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Book Review

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Janaki Nair (Ed.), *Un/Common Schooling: Educational Experiments in Twentieth-Century India*. Orient BlackSwan, 2022, pp. 254, Price: ₹1,145, ISBN: 9789354422775.

Close to eight decades after achieving independence, India's inherited modern schooling system has seen significant expansion and transformation. Despite inherent flaws, modern schooling has become deeply ingrained in the national-social imagination, indistinguishable from the concept of education itself. Its presumed nature and form are reflected in laws, policies, institutions, and everyday common sense. This mainstream system has historically operated under bureaucratic governance frameworks which exercise stringent control over its various aspects. This includes how education is provisioned and delivered, as well as determining appropriate school knowledge and instruction. On one hand, the stated goal of this massified system is to ensure uniformity of values in a social landscape that is as divided as it is diverse. On the other hand, it reflects the enduring legacy of colonialism, adapted and perpetuated in a post-independence era with little imagination for nurturing human qualities, and focused singularly on preparing youth for the job market. This has resulted in a largely homogenised, inauthentic education that alienates students from their own contexts.

Post liberalisation, this top-down approach has become seamlessly intertwined with global policy borrowings, reflected in increasing calls to standardise learning and teaching outcomes. At the same time, market-driven approaches to schooling have deepened social divides and undermined the goal of quality universal education. Under authoritarian regimes of power, these trends have further intensified with policy initiatives towards prescribed curricula, national standards, and tests across stages, coupled with the increased role of for-profit actors. Although these initiatives are packaged as efforts to bridge equity and quality, they further exacerbate the problem. In such a context, the need to nurture alternative approaches to address core issues in education has been

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overshadowed by the project of skilling for economic development, driven by the logic of return on investment.

However, during the 1960s and 1970s, a thriving civil society nurtured a wave of alternative schools amid shrinking consensus on the post-independence project of nation building and "the very vivid failures of mass education" (p. 214). Most telling among these failures was the inability of mainstream education to engage with the realities of disadvantaged groups. The book *Un/Common Schooling* edited by Janaki Nair engages with such schools, which emerged to provide education to some of the most marginalised social groups in the country. Most of these institutions are no longer in existence or have been restructured significantly. From the lens of alternative education, the book provides insights into the sociopolitical landscape of schooling in India, focusing on the interplay between education, social justice, and the aspirations of marginalised communities. The central focus of the book is on exploring the meaning(s) and possibilities of education for marginalised children, beyond merely imparting cashable skills to them.

The book comprises case studies, personal accounts, and life stories of founders, practitioners, and graduates of these institutions, bringing to life alternative imaginations of education from different regions of India. It includes an introduction and conclusion by Nair, along with nine chapter-contributions organised into three parts. The book opens by inviting readers to engage with key questions concerning alternative schooling: What were alternative schools an alternative to, and what made them possible? What constitutes alternative schooling, and did these schools produce a climate of caregiving and caretaking? What forms can alternative schools take in the present context?

The first part brings together three critical reflections on educational alternatives for children from social groups outside the fold of formal education systems, mostly located in remote villages and some in city slums. The first two essays by K. T. Margaret and Jane H. Sahi are rich memoirs of the Tilak Nagar Children's Centre in a Bengaluru slum and Sita School in Silvepura village near Bengaluru, respectively. These essays traverse through ideas and experiences that shaped these institutions and their practices. The third essay by Rashmi Paliwal reflects on the emergence and work of Eklavya in Madhya Pradesh and its eventual restructuring. Drawing from nation-building concerns of the Nehruvian era and dissatisfaction with elementary science education, Eklavya's pioneering work began with reforming the school science curriculum that expanded across subjects while also catalysing other reform networks in elementary and teacher education. Despite

being an exceptional example of state and civil society collaboration for providing quality education to the masses, Eklavya's initiatives eventually gave way to the government's insistence on implementing a uniform state curriculum for all.

The three essays in the first part of the book signpost shared challenges to the sustainability of non-state and non-profit alternative institutions that are shaped by shifts in the socioeconomic aspirations of communities, funding priorities of sponsors, and state policies. In doing so, the essays draw readers' attention to the dynamic meanings and contexts of alternatives to formal schooling.

Part two of the book comprises three contributions that discuss other influential alternatives. The chapter by Pradip Kumar Datta discusses Sriniketan in West Bengal's Surul village, based on Tagore's emphasis on forging a new rural selfhood or reconstituting the rural by reworking its relationship with the urban. A recurring theme in these discussions is the contrast between the pedagogic orientations of Tagore and Gandhi, both of whom placed rural transformation centrally in their imagination of a post-colonial future. The next two chapters are narratives of relatively small-scale experimental initiatives. Malathi M. C. presents an autobiographical account of establishing Vikasana in Doddakallasandra village on the outskirts of Bengaluru. Shirly Joseph, co-founder of Kanavu in Nadavayal village, Wayanad in Kerala, delves into the pedagogic context and practices of the school and its intersection with the personal life trajectories of its founders, teachers, and students. These accounts demonstrate how small-scale alternative initiatives allow freedom and autonomy in thought and practice, but at the same time, how this very nature shapes their lack of validation and support, and fragility.

The third part of the book is based on the life stories of underprivileged school alumni. It comprises an introduction by Nair and three chapters drawing from the Life Stories Project sponsored by the Transnational Research Group of the German Historical Institute in London. In the introduction to Part Three, Nair outlines that the purpose of exploring these life stories is to engage with questions such as: how do the underprivileged and mostly first-generation school graduates recollect their schooling? Which type of school offers better prospects to underprivileged learners? What makes the experiences of alternative, mainstream, state-run, and religious schools different from each other? What follows are non-deterministic, thematic observations based on respondent recollections that are both "exhilarating and troubling" (p. 134). The chapters by Sunandan K. N., Shivangi Jaiswal, and Megha Sharma take this engagement

forward, presenting the respondents' stories of success, failure, humiliation, hope, guilt, and the ethics and politics of care as they are shaped by social hierarchies of class, caste, and gender. These narratives provide a glimpse into how respondents rearticulate or make sense of their experiences of schooling later in life. Through these stories, the chapters vividly portray the persistent precariousness in the lived realities of underprivileged students despite schooling/education.

Nair's concluding chapter juxtaposes narratives of alternative school alumni with the recollections of state schooling by Dalit authors in their autobiographies. Through their schooling experiences, while the former developed greater confidence in dealing with structures of dominance despite uncertain economic success, the latter's chances often hinged on "fortuitous encounters" with enlightened individuals (p. 236). In this context, the chapter calls for consideration of how idealistic alternative schooling—that emerged at certain key moments in the history of education in India—has now become redundant, with large-scale and unbridled privatisation of schooling and the expansion of its shadow industry.

Overall, although the volume does not singularly define alternative schooling, it implicitly presents it as a creative form of resistance to the dominant educational narrative, fostering culturally responsive and critically engaged learning experiences. The book offers a fresh perspective on underexplored alternative experiments and stories of education by interweaving them with sociopolitical analysis and personal reflections. It is thought-provoking, particularly in the contemporary context where the discourse on equity and social justice in education is increasingly being narrowed down to vouchers and concessions, and the legitimisation of low-cost "alternatives" for the poor.

The volume has its limitations. For instance, it does not sufficiently attend to the processes and challenges of building up alternative schools and the politics of their working. It also leaves much to be desired regarding the problems of practice and the abrupt closure of these schools. However, these limitations do not overshadow the book's critical contribution, which is to encourage readers to rethink the defining moments of schooling in independent India (p. xxiv) and engage with the question of why alternative experiments for the masses were neglected and even stifled by the state. The cross-cutting narratives invite a reflective reconsideration of education, emphasising on an ethical framework of care. They challenge the conventional focus of mainstream education on inputs and outputs, suggesting that education for the poor encompasses much more than mere metrics.

Departing from the conventions of scholarly analysis on Indian education which are based on policy perspectives, *Un/Common Schooling* builds on narratives from below without glossing over their contradictions and fragmentations. Voices of practitioners and marginalised individuals assume centrality in the essays. The chapter contributions are critical, reflexive, and accessible, making this book a valuable resource not only for scholars, policymakers, and educators, but for anyone interested in understanding experiments in Indian schooling.