards in 1922–1923, B and C wards in 1923–1924, and in F, G and E wards in 1924–1925. The decision on 'graduated progress' of FCPE was based on focusing on wards with 'small, literate populations' (such as ward A in Colaba, where it could reach out to children of 'menials', servants of the affluent Indian and European sections) to those 'majorly populated by mill-hands', backward castes and Muslim population (SC Proceedings 1921: 7).

Financial stringency following the First World War saw official attention focusing on those wards most 'in need' of education, and in 1923 the SC proposed to the BMC that FCPE be introduced selectively in the city's F and G wards.<sup>7</sup> The scheme was to apply to 'all castes, creeds, races' except Europeans and Anglo-Indians, and to all boys and girls except Muslim girls, the latter on account of lack of female Urdu teachers (SC Proceedings 1923: 3). The proposal detailed plans to bring non-enrolled children into existing municipal schools or into private recognised and aided schools (interestingly, with compensation for fees). The *Administration Report* notified the launch of FCPE in Bombay's F and G wards on 2 November 1925. Children in all primary schools in these wards were exempted from paying fees (*Administration Report* 1925–1926).

It is interesting to note that the available records cast little light on the exclusion of the city's E ward from the FCPE scheme, given its proximity to the F and G wards and its similarity to these wards. Nagpada E Ward, one of the worst hit in the plague years, was the first area to be targeted for slum clearance and decongestion by the City Improvement Trust. In his autobiography, Clifford Manshardt, an American missionary who set up the Nagpada Neighbourhood House, a community centre in 1926, provides a thick description of life in this area between the 1920s and 1940s. Written with warmth and empathy, Manshardt's account of dockside life, the mosaic of cultures and languages, the dismal conditions of housing and the difficult lives of workers, including women

workers, artisans, children and prostitutes, strongly suggests that schooling was perhaps a distant dream for the children of the area.<sup>8</sup> E ward was probably seen as a difficult area in which to impose compulsion under FCPE, with its large population and the stigma of filth, notoriety, ‘amorality’ and criminality, all of which made it more difficult to navigate administratively. Significantly, as early as 1922, it was the millworkers of Girangaon who demanded that FCPE also be extended to E ward<sup>9</sup> (*Times of India* 1922).

## Logic of Compulsion and Its Lapses

Since the plague and influenza epidemics, sections of the city’s elites had been voicing concern over unsanitary parts of the city associated with the spread of disease. F and G wards came in for particular criticism in the local press with reports referring to the backwardness and ‘filthy habits’ of residents, including alcoholism and sexual promiscuity. Education was seen as crucial to address these problems. It was part of the larger project of public hygiene and sanitation in the city, embodying the colonial ethic of cultivating a disciplined self in the public sphere (Kidambi 2007: 211). Inculcating self-discipline was tied to the construction of the urban worker-citizen, through planned socialisation of the working-class child into norms such as compulsory enrolment and regular attendance at school, and maintaining good hygiene and promoting sanitary conditions in their homes and localities.

In 1923, the SC proposed an education tax from the ‘employer classes’ (SC Proceedings 1923: 14). This found support among Bombay’s middle-class intelligentsia and from the philanthropically minded among the business elites. With this, the colonial state foregrounded education as an important means of exerting social control over populations within its agenda of fashioning the modern industrial city through its own agencies. By arguing for a tax on employers to contribute to the creation of a ‘superior class of employees’, the SC drew connections between education in working-class areas to workers’ productivity and, by extension, the investment expected of industrialists to the expansion of education. The Bombay Mill Owners Association (BMOA) welcomed the efforts of the BMC in promoting FCPE. J. P. Mody, representing the association in the corporation, stated in the BMOA report of 1925 that education was ‘the all-important thing as far as the industrial workers’ lives are concerned (BMOA 1925: 91).

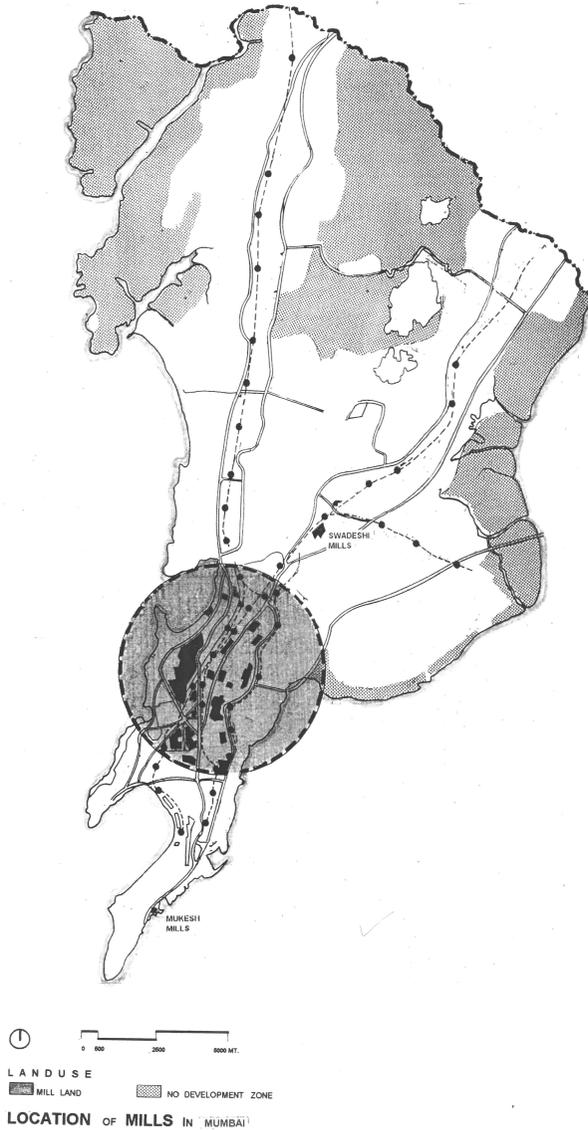
The response to compulsory education from reformist-nationalist organisations was not uniform. For some, education for the working classes was important to stem the tide of growing worker militancy while allowing the

opportunity of increased representation in local bodies. For others, such as the radical reformer B. R. Ambedkar, education was critical to raising consciousness among the most marginalised and equipping them to fight for their rights and entitlements. The issue of caste discrimination in schools was debated in the press, but the education establishment was hesitant to act decisively against it, fearing a backlash from caste Hindus (*Times of India* 1927d). Ambedkar's submission to the Indian Statutory Commission in 1928 referred to the SC's 'fright' at dealing with the issue of different glasses for drinking water for children of the untouchable castes in municipal schools, which violated the BMC's official policy against caste discrimination in schools. The SC, fearing antagonism and legal action from caste Hindus alleging that this did not fall under the purview of FCPE, backed off from taking any action (Ambedkar 1982b [1928]: 457). These contradictions were embedded in the expansion of schooling in the city under FCPE and continued well into the 1940s.

## **Girangaon as a Socio-Spatial Template for FCPE**

Bombay's F and G wards covered an area of 13.2 square miles, a little more than half the area of the town and island of Bombay. The two wards, along with E ward, straddled the south-central region of the island, between the docks and the city's harbour.<sup>10</sup> Sandwiched between southern Bombay with its colonial and native towns and the newly developing suburbs, these wards that made up most of Girangaon were where Bombay's industrial working class lived and worked (Figure 2.1).<sup>11</sup> Living conditions in Girangaon determined public perceptions and municipal planning for FCPE in the area.

The population of Girangaon grew rapidly in the opening decades of the twentieth century, along with the increase in number of Bombay's mill-hands, which rose by almost 40 per cent between 1914 and 1921. After 1921, as Radha Kumar's comparison of census data shows, there was a steep increase in women and children migrating to this area (Kumar 1983). This brought in a significantly new dimension to the culture and social organisation of neighbourhoods in Girangaon, which up to that time had largely seen only male in-migration. Around this time, workers also started coming in from other regions of the country to work in Bombay's mills. By the 1930s, mill labour was characterised by considerable linguistic, caste, regional and religious diversity. Compulsory primary education had to account for this linguistic diversity of communities residing in Girangaon. By 1926–1927, in addition to the existing Marathi, Gujarati and Urdu schools run by the BMC, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Sindhi and Hindi medium schools or classes started to accommodate



**Figure 2.1** Location of Bombay mills

*Source:* Charles Correa, D. M. Sukthankar, Deepal Parekh, A. N. Kale, V. W. Deshpande and V. K. Phatak (Charles Correa Committee), *Report of the Study Group to Prepare an Integrated Development Plan for Textile Mill Lands in Mumbai* (Mumbai: KRVA Research and Development Cell, 1996), p. 12, fig. 1.

the changed demographic profile of the area. An increase in child population and legally enforceable compulsory education altered the situation of public schooling in the area after 1925.

Other dimensions of life in Girangaon in the 1920s and 1930s were important in the context of compulsory education for children: poverty, the unavailability of suitable rental facilities to use as schools, and various disruptions in the area as a result of industrial strikes, nationalist political activities and communal riots. It could be argued that this time also marks the emergence of a distinct discourse of children's schooling – indeed, the idea of a modern childhood itself, with factory legislation and rising civic consciousness against children working in the mills playing an important role. The following sections discuss a few of these dimensions that made up the context for FCPE in Girangaon.

## Accommodating Schools

A serious challenge before the SC was to find suitable rental property in Girangaon to house schools. As several scholars have pointed out, the city's elites who supported the proposal for FCPE were eager to fashion a particular kind of urbane modernity in the face of anxieties around the spread of disease and ill-hygiene, but fell short of imagining the welfare of workers living in these areas (Burnet-Hurst 1925; Caru 2019; Kidambi 2019). Although some mill owners did invest in housing for their workers, these were woefully inadequate and certainly could not accommodate schools on their premises.

Abysmal living conditions, with overcrowded settlements and extremely poor levels of sanitation, made renting proper premises for schools in Girangaon a taxing affair (SC Proceedings 1928–1929: 32–33). From the late 1900s, the SC stressed the urgency of acquiring school buildings, but for the state financial stringency only compounded, especially after the plague and the war years. The SC's appeals for school buildings that were 'well-ventilated, sanitary and spacious' (*Times of India* 1914b) were confounded by the larger problem of scarcity of accommodation, and bad sanitary and infrastructural conditions, especially within the poorer parts of the city. With scarcity of funds to construct new school buildings, schools were housed mostly in residential premises, *chawls*,<sup>12</sup> privately owned buildings and sometimes in commercial premises.

Problems in identifying and acquiring decent school buildings were related to the situation of housing in the Girangaon neighbourhoods. B. S. Upadhyay (1990) describes the haphazard development and shortages of housing that led to overcrowding in the area. In Parel, where there was a concentration of mills, 97 per cent of the working-class households in 1917–1918 lived in single rooms,

at times with three families in a room and single adult lodgers in rooms occupied by one or two families. According to the census of 1921, there were at least 135 instances in Bombay in which a single room was occupied by six families or more. The increase in provision of working-class housing between 1921 and 1931 did not make a significant difference in E, F and G wards, probably because a large number of condemned tenements in disrepair were also being demolished (Kumar 1983). Builders compensated for low returns on rental property by erecting cramped *chawls*, economising on quality of materials and provision of sanitation. Water supply was inadequate, and community taps provided a 'flashpoint of conflict' among neighbours.

Under such conditions, the SC was hard-pressed to rent school premises meeting minimum satisfactory standards of light and sanitation in areas close to workers' residences (Adarkar and Menon 2004: 21). In 1926, the BMC made it possible to house some schools in the Development Department *chawls* (SC Proceedings 1926: 90–92; *Administration Report 1925–1926*). Over the 1920s and 1940s, implementation of FCPE in F and G wards involved a series of policy decisions in light of constraints on expanding access to schooling. The first was to optimise rental spaces through a 'shift system', with schools with different mediums of instruction operating at different times within the same premises (SC Proceedings 1927). Special classes were introduced at night for children who were not able to attend day schools. Schools for infants were also set up in shifts within existing schools. Another policy was 'retrenchment' of schools, akin to what in contemporary times would be termed 'rationalisation', under which poorly attended schools were closed down and schools in close proximity to each other were amalgamated. A later development was to amalgamate single-sex schools into a co-educational system (SC Proceedings 1949).

## Hierarchy and Discrimination

The heterogeneous composition of the working class was an important factor in understanding the impact of compulsory education in the mill district. Girangaon was strongly differentiated by caste, community and region, mirroring the social hierarchy and discrimination in the mills. Caste was a key occupational and social marker in the mills. The most direct manifestation of caste exclusion practices was the refusal of Maratha weavers to work with untouchable castes (Chandavarkar 1994: 227). Caste, kinship and village connections formed the most convenient basis for social organisation in Bombay. Migrants in the city sought help of their caste fellows, co-villagers and relatives to find work, credit

and housing (Chandavarkar 1994: 219). To a large extent, this pattern allowed for the reproduction of caste in working-class neighbourhoods.

While class solidarity did provide a collective identity to workers in the area, caste and religion distinguished Girangaon as an area distinct from the upper-caste, middle-class localities around it. Internal differentiation influenced the practices of public schooling in Girangaon, marking graded precarity and exemplifying Henry Lefebvre's (1991) contention of social space reproducing relations of production and in constant conflictual and dynamic relationship with ruling elites.<sup>13</sup> Within the paradigm of urban modernity actively promoted by the city's elites, the association of unsanitary and unhygienic physical attributes of the locality had a definite caste character. To create and live in filthy surroundings was seen as being the disposition of the low-caste residents themselves. Such discourses marked a kind of urban untouchability, and it was not surprising that children from the lowest, 'untouchable' castes faced indignities and discrimination at school.<sup>14</sup> Parents often took complaints of discrimination to the SC, and there were petitions for separate schools by community leaders for children of Dalit communities (at the time referred to as 'depressed classes'). Issues around exclusion and caste discrimination in schools were topics of intense debate in Maharashtra since the late nineteenth century (Nambissan 2020). The introduction of 'separate schools' by the colonial state was opposed by Ambedkar and other leaders of the depressed classes, who articulated in clear terms that it was the state's responsibility to ensure admission in common schools. Ambedkar also made representations against the responsibility for FCPE being transferred to local bodies, arguing that members of these bodies were antagonistic to the education of the depressed classes and 'by no means share their aspirations or their desires for advancement and betterment' (Ambedkar 1982a [1927]: 43). Being invested in the perpetuation of caste hierarchies, they would not ensure compulsion and would instead condone the practice of untouchability and discrimination in schools (Ambedkar 1982a [1927]: 43).

Access to drinking water was the most contentious issue in schools, where untouchability was practised by not allowing Dalit children to use the same taps and pots as other children (*Times of India* 1927d). In 1927, the BMC passed a resolution stating that in selecting school buildings and admission of children, the SC must be mindful that 'no caste prejudice is made' (SC Proceedings 1925–1926: 212). A circular was issued to all schools enforcing compliance with the BMC's resolution that there should be no distinction of drinking pots in the schools. However, ultimately this resolution evoked protest from caste Hindus<sup>15</sup> (Nambissan 2020: 140). As discussed earlier, the SC's ambivalence on this issue

was contested by Dalit leaders who exposed its capitulation to the city's upper-caste elites. Official directives against caste discrimination in schools have to be seen in the context of growing mobilisation for the education of Dalits, largely led by Ambedkar, who set up the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha (Association of the Depressed Classes) in 1924 and the Depressed Classes Education Society in 1928. These organisations worked to spread education among Dalits, setting up scholarships and hostels for students and working towards their general upliftment. While for the city's elites, FCPE was a way to 'school' the working-class child into norms of modernity, Dalit leaders like Ambedkar extended its importance by drawing its connections to access to public amenities and political entitlements, and therefore to social justice, for the most marginalised.

## The 'Problem' of Attendance

Regular attendance in schools, which was central to the implementation of compulsory primary education, remained a serious issue for the SC and the BMC. The core aim of FCPE was the expansion of schooling under compulsion, but it is clear from available records that despite several 'experiments', as the SC put it, to bring children to school, non-attendance remained high. The SC conducted detailed household surveys to estimate the number of children not attending schools and the conditions in which they lived. Measures were taken to see that children were taken to school by 'call boys and call girls' hired to go from house to house collecting children for school (*Administration Report 1929–1930*). The experiment of 'attendance teachers' was introduced to see whether teachers living near schools would be able to ensure regular attendance by persuading parents of non-attending children to send them to school (*Administration Report 1929–1930*). 'Propaganda meetings' were held in localities, appealing to guardians to send their wards to schools and to ascertain their difficulties (*Administration Report 1931–1932*).

What emerges from all reports on FCPE is that the principal reasons for non-attendance were illness and malnutrition. Reports of the Royal Commission of Labour (1929–1940) outline the dismal conditions of working-class children. They suffered malnutrition due to several factors: poor food, want of meals, lack of ventilation in home or school, lack of exercise, lack of sufficient recreation and rest, and lack of sunshine. The SC identified the dearth of medical facilities such as dispensaries in the F, G and E wards. The BMC issued municipal health cards for free treatment in these localities, but the dispensaries were at considerable distance and hence inconvenient for the mill-hands (SC Proceedings 1926: 86–96).

Medical inspectors wrote many letters to the SC regarding health inspection in schools and the need for discussions on hygiene with parents, highlighting this particularly for children of the lower and untouchable castes whose health status was alarmingly low. The municipal commissioner's administrative reports contain accounts of 'lantern lectures' delivered by medical inspectors in schools and public places like local cinemas on different aspects of personal cleanliness, dental hygiene and hygiene at home (*Administration Report 1925–1926*). These efforts came in for praise by the Royal Commission of Labour. They recorded that it was of immense benefit, especially to working-class parents, as over time it familiarised them with the nature of the ailments their children were suffering from (SC Office 1929–1940).

Non-attendance assumed a new character in the late 1920s–1940s, when Girangaon was an epicentre of political turbulence with strikes, riots and nationalist calls for action. This period of uncertainty and disruption, undoubtedly aggravated by conditions related to the Second World War, saw millworkers send their families back to their villages. In official records of the time, the occasional note of sympathy about these factors leading to non-attendance is muted by the dominant tenor of impatience with the indifference of poor parents towards the education of their children. With falling attendance in the schools, city administrators repeatedly raised the question of prosecution of 'defaulting' parents under the compulsion clause, which the SC was legally empowered to enforce under the city's Primary Education Act of 1920. But in the end, the SC chose to avoid showcasing test cases prosecuting parents and guardians of the non-attending children. Given the political ferment of the times, the SC recorded that prosecuting parents 'in the times of disturbances and unrest ... could do more harm than good' (*Administration Report 1929–1930*).

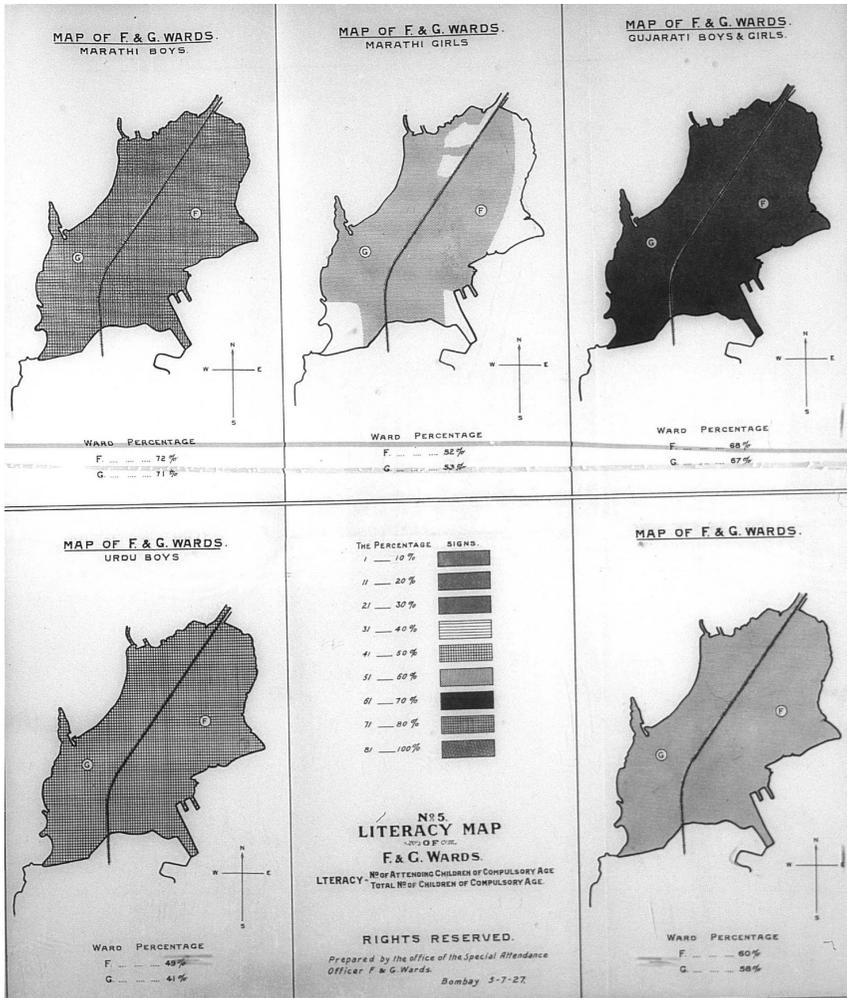
It is hardly surprising that the main reason for non-attendance was that most sections of the working class were unable to maintain the material, social and cultural needs of school-going children. Poor parents found it difficult to maintain the disciplinary orientations of formal schooling within the home. In 1938, a report of children of workers from Dalit communities in Bombay discusses how parents had to stop children from going to school, as being in company of 'touchable' (higher-caste) children, they developed habits which were difficult to sustain at home. Children insisted on good food and cleanliness in their homes, which parents were unable to provide on account of poverty. Under these circumstances, parents expressed that it was better to send their children out to work as soon as they completed some primary education to supplement family income (Pradhan 1938: 73–74).

The introduction of FCPE in F and G wards empowered the SC to undertake a series of steps to ‘scientifically’ monitor and exhibit the progress of intervention. These involved technologies of governmentality (Kalpagam 2014) like household surveys and area censuses of school-going children and extensive use of mapping to monitor the setting up of schools, attendance and other aspects of FCPE in Girangaon. The official narrative in reports is that FCPE started showing gains in the very first years of its implementation. In its 1926–1927 report, the SC prepared a series of six impressive maps of F and G wards based on its survey of schools, showing enrolled children, girls and boys, in Marathi, Hindi and Urdu schools. It is significant that this elaborate mapping of enrolments by special attendance officers was performed in response to the SC and municipality’s demand for ‘evidence of success’ for FCPE in F and G wards. Figures 2.2 and 2.3 are two examples. The first is an overall map of all schools in the wards;<sup>16</sup> the second focuses on ‘progress’ in Marathi girls’ schools (*Administration Report 1926–1927*).

School attendance continued to be a problem well into the 1950s. With increasing demands on public funds due to the war, FCPE was extended to other wards of the city only in 1939–1940 (*Administration Report 1939–1940*). SC reports by special attendance officers in the immediate post-war period suggested that the problem of non-attendance of children may have actually escalated with higher economic constraints on families migrating to the city for work and having to live in substandard housing with no access to water and sanitation (SC Proceedings 1950). The SC report of 1948 showed that out of 100 non-attending children living in localities mostly inhabited by the working class, 60 per cent did not attend due to various economic handicaps. Around 40 per cent were required to contribute to household work. Other ‘economic disabilities’ listed in the report include looking after youngsters, earning wages from outside work and acute poverty (SC Office 1948).

## Local Civic Engagements on Issues of Schooling

From the late nineteenth century, a range of voluntary social welfare organisations contributed to the discourse on education for Bombay’s industrial workers, engaging with the state and its agencies like the municipality (Hazareesingh 2000; Srivastava 2018). These engagements were qualitatively different from those of Bombay’s elites, who insisted on enlarging social, civic and political rights that included decent housing and expansion of amenities as premises for urban citizenship.<sup>17</sup> Undoubtedly, in the 1920s and 1930s, a period marked by industrial strikes, mobilisation around issues of political rights, including the

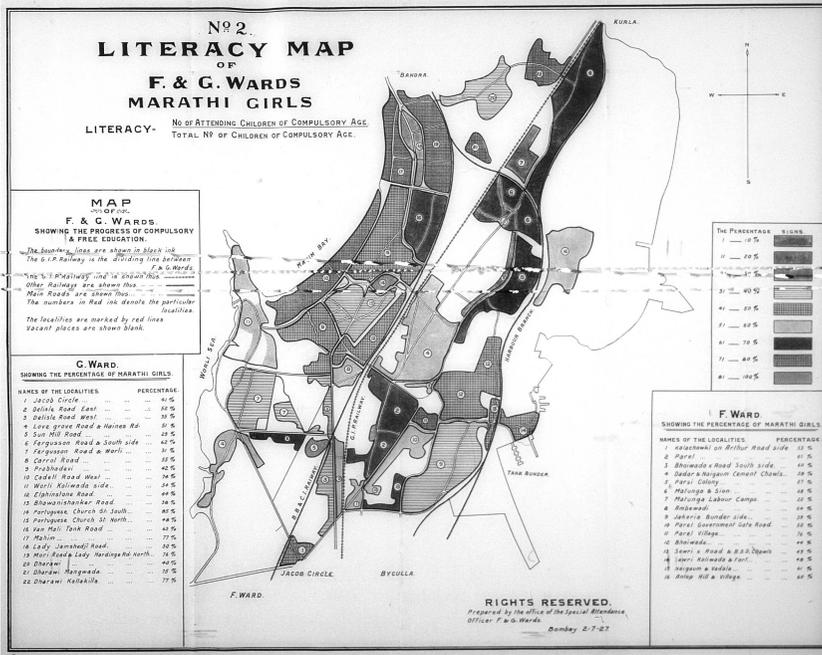


**Figure 2.2** Literacy map of F and G wards (all schools), 1926–1927

Source: Bombay Municipality, *Administration Report of the School Committee (1926–27)*, India Office Records (IOR V/24/901), British Library, London, p. 22.

Note: The map defines literacy as the ratio of the number of children of compulsory age who attended school to the total number of children of compulsory age. This ratio is generally referred to as the net enrolment ratio, and not literacy.

rights of the depressed classes, and the active presence of the Communist Party of India in the millworkers union, the city’s elites and the provincial government were also beset with anxieties around questions of workers’ welfare.



**Figure 2.3** Literacy map of Marathi girls and F and G wards, 1926–1927

Source: Bombay Municipality, *Administration Report of the School Committee (1926–27)*, India Office Records (IOR V/24/901), British Library, London, p. 22.

Note: (a) The shaded parts of the map represent the percentage of girls of compulsory school age attending Marathi girls' schools in the different localities of the F and G wards. The choice of the term 'literacy', and not 'enrolment', in such official maps signifies the discursive connections constructed by the SC between schooling and literacy. (b) The map defines literacy as the ratio of the number of children of compulsory age who attended school to the total number of children of compulsory age. This ratio is generally referred to as the net enrolment rate, and not literacy.

Interconnections between the workplace and the neighbourhood remained crucial in the development of workers' politics. Workers drew heavily upon the social organisation of Girangaon's neighbourhoods, which sustained the scale and tenacity of industrial action in the mills, led by the Girni Kamgar Union and other associates between 1918 and 1940 (Adarkar and Menon 2004: 12). As the labour movement gathered momentum in the interwar period, Girangaon ceased to be a mere geographical entity on the map of the Bombay city; rather, it came to represent an active political terrain. The inauguration of FCPE in Girangaon was welcomed by millworkers, even under conditions of legal compulsion, because

education assumed importance as a political project associated with freedom and aspirations (*Times of India* 1925). Workers started taking an interest in educational affairs, and many social organisations worked to set up night schools and other centres for workers (A. Kumar 2019). The Social Service League set up ‘settlement’ houses in working-class areas to improve the social conditions of workers (Social Service League 1915: 13). The contribution of social welfare organisations was critical to the life of workers, as Prashant Kidambi and others have documented (Kidambi 2007; Srivastava 2018; see also Manshardt 1967).

The SC recognised that enforcement in Girangaon would not be a suitable strategy in the wake of workers’ political consciousness, and it attempted to involve communities in the implementation of FCPE through local area committees, holding ‘propaganda’ meetings with other city-based social welfare organisations. Prominent members of the city’s intelligentsia as well as workers’ organisations were invited to these public meetings, which were extensively covered in local newspapers. In one instance, for example, a meeting was held by prominent Muslim intellectuals to ‘convince’ Muslim families to send their girls to schools, as the SC planned to bring them under FCPE from which they were originally excluded (*Times of India* 1928a, 1928b).

Approached narrowly as an instrument of moral and civic reform of the working class, FCPE in Girangaon disregarded the relationship of education in a wider sense to working-class lives. As Arun Kumar (2019) shows, workers claimed a space of their own beyond the rigidities of factory labour and factory time, fashioning leisure time at night outside factory hours by attending night schools and visiting libraries. Kumar’s work on night schools for workers gives an understanding of the worker as a political and intellectual being, an aspect ignored in an imagination of public education that primarily focused on teaching moral hygiene and civic sense to their children. By 1926, there were 21 night schools in the city, many of them in the Girangaon area, attended by students of all ages (*Administration Report* 1926–1927). With the expansion of education in Girangaon, social and political associations like the Depressed Classes Mission, the Social Service League and the Bombay Theistic Association petitioned the state to fund night schools and libraries.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

The introduction of FCPE in Bombay’s Girangaon area in the early twentieth century constitutes an important moment in the history of urban education in India. Girangaon was the epicentre of the tumultuous events that marked this period: epidemics, the two world wars, struggles between capital and labour,

industrial action, welfare work by social reformist organisations, nationalist and anticolonial movements, and the nearing horizons of political freedom. The late colonial industrial city was born out of the struggles and contradictions represented by these events. They constituted an ideological terrain wherein the colonial state, provincial government, nationalists, labour organisations of various ideological persuasions, the city's business elites, middle classes and, most importantly, workers sought to carve out a presence for themselves in a newly emerging urban landscape. In the larger imagination of education in this period, as much as there were conflicts, there were also points of convergence among all these sections. Education, especially for the city's large working-class population in Girangaon, became a site of intense debate for each of these sections.

Though the concept of public education bore the stamp of welfarism and was embraced by all sections of society, it was not unrelated to the politics of domination and control. Making educated/literate citizens of workers fell short of understanding their lives and their needs. The colonial government's lack of commitment to spending on public education and devolution of expenditure to local bodies complicated the notion of 'public' itself, implying as it did the continuation as well as contestation of class and caste hegemonies (Nambissan 2020: 126–154). It is therefore not enough to look at the introduction of FCPE as a philanthropic initiative of Bombay's elites. A more complex analysis would need to consider how this policy to educate Bombay's working class was framed against a background of workers' movements, the political education of workers through alternate public cultures, trade union politics, night schools and working-class neighbourhood politics, all of which contributed to the dynamism of Bombay's working class in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, workers intervened actively in debates on education. While workers welcomed the introduction of FCPE in Girangaon, their representatives engaged in area committees set up by the SC, voicing demands for the inclusion of different languages of instruction and safe, clean premises for their children's schools (*Times of India* 1925, 1928a). The history of FCPE in Girangaon suggests that although it may have been framed by the logics of colonial and elite governance, public education did enable a different sociopolitical imagination for Bombay's working classes, whichever caste, community and religion they belonged to.

For Bombay's workers, education was related to a distinct political imagination of the world and a consciousness articulated as liberation from class as well as caste exploitation. Their children were influenced by these flows of ideas and actions, linked as they were to everyday life in the neighbourhoods (Chandavarkar 1994: 107). Newspapers of the time reported how children missed school to take part in workers' rallies and other public actions (Hazareesingh 1999: 109).

FCPE in Girangaon may not have had a direct relation to involvement in such activities but over time did influence the generational diffusion of education as a value and norm in millworkers' families, with rights fought over and gained by workers through legislation and political action ensuring decent wages, stability of employment and aspirations for more fulfilling lives in the city (Manjrekar, Gopal and Vaidya 2015).

The organisation, structure, strengths and constraints of Bombay/Mumbai's public schools have always been linked to larger imaginations of education in the city. The closure of the mills in Girangaon in the 1990s transformed its neighbourhoods; and by the turn of the twentieth century, neoliberal discourses and policies transformed its municipal schools. Today, these schools in erstwhile Girangaon recall times when public education in the city was planned around its demography and was an important site of public debate and civic action. The number of languages of instruction in these schools has reduced from eight to four (Marathi, Hindi, Urdu and English), with English increasingly being offered either partially or fully as a medium of instruction. Many municipal schools in the area now operate as public–private partnerships (PPPs) under the rubric of 'reforms' in public school education. These developments have contributed to erasing the complex, multilayered histories of public education in the area of Bombay/Mumbai that contributed most to the vibrant cosmopolitanism of the city through the twentieth century. This chapter represents an attempt to recover this history within the limitations of a fragmented archive on public education in early twentieth-century Bombay.<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

1. This chapter draws on archival records, principally the proceedings of the Bombay Schools Committee (SC) and the annual administrative reports of the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC). Other sources are the records of social welfare organisations such as the Social Service League and the Servants of India Society. The newspaper archive is another important source. Apart from these, the chapter draws on the extensive scholarship on millworkers and the mill area of Bombay city.
2. In the late nineteenth century, there was a dominance of these communities in higher education in Bombay. Brahmins were about 43 per cent of all college students, Parsis about 23 per cent, Gujarati trading castes about 7 per cent, Goan Christians about 6 per cent, European and Eurasian Christians about 6 per cent, and Prabhus (traditional scribal castes) about 4 per cent (Ramanna 1992; McDonald 1966).

3. This was the period marked by the plague in 1896, the outbreak of Spanish influenza in 1918 and famine-like conditions in areas affected by the flu epidemic, in large measure due to shortage of food grains because of the war.
4. Up to 1909, the Department of Primary Education in the BMC was under the aegis of the Joint Schools Committee, comprising members of the colonial government and the BMC (Manshardt 1935; Thakkar 1916).
5. 'Depressed classes' were those belonging to untouchable communities (who later went on to name themselves 'Dalit'). 'Backward classes' was a term used for those communities that were above the untouchable castes but below the intermediate castes.
6. The SC also had highly motivated persons heading it who had no direct connection with the city's business elites and were among the first public intellectuals and administrators trained in education in universities abroad. The most well known among these were R. V. Parulekar, who came from humble rural origins and had obtained a master's in education from the University of Leeds in 1924 (secretary, SC, from 1928 to 1941), and Kapila Khandwala, who came from a relatively well-off family of the city, who gained a master's in education from the University of Michigan in 1930 (secretary, SC, from 1941 to 1949, and as education officer from 1950 for a few years). Both attempted to introduce several social measures within public education in Bombay. Khandwala worked for girls' education and played a significant role in the women's rights movement both nationally and internationally from the 1930s.
7. Extract from Letter No. 4242 of 25 October 1922, from the Secretary, Schools Committee, to the Municipal Secretary, Part II, Scheme to Introduce Free and Compulsory Education in the F and G Wards (SC Proceedings, 1923).
8. Manshardt was active in several social welfare organisations and official planning committees in Bombay and went on to become the first director of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences when it was set up in 1936 (Manshardt 1967).
9. The *Times of India* reported a meeting held at Dhore Chawl (Kamathipura 1st lane), where Dalit residents demanded *chawls* and schools to be immediately opened in the areas of E ward (*Times of India* 1922).
10. The current administrative wards of F South and North and G North and South cover the erstwhile F and G wards.
11. Most millworkers lived close to the mills; by 1925, 90 per cent lived within 15 minutes' walking distance to their place of work (Adarkar and Menon 2004).

12. *Chawls*, typical of Bombay's early housing for workers and their families, and many still surviving, are two- to four-storey buildings with small single-occupancy rooms, typically 10 × 12 feet connected to a central passage on each floor.
13. The interweaving of class and caste solidarities was complex and saw several shifts with time and context (Shaikh 2011).
14. Discrimination against the former untouchable castes from education since the mid-nineteenth century has been widely documented, taking various forms such as 'denial of admission and entry into schools, physical violence against low-caste pupils and their families, and threats of school boycott and emptying of classrooms if a single Untouchable was admitted' (Nambissan 2020: 128).
15. The background to these events was the growing consciousness of the Dalits against the discrimination they faced in accessing water tanks and public facilities in the city, and mobilisation that resulted in the Mahad Satyagraha of 1928.
16. No Urdu girls' schools are included here since FCPE excluded Muslim girls.
17. See Hazareesingh (2000) for a detailed discussion on the role of the Social Service League. The possibilities for making the discursive connections with education remain to be explored.
18. For example, in 1924, the Depressed Classes Mission asked the SC to take over a library and primary night school, as it was becoming difficult for the association to support it (Depressed Classes Mission Society of India 1924). After the introduction of FCPE in 1925, some night schools were amalgamated with municipal schools, and the available data suggest an overall decline in the number of municipality-supported night schools. However, night schools supported by social welfare organisations that received some aid from the government increased in number between the 1920s and 1940s.
19. It took considerable patience but we were finally able to access neglected and fragile school-based files of the Schools Committee's Office for the period 1910 to 1947. This chapter represents one of very few studies where it has been possible to reference records from this endangered archive.

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