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## Book Reviews

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**Janaki Nair (Ed.), *Un/Common Schooling: Educational Experiments in Twentieth-century India*. Orient BlackSwan, 2022, ₹1145, xix + 249 pp.**

Stories are neither definitive statements nor immutable and, by their very nature, lead to other stories. Even this story has not ended and it grows by being shared.

—Sahi (p. 47)

*Un/Common Schooling* is an edited volume of 10 essays that discuss alternative education in post-independent India. The essays may be seen as presenting stories that capture the essence of alternative education. The field realities are trigger points for reflections and discussions on what alternative education means, how the meaning has changed over the last five decades, and why, if at all, do we still need alternative education. A fundamental question that each of the essays keeps returning to is what is alternative education an ‘alternative’ to. Is alternative education only meant to provide a choice to the conventional education provided in state-run and private schools of our country? Or does it work towards building a transformative society that is closer to working on principles of equity in access, opportunity and social order?

Two of the most popular books on alternative schooling in India are *Life at School* and *Life at Mirambika*. Thapan’s ‘*Life at School*’ (1991) presented an ethnographic account of the Rishi Valley School that is founded on the thoughts of Krishnamurti. Besides presenting a detailed account of the schooling process, Thapan’s work also brought forth the ideas that Krishnamurti propounded. *Life at Mirambika* (Sibia, 2006) is a shorter book that presents a sketch of the translation of Aurobindo’s vision into practice at Mirambika, the Free Progress School. Both these books focus on principles and practices of specific schools. Krishnamurti’s focus has been on experiential learning to find deeper meaning in one’s existence while forming a profound connect with the world in which we live. Aurobindo’s vision of integral yoga focuses on understanding the various realms of one’s personality and connecting with the physical, emotional, social and spiritual being. Both these philosophies emphasise experiencing rather than learning from lectures and texts.

A broader perspective on alternative schooling in India has been presented in the works of Vittachi and Raghavan (2007) and the more recently published work of Pathak (2016). In the former, the conceptualisation of alternative schools and why are they required has been discussed apart from personal experiences of some select experiments in the country. Pathak’s book is more comprehensive and written to inform parents about the options that they can avail when looking for schools for their children.

The books have been written in the past two decades and there is a dearth of literature that documents contemporary developments in the field. Further, none of these books provides a critical reflection on why alternative education systems arose in the country and the systemic difficulties that they have faced. This vacuum has been addressed by the edited volume by Nair. The essays in the book are not just summaries of work at the grassroots but also raise fundamental questions on the space for alternative educational practices in larger educational landscape of a developing nation.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first part, Reflections on Alternative Education, the three essays explore the space for alternative education in India. The first two essays in this part trace the trajectory of alternative education in the country and uncover the need for it. The third essay is a reflective account of perhaps the largest attempt in the country, of alternative education run in collaboration with the state. Each of the three educational endeavours that the essays talk about—namely Tilak Nagar Children’s Centre, Karnataka, Sita School, Karnataka, and Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme, Madhya Pradesh—started by recognising the needs that arose from the field. Learning with children, accepting them for who they are and listening to their needs were cornerstones in each of the centres. Where curriculum is not fixed, there is ample scope to design experiences around children’s learning interests and needs. If we were to extrapolate these ideals to mainstream education, this seems improbable in the large class sizes that conventional educational system works with. Margaret’s essay (Chapter 1) ends by discussing the important changes that have been brought into the Indian education system in the past decade. Greater enrolment in government schools post RTE 2009, and a no-detention policy has brought about two major changes. First, where children spend increasing amounts of time inside government schools, there is no time left for visiting or staying at ‘alternative’ or supplementary learning centres. Second, with the no-detention policy, children have lost the motivation to learn. Both these point to the negative impact of alternative education in India. This, of course, can be questioned from a different lens. For instance, one might argue that evaluation of learning and the terminologies of ‘pass’ and ‘fail’ were the demotivating factors. The ‘no-detention’ policy has opened up the possibility of pacing learning according to the learning levels and styles of each learner. This discussion is beyond the scope of this book review. The insights that Margaret has arrived at after working in the field for over five decades are significant contributions to understanding the learning of children and what schools need to do for them.

Another major aspect is the interface of educational centres with the community. A major driving force for parents to send their children to schools or alternative educational centres has been the instrumental value that education brings particularly in terms of employment opportunities but also emancipation from caste-based discrimination. Sahi points out (Chapter 2) how the community did not want schools to extend or build upon the indigenous knowledges of the village. ‘There was a felt need that the institution of the school should sever connections with a history that seemed to only preserve disadvantage and marginalisation’ (p. 42).

In the third essay in this part, Paliwal (Chapter 3) describes the systematic efforts made as part of the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme. The efforts, beyond doubt, were important initiatives towards making education more relevant to learners and contextualised in the local settings that the students could benefit from. The attempt at mainstreaming them through government schools throws up the possibility of merging conventional with alternative education, which would have yielded many benefits for the learners. Yet, as Paliwal points out, community plays a significant role in the success of any programme. In this case, the curriculum reform faced opposition from various participants, including private players in the education sector, and a large-scale implementation weakened the agency of teachers that seemed to be the hallmark of HSTP. A significant opposition stems from the middle class that presents its own anxieties about its children’s future if education does not prepare them for competitiveness that awaits them in professional courses after school. We are drawn once again to the challenge faced by alternative education in countering the instrumental value of education that conventional education seems to address well.

In the second part of the book, Experiments, the three essays present descriptive accounts of educational experiments made in different regions of the country. While the essays in the first part were reflective and analytical, the essays in the second part focussed on the processes and practices in place in the three schools and how they interface with the community. Datta (Chapter 4) discusses the translation of Tagore’s vision

into pedagogic initiative in rural India through Sriniketan. One of the key takeaways from this experiment is to create a sense of ownership among rural communities towards initiating social change through education. A significant process of social change can be initiated by adopting some of the practices of alternative schools into the mainstream. Where communities take ownership of the change, they are able to direct transformation to suit their needs and feel better connected with new practices being adopted in education. In sharing the journey of setting up and running *Vikasana*, Malathi (Chapter 5) talks about the possibility of replicating the ideas of *Vikasana* in other settings. She recommends that schools work with freedom from government control, parental interference and universalisation. This is a significant departure from some of the other experiences where working with community is recommended. Joseph's experiences at *Kanavu* (Chapter 6) document change at a different level. The change through this school is quieter and at a smaller scale. In this vision, the transformation is in the individuals with no attempt at scaling it up. Individual lives are touched through the experiences at *Kanavu*, and there is no attempt to document or define success or failure of the work done.

In the third part, *Life Stories*, the essays draw upon the *Life Stories Project*, sponsored as part of the *Transnational Research Group (TRG)* of the *German Historical Institute of London*, to document the experiences of the underprivileged and what transformation has education brought for them. In the *Introduction* section, Nair talks about the place of schooling in changing the social landscape, where post-independent India was characterised by social hierarchies. Schools remained inaccessible to the marginalised. Alternative schools started in response to such marginalisation, in places where there was often felt no need to send children to schools. Alternative schools emerged as spaces where children from diverse caste/class contexts could develop a sense of self that paved the path for social and economic emancipation. Nair purports that central to alternative schools is the process of 'healing', that children at the alternative schools have experienced (p. xxviii). The 'ethic of care' that alternative schools have worked on has helped children find their own identities and have faith in their abilities. This is a significant step in understanding what successful alternative schools do and what conventional education system should be able to do. Instead of using the yardstick of success and achievement in material terms, where schools work on 'ethic of care', children are able also able to make sense of their own lives and find space for themselves to participate fully in society. Schools thus have the potential to pave the way for individual and social transformation. This is evident in the stories of *Vidya* (Sunandan, Chapter 7), *Devika* and *Shyam* (Sharma, Chapter 9). In other stories presented by *Jaiswal* (Chapter 8), the narrative that emerges shows the inner conflict experienced by 'poor married women' who continued their education after their marriage. The satisfaction with the decision to study post marriage was marred by the guilt of not having committed themselves to the responsibilities of housewives and mothers.

In the concluding section, *Un/Common Schooling*, Nair points out the anxiety of an uncertain future experienced by those who have benefitted from experiencing alternative education. As market forces permeate rural and forest communities in India, the need to succeed in a competitive world has pushed more parents towards opting for private schools for their children. This makes it difficult for alternative education to work towards promoting participatory education that seems to serve lofty ideals of creating a just and equitable society.

In the *Introduction*, Nair points out that *Gandhi's Basic Education*, that started as a plan to socialise people of India juxtaposed against the socialisation provided by colonial education. Yet it soon 'morphed into a residual category of non-formal schooling for those who had no access to education' (p. xx). The essay by *Paliwal* in Chapter 3 presents the view that large-scale projects such as the *Hoshangabad Science Education programme* did not find favour with the State. Small projects that choose to stay insulated from conventional and mainstream education continue to find favour with the marginalised. One is then left wondering if alternative schools in India will continue to be access points for those who remain on economic and social margins.

The book is insightful about exploring possibilities in educational spaces. Committed teachers can draw upon these experiences and develop their ideas for bringing about change in their classrooms, schools and the larger social system. The essays are noteworthy contributions towards bridging the gap between the rhetoric and praxis in alternative education. We dream of a world that does not require children to move away from the mainstream and look for alternatives. If this dream has to become a reality, there are valuable lessons that can be learnt from the essays in this book. A final word is also for the writing style of the essays that provide inputs for researchers on how to conduct interviews and undertake fieldwork. The book is thus a valuable resource for teachers, teacher educators and researchers in the field of education.

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