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Imandeep Kaur Grewal

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The Environment of Poverty and the Limits of Girlhood:
The Struggle for the Right to an Education in North India

Gareebi Ka Mahual Aur Ladkeo Ki Hud

Imandeep Kaur Grewal

Dissertation
Submitted to the College of Education
Eastern Michigan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
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Concentration in Urban Education

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April 2014
Ypsilanti, Michigan
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my father’s vision, the love of my mother and children, and to the courage and determination of the girls in this study.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with most endeavors in my life, this study is the result of significant contributions made by many people. First and foremost I would like to acknowledge my adviser, Dr. Valerie Polakow, for her support, guidance, encouragement, and dedication to excellence all of which have helped give shape to this dissertation. I am deeply grateful to the girls with whom I worked who so willingly and lovingly welcomed me into their lives, and I would also like to thank their families for the trust they placed in me. Sonia Channi, principal of Sikhya, provided me with access to participants; her guidance and insights proved to be invaluable. I would like to thank Kamal Gill, my aunt, for arranging meetings with participants and fellow government school teachers. Simran Grewal, my sister-in-law, provided much needed help with transportation and networking, and also proved to be an excellent discussion partner. I am deeply grateful to my friend Becky Schmitt for being an excellent substitute mother to my boys, an incredibly supportive friend, and for providing excellent feedback throughout the writing process. The skilled use of Kjirsten Blander’s red pen and her willingness to devote countless hours editing added the much needed polish to this dissertation. I am grateful to my friends Mara Gibson, Marcia Mai, Kathleen Anzicek, Caroline Peltz, Regina George, and many others for the love and support they so generously share with me and my boys. I am certain that this dissertation would not be possible without the love, support, and encouragement of my sons, Tej Grewal Bergin and Kabir Grewal Bergin. I would like to thank Gurdarshan Grewal, my mother, for her deep love and support which continues to give me courage and motivation. It is easy for me to trace the beginning of this dissertation to discussions I had with my father, Late Brig. Gurdip Grewal, when I was a child. He was a visionary and, without his wisdom, this dissertation would not
have taken shape. Last, but not least, I would like to thank my sister, Mandeep Grewal, for always being there for me.
ABSTRACT

This qualitative dissertation explored the lived worlds and educational experiences of adolescent girls living in poverty in North India. Class, caste, gender, and regionally-based inequalities result in striking disparities leading to restricted, gendered opportunities and individual freedoms. The purpose of this ethnographic study was an in-depth exploration of the lives of 20 girls living in poverty, and how their own educational futures were impacted by educational policy and practices. Illustrative case studies were used to explore the broader question of educational access. In keeping with Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the primary focus of this study was to give voice to the girls by utilizing interviews, daily journals written by the girls, and intense researcher immersion in their lives. Issues of critical reflexivity, positionality, and translation were addressed within a methodological framework shaped by the works of Clifford Geertz and Ruth Behar. Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s work on Human Capabilities provided the theoretical framework for this study. The environment of poverty, shaped by parental education, occupation, health, the absence of reliable social services, as well as the limits placed on girlhood within the patrifocal family structure, posed significant barriers to educational access and success. The impact of poverty and gender on educational aspirations, access, mobility, and individual freedom was explored in the context of agency, resilience, and determination as the girls negotiated obstacles to their education such as: limited access to quality education; heavy reliance on exams and tutoring; vulnerabilities associated with multi-dimensional poverty; and a culture of silence and compliance that limited their capability and freedom to achieve their aspirations.

Keywords: gender, education, poverty, rights and capabilities, India, ethnography
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CHAPTER 1: INDIA, POVERTY, AND GENDER

Impetus for This Study

Flipping through a National Geographic Magazine in the waiting room at my doctor’s office, I came across a story entitled “Too Young to Wed: The Secret World of Child Brides.” I read the story with interest and paused often to take in the photographs of girl-brides, some as young as five years old. On the last page of the article was the photograph of thirteen-year-old Sunil standing by herself in front of a white wall decorated with posters of women both in traditional and “modern” clothes. I lingered over Sunil’s picture for a long time, and continue to wonder if it is the confident lift of her shoulder, the defiant tilt of her chin, or the light of no-nonsense strength in her eyes—or perhaps a combination of these features (especially as it stood in stark contrast to the other photographs in the article)—that captures my fascination every time I look at the photograph. At the age of eleven, Sunil’s parents arranged her marriage. Aware of the fact that marriage for girls before the age of eighteen had been made illegal following India’s ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Sunil threatened to inform the police unless her parents agreed to call off the wedding and let her stay in school. Sunil’s informed and courageous stand worked; two years later, according to the article, she is still in school, surprisingly with her mother’s support who now believes that education will give Sunil an “edge against others” (Gorney, 2011, p. 98).

Sunil’s awareness of her right to an education combined with her ability to exercise this right gave her the courage to resist the limits that her family and society placed on her freedom to choose a life she desires, and has a right to desire. While constructs of childhood have varied across time and culture, it is only in the past few decades that children are beginning to be recognized as autonomous beings deserving of their own rights. It is this emerging new
construct of childhood that recognizes that childhood cannot and must not be understood as an a-historic, monolithic, or universal construct. Instead it must be understood as an historical and social construct that varies based on (but not limited to) a child’s race, gender, class, ethnicity, region, and religion and to which each society assigns varying expectations, opportunities, and values (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004). In India’s highly socially stratified society, children are placed near the bottom of the hierarchy, their status affording them sparse legal, social, or economic protection (Kakar, 1982; Bhakry, 2006). Under India’s long history of patrifocal family structure (discussed in Chapter 2), children are seen as members of a family rather than as individuals, as property of their fathers rather than as autonomous, and boys are far more highly valued than girls. Kismet (destiny), believed to be shaped by one’s deeds from the previous life, is widely accepted to determine an individual’s life course (Kakar, 1982; Clarke, 2001; Bhakry, 2006). Besides being highly socially stratified, Indian society is also extremely economically stratified so that children in poverty have a lower status than children of wealthy families. The intersection of poverty and gender means that girls living in poverty (like Sunil) are on the lowest rung of the social status hierarchy. Within this social, economic, and political context, then, Sunil’s gender, age, and class renders her defiant stand that much more exceptional and admirable.

It is relevant at this point to ponder what other choice Sunil could have made in the absence of the rights granted to her by the Indian Government and various international rights conventions, especially the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989). Rights, Alderson (2008) offers, are a powerful tool for social justice since, once granted, rights can be equally claimed by everyone thereby extending equality, worth, and dignity to every person. Rights therefore are a “valuable commodity,” especially for those such as children without other
means of power (Freeman, 1997 p. 14). The CRC is the first legally-binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights—civil, cultural, economic, political, and social—for children. Article 28 of the CRC gives children the right to education by recognizing that education is a necessary precursor to the attainment of all other rights, and the belief that education has the potential to act both as a “freeing” and “equalizing” agent.

Inequality of various kinds is part of every society but, in India, class, caste, gender, and region-based inequalities have created “lethal divisions and disparities” (Dreze & Sen, 2013, p. 213). In the Capabilities Approach, Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) propose that inequality must be understood in terms of its impact on individual capabilities—where capability is a combination of actual freedom to choose and actual functioning. They argue that inequalities limit an individual’s actual freedoms to choose from among possibilities, to do and to be what she values and has reason to value. In other words, inequalities, particularly poverty and gender based inequalities, create a gap between what an individual does and becomes and what an individual is actually capable of doing and becoming. Nussbaum (2000) says that there is a sense of waste and tragedy when an individual is given a life that “blights powers of human action and expression” (p. 83). A “good life,” on the other hand, is one in which an individual has genuine choice as opposed to being forced into a particular path. Within this framework, then, girls who are forced to marry at an early age when they would prefer to stay in school do not have a “good life”; theirs is a life of tragedy and waste. Similar to the rights framework, the Capability Approach gives due importance to education and sees it as essential to the fulfillment of all central capabilities. Both Sen (1999, 2013) and Nussbaum (2000, 2011a) are strong supporters of education, particularly education of women and girls living in poverty for whom
education has the potential to increase their actual freedoms and functioning by increasing access to information and strengthening capabilities in the political, social, and economic spheres.

**Purpose of the study.** Gender roles are socially and culturally constructed so that what is considered normative for women and girls is a reflection of their status within a given society. In traditionally patriarchal societies, women and girls are seen as weak, dependent, powerless, and incompetent (UNICEF, 2011a; Bhan, 2001). Cultural practices and institutional structures within such traditionally patriarchal societies often maintain and reinforce this inferior and limiting view of women and girls. While it is true that women in most countries struggle with issues of equality and empowerment, it is important to recognize that girls and women are not powerless. Throughout history, there is evidence of women’s resistance. It is important to recognize that resistance does not always take place on a large scale; women may exercise their agency within the limits of patriarchy and poverty on a daily basis in ways that often are subversive and hidden. Equally important to note is that a universal “Indian woman” does not exist. Experiences of girls and women depend on class, region, religion, and caste. Just as important to note is that the dominant discourse on “being female” in India is shaped by men and women belonging to economically and intellectually advantaged groups. For these reasons, it is imperative to provide opportunities for girls and women from the “other” India to effectively participate in the construction of understanding of their lives.

Even though many women have been granted rights in theory, discrimination against them persists worldwide since these rights are not upheld in practice. Nussbaum (2011a) states that when gender and poverty intersect, multiple deprivation of capabilities results. Over half a million women die each year from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth; gender-based violence kills or disables as many women between the ages of 15 and 44 as cancer;
and of the 77 million illiterates world-wide, two-thirds are women (UNICEF, 2011a). The lives of the majority of women and girls in traditionally patriarchal India are similarly subject to pervasive inequalities and discrimination. The Review Committee (2000, 2004) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child noted the “persistence of discriminatory social attitudes and harmful traditional practices towards girls, including female infanticide, selective abortions, low school enrolment and high drop-out rates, and early and forced marriages” as violations of the rights of girls in India. Discourses that challenge the traditional view of girls as a “burden” and “less than” are essential for improving the status of girls in India (Bhan, 2001).

Nussbaum (2011b), Dreze & Sen (1995), and Sen (1999) argue that education has the potential to be a vehicle for economic and social mobility. Educational achievement opens opportunities for economic participation for women. In turn, women who earn an income have an increased sense of autonomy, along with increased status in the family and participation in decision making. Education also exposes girls and women to other points of view and ways of being. Ideally, education prepares girls and women for participation in the political process. The widespread benefits of education make it a “fertile capability/function” (Nussbaum, 2011a).

Historically, education in India has been limited to the wealthy, and, in wealthy families, to boys because it long has been assumed that education has no value in the lives of the poor or in the lives of girls. This discourse and resulting practices have resulted in double barriers to educational access for girls living in poverty.

**Research questions.** This study explores the school experience of girls living in poverty in India. Through small scale, local case studies of twenty girls living in poverty in northern India, I explore the impact of educational policy and its implementation on their lives; specifically how their lives are shaped by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and
the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE). Using illustrative ethnographic case studies, I also analyze the broader question of educational access for girls living in poverty in northern India. Two policy questions are central: 1) Has the ratification of the CRC and implementation of the RTE impacted structural, attitudinal, financial, and other barriers to educational access as experienced by girls living in poverty? and 2) has the ratification of the CRC and implementation of the RTE impacted gender-role perceptions for girls living in poverty?

**Significance of study.** Expertise can come from theoretical and academic pursuits and/or from lived experiences. To a large extent, the research on poverty, gender, and education is articulated by people with academic and theoretical expertise. The voices and participation of people who live in poverty, women who live in poverty, and female students who live in poverty are critically missing from discourse and policy making. The most significant contribution this study makes is to provide a meaningful opportunity for girls living in poverty to effectively participate in the construction of understanding of their lives. Since quantitative research has been the significant research methodology used in India, the understanding of most social, political, and economic phenomena is dominated by a positivist framework (Dyer & Choksi, 2002). Qualitative research is just starting to take root in India (Sinha, 2010). My qualitative study adds to the limited body educational qualitative research in India. By highlighting the complexity of the lives of the participants in their own voices, this study deepens and expands understanding of critical issues in the lives of the participants with the hope of impacting and improving policy development and implementation. Research with children rather than on them also is relatively new. This study makes a further significant contribution in highlighting the benefits of working with children while adding to the discussion on ethical concerns of
researching with children, especially in non-European contexts. A focus on effective implementation of children’s rights in India is emerging and my study makes a significant contribution to this focus.

**India: Diversity, Contradictions, and Inequalities**

Widespread class, gender, religious, language, geographic, and cultural diversity render India a highly complex and often contradictory society. India’s 2,973,193 square kilometers of landmass is divided into 29 states and seven union territories. India has 23 official languages and over two-hundred dialects. Diversity is just as prominent in India’s geography with its landmass encompassing deserts, evergreen forests, snowy Himalayas, a long coastline, fertile plains, some of the most densely populated cities in the world along with some of the most remote habitations in the world. India’s cultural plurality is partially a result of its myriad invaders and rulers, among them the Romans, Greeks, Tajiks, Arabs, Uzbeks, Persians, Afghans, and Europeans. Nussbaum (2000) states that the broad range of diversities prevalent in India—urban/rural, rich/poor, patriarchal/matriarchal, literate/illiterate, English speaking/non-English speaking—makes it the most diverse country in the world. In their latest book, *An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions*, Dreze and Sen (2013) discuss these contradictions and inequalities, some of which they refer to as “lethal” and “shocking.” The authors suggest that class, caste, gender, religion, and region continue to be axes of inequality in India, and, in some instances (such as of class and region), such inequalities are increasing rather than decreasing.

At this point, a brief discussion of caste, religion, and region as axes of inequality is needed. While caste, religion, and region remain essential axes of inequality in India, this study focuses primarily on class and gender based educational inequalities. Thus a more in-depth discussion of class and gender will follow later in the chapter.
Caste. The origin of the Indian caste system can be traced back to the Vedic period and is described in ancient scriptures like Dharmasastras (circa 200 BCE; Dumont, 1980). The “Caste System” is a term introduced by the Europeans that, over time, has become synonymous with the ancient Hindu terms varna (color) and jati (ethnicity). It most commonly categorizes people into four hierarchical groups determined by their jati which distinctively defines their occupation, income, status, and social order. The four most commonly referenced groups are: Brahmins, those engaged in priestly function; Kshtriyas, rulers and warriors; Vaishyas, merchants, farmers, and tradesmen; Shudras (now referred to as Dalits), laborers, craftsmen, and servants (Desai, 2008). According to Vedic tradition, Brahmins attain their high status by preserving their “purity” and abstaining from polluting food (meat), polluting activities (farming), and polluting behavior (remarriage of widows, interaction with Shudras; Dumont, 1980). The Shudras were considered polluted and therefore untouchable by the other castes. Rigid traditions prescribed to protect the “purity” of the Brahmins dictated that Shudras live in exclusion outside city limits, and be allowed to perform only the dirtiest and lowest paying jobs. Since the caste system was rooted in religious ideologies, inequalities between the castes are much wider and deeper than simple economic inequalities; moreover, since caste is determined at birth, social mobility was (and to a large extent continues to be) impossible. These inequalities between the castes are significant, persistent, and prevailing even though the upper class, mostly insulated from discrimination based on caste, often believe the caste system is a part of India’s antiquated past and has no relevance in modern Indian society (Bhan, 2001). Even though concepts like purity and pollution hold little weight in modern India, especially in urban areas, caste-based practices persist and are most evident in marriage practices that discourage inter-caste marriages. India’s long caste tradition has resulted in the stratified
distribution of material resources with a majority of the resources and power in the hands of the Brahmins. Making use of available data, Dreze and Sen (2013) illustrate the extent of this imbalance by revealing that in the city of Allahabad (Uttar Pradesh) Brahmins constitute 20% of the population but hold 75% of the top positions in public institutions (judiciary, education, police, press, and government). More surprisingly, 90% of the leaders of anti-establishment movements (such as NGOs and trade unions) in the city were Brahmins, indicating a continued perpetuation even in spaces working towards equality.

**Region.** A majority of Indians continue to reside in rural areas (Government of India, 2012a). The lived experiences of Indian citizens vary considerably depending on whether they live in rural or urban areas. Some of the rural/urban disparities are reflected in poverty and literacy rates, 75% of the poor in India live in rural areas. The rural literacy rate is reported to be 68.9% as compared to the urban literacy rate of 85%, the literacy gap widens when gender is added to the equation. Rural female literacy is reported at 58.8% as compared to the urban female literacy rate of 79.9% (Government of India, 2012a). The definition of “literacy” in the population census of India is fairly liberal, defined as any “person, who can read and write with understanding in any language.” The person may or may not have received any formal education (Government of India, 2001). Significant rural/urban differences are also revealed in marriage experience: 56.2% of girls in rural as compared to 29.3% in urban areas are married before the age of 18 years.

Regional differences are even more pronounced for the 8.2% of India’s population that is tribal, considered to be the largest in the world. The 574 endogamous tribes identified in India are concentrated in a few states: Mizoram (94.75%), Lakshadweep (93.15%), and Nagaland (87.70%; Government of India, 2012a). A majority of the tribes live in remote, inaccessible
settlements scattered in small concentrations and lack access to basic facilities and infrastructure such as electricity, sanitation, communication, roads, schools, and so on. Without exception, tribal communities are characterized by deep poverty.

Another dimension of regional differences in India is the significant variations in interstate social and economic indicators. States like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Himachal Pradesh have social indicators such as female literacy rates, life expectancy, and child mortality that are at the top when compared to other South Asian countries, while states like Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have social indicators that are at the bottom in the same comparison (Dreze & Sen, 2013). While the female literacy rate in Kerala is 93%, it is only 37% in Bihar, which is comparable to the female literacy rates in sub-Saharan Africa.

Dreze and Sen (2013) highlight the very different pace of progress across different states; Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu states were relatively poor in the 1960s while Punjab and Haryana states were relatively prosperous. Both Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu launched ambitious social programs (including universal primary education) in the 1970s which were adequately funded and effectively implemented by the state governments allowing both states to make remarkable social progress. Punjab and Haryana, on the other hand, have increased rates of poverty and have stable or decreased levels of other social indicators (particularly the sex ratio—the number of girls for every 1,000 boys—which has dropped for both states). Dreze and Sen (2013) indicate that, in general, states in the northern (Himachal Pradesh is an exception to this) and western regions of India have higher gender disparities and lower social indicators as compared to southern and eastern states. Reasons for significant regional variation in economic and social indicators are still relatively unexplored though five reasons are primarily identified by most researchers including Dreze and Sen (2013) who offer that states with higher social
indicators have: a) active social policies in place, b) follow universal principles when implementing these policies, c) have functioning governments that are relatively efficient, d) have made it a priority to address issues of inequality, and e) actively involve the public in democratic politics. In short, it is the will of the people and action of the government that improves measure of equality.

The essential role the above-mentioned factors play in tackling issues of inequality can be illustrated through the case of Kerala. During British rule, Kerala was, in fact, two different states each of which had been allowed by the British to have its own domestic rule (which historians say was pro-education). At independence from the British in 1947, in addition to the combination of the two independent states, Kerala also absorbed a small district (Malabar) from Tamil Nadu which had been under British rule and, at the time of absorption, had very low social indicators. Social indicators are now the highest in the nation across all districts of Kerala, including Malabar (Dreze & Sen, 2013).

Religion. India is the birth place of four major World religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. India also has the third largest Muslim population in the world along with a notable population of Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahai’s, and Christians to add to its religious diversity. Religious diversity has been an integral part of Indian history, particularly since invaders of different faiths have ruled India for significant periods of time. At the time of Independence, India was religiously split into two countries—India for the Hindus and Pakistan for the Muslims. This partition was followed by a time of horrific ethnic massacres of millions of people, predominantly Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh.

Contemporary India is a secular country though religion is accepted as an important part of the daily lives of most Indians. Places of worship are plentiful and it is common to find a
mandir (Hindu place of worship), mosque (Muslim place of worship), and a gurudwara (a Sikh place of worship) in the same block. There is a fine balance between religious tolerance and intolerance in India. Religious songs from different faiths are sung as part of the daily morning assembly in schools across India, national holidays are granted for major celebrations of each faith; nonetheless, tensions between Hindu and Muslim groups persist and have resulted in many communal riots. More recently tensions between the Hindus and Sikhs have increased. Community unrest based on cultural and religious differences is part of every region across India.

Significant differences exist between religions when it comes to social practices such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, dowry, and the status of women (the female literacy rate is an indicator and is lowest for Muslim girls). To account for these significant variations, the Indian Constitution allows for plural systems of personal law (Muslim, Hindu, Parsi, and Christian) that govern inheritance and property laws as well as family laws (marriage, divorce, child custody, etc.). Commercial and criminal laws are unified for the whole nation (Sarkar, 2002).

The Environment of Poverty: Gareebi Ka Mahaul

India’s rapid economic growth (7% growth in GDP at a time when most economies are struggling) in the last decade has been a cause of celebration for many, but also has led to a wider class divisions as only a small percentage of India’s population has benefited from this growing economy. Stark class disparities add to the complexities and contradictions prevalent throughout India and have led to the commonly used term “two Indias” in an effort to contextualize the economic, political, and social experience in India. The one India is home to the largest middle class, and some of Forbes’ wealthiest people in the world; the “other” India is made up of the largest number of poor living in any country. Indians in the first India are active participants and
beneficiaries of the booming Indian economy; they have the power to “buy” access to basic (and often limited) resources such as food, water, land, electricity, and transportation. They also have the ability to bypass India’s corrupt bureaucracy. Membership in this India allows access to cutting-edge health care and some of the most elite schools (Indian Institute of Technology and Indian Institute of Management) in the world. Indians in the “other” India, in stark contrast, are made up of a significantly large population of people living in abject poverty with limited access to basic resources such as food, water, land, electricity, and transportation. They have little to no access to even the most basic health care or education and have no resources to bypass corrupt bureaucracies. The large number of Indians in the “other” India “lack the basic requirements of a dignified life” (Dreze & Sen, 2013 p. 218).

Poverty in India. Poverty, Mahatma Gandhi said, is the worst form of violence (Gandhi, 1927), and the number of people subject to the violence of poverty in India is staggering. The estimates vary based on how poverty is measured ranging from 77% to 37.2% (Misra, 2010). While these percentages by themselves are astounding, converting them into actual numbers allows for a more concrete realization of the magnitude of poverty in India—estimated at over 420 million people living on under $1.25 per day in 2010 (Lanjouw & Muragi, 2011). Cross-national understanding of poverty is made difficult by the fact that significant variation exists in the criteria individual countries select for measuring poverty. To make international comparison possible, the World Bank determines the poverty line for developing countries at $1.25 per day at 2005 purchasing power parity (PPP) prices (World Bank, 2013). The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) uses the same measure as the World Bank for measuring poverty. This is higher than India’s standard of approx. $0.55 per day at 2008 purchasing power parity (Misra, 2010).
Measuring poverty. Poverty is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon, the measurement of which is dependent on its definition. Historically, the definition and measurement of poverty has been limited to measures of income and ability to purchase basic goods. The first measure of poverty in India was undertaken by the Planning Commission (1962) which established the poverty line at per capita monthly income of Rupees 20 ($1=approximately Rs. 60) as a measure of rural poverty. The poverty line was based on per capita monthly income needed to purchase minimum nutritional requirements (measured in terms of calories). The poverty line did not account for the cost of housing, health care, and education though the measure did account for rural/urban price differences by increasing the measure of urban poverty by Rs. 1 per adult per month (Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Sen (1974) pointed out two significant shortcomings to this measure of poverty by arguing that a) caloric intake is highly dependent on occupation (rural occupations are generally more physically demanding), age, gender, and health; and b) it does not allow for consideration of levels of deprivation. The Planning Commission (1977) continued to use measures of income and purchasing power to define poverty but broadened it to include expenditure on non-food items such as transportation, housing, health, and education. The Planning Commission did take into account Sen’s recommendation and set the minimum caloric requirement at 2,400 for rural areas and 2,100 for urban areas, thereby increasing the poverty line to Rs. 49.09 ($1=approximately Rs. 60, or approximately $0.82) for rural areas and Rs. 56.64 (approximately $0.94) for urban areas based on 1974 prices. In 1992, the Planning Commission revised the poverty line to take into consideration the cost of a wider range of goods—food, fuel, lighting, housing, clothing, bedding, footwear, and miscellaneous. At this time, the Commission also set state-specific poverty lines to account for regional differences in prices. The Commission did not consider the
cost of education. The poverty line is continually adjusted to reflect changes in prices and, in 2011, is defined as per capita monthly income of Rs. 960 (approximately $16) in urban areas and Rs. 780 (approximately $13) in rural areas (Dreze & Sen, 2013).

The low cut-off of the poverty line has come under heavy criticism in recent years and is often referred to as a “destitute line” since the allocations for basic needs set by the Planning Commission are far below the real costs. Dreze and Sen (2013) provide examples saying that the Rs. 40 set for cost of footwear would only buy a strap and not the whole sandal. In the last decade, measurement of poverty has received considerable attention in India with several commissions and task forces undertaking the task of defining it—the Sengupta committee of 2008, the Saxena Committee of 2009, the Planning Commission and the Tendulkar Committee of 2010, among others (Misra, 2010). The result is that there are many measures of poverty and therefore many estimates of the poverty rate in India.

**Sen and the Multidimensional Poverty Index.** Sen (1983, 1985) challenged the measurement of poverty as taking into account only income and purchasing power arguing that doing so severely limits understanding of the impact poverty has on the lives of the poor. In his book, *Development as Freedom*, Sen (1999) proposes a broader approach to understanding poverty, one that explores the complicated relationship between income and well-being. Sen (1999) argues that when poverty is viewed within an income/consumption framework, it fails to account for two significant factors: a) that existing economic, political, and social structures do not allow equal distribution of economic gains; and b) even among citizens with equal consumption levels, the ability to benefit from economic gain is impacted by diversity (age, gender, caste, region, etc.). While the narrow analysis of poverty as determined by income allows for uncomplicated prediction of trends and counting of the poor, it does not account for
the fact that economic inequality is “substantially magnified by its coupling” with social and political inequality (Sen, 2008, p. 12). Using income and consumption as measures of poverty not only oversimplifies the problem, it fails to recognize the “social dimensions of disparity” (Sen, 2008, p. 12)—the process by which the poor become or remain poor. Poverty understood in these terms would explain why, in spite of India’s rapid economic growth, a majority of its citizens cannot participate in nor benefit from this economic growth, and they remain very poor.

Sen proposes an approach that extends deeper and wider than access to basic food and housing, an approach that focuses on individual capabilities, freedoms, and well-being (see Chapter 2 for more on the Capability Approach). There is no denying that income has an impact on individual freedoms and well-being, but Sen (1999) cautions that the relationship is complex and multi-directional. The impact of income on an individual’s well-being does differ based on the age of the person, for example children’s well-being is more severely impacted by low-income. The impact is dependent on a person’s gender and social role (mortality, morbidity, illiteracy, malnutrition are higher among girls in India because they are usually the last to receive economic benefits in the society and within a family) and by the coupling of low income with other disadvantages such as illness, social exclusions, or disability. Additionally, the impact of income on individual well-being is relative, as in the case of the poor in rich countries. For example the income of African-American men is significantly higher than the income of Bangladeshi men, but Bangladeshi men have a much higher chance of living past the age of forty than African-American men in Harlem, New York (Dreze & Sen, 2013).

Sen’s conceptualization of poverty as a complex, multi-dimensional, dynamic, and relative phenomenon, and his framing of poverty as capability deprivation have led to the development of the Multi-dimensional Poverty Index (MPI) by Alkire and Foster (2007). The
MPI currently uses the following measure to determine levels of poverty: education (educational achievement and literacy); childhood and youth conditions (school attendance, no school lag, access to child care, and absence of child labor); labor (absence of long term employment, formal employment); health (insurance, access to health care when needed); and public utilities and housing conditions (access to improved drinking water, adequate elimination of sewer waste, adequate flooring, adequate walls, and no critical crowding).

**Urban poverty.** It is estimated that by 2050, seven out of ten people in the World will be living in urban areas where the population is increasing by approximately 60 million a year. Asia is home to half of the world’s urban population (Aslam & Szczuka, 2012). Only ten percent of the urban population resides in mega cities, the majority of urban growth is occurring in smaller cities and towns. Rural-to-urban migration is a major factor in the rapid growth of urban population. Social factors such as the caste system, joint family, diversity of languages and cultures, poor transportation and infrastructure inhibited migration in India until the first half of the 20th century such that only three to four percent of the population lived outside the state of birth (Stanislaus & Joseph, 2007). Coelho and Maringanti (2012) suggest that as a result of market changes, “cities are emerging as both sites of hope and despair for millions of people” (p. 39) saying that the rapid pace of migration in developing countries can be characterized as distress migration resulting from collapsed agrarian economies and manifests as “urbanization without industrialization” (Davis, 2006, p. 59). Distress migration continues to attract migrants in spite of the high rates of unemployment, overcrowding, soaring prices, and poor infrastructure that are characteristic of many Indian cities (Coelho & Maringanti, 2012). Significant urban growth is happening in the most unplanned and deprived areas creating significant challenges in accessing essential services, and increasing insecurity for meeting basic needs (Aslam &
Szczuka, 2012). Availability of work, place of residence, and how a migrant navigates the city both determines and is determined by levels of poverty. Physical proximity to resources like drinking water, health care, and schools is closer than in most rural areas, but this proximity does not guarantee access or quality. This is not to negate the “urban advantage” in that, on average, urban children have better health and better access to education as compared to their rural counterparts (Aslam & Szczuka, 2012, p. 6). Disparities in health, housing, and education between rich and poor in cities are attracting increased attention and concern. Urban inequalities increased in eighteen Indian states in India, and increased sharply in some states like Orissa (Kapoor, 2013). Aslam and Szczuka point to the fact that in many countries, such as Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Venezuela, urban poverty severely limits access to education with the result that children from poor urban households have less education than their poorest rural counterparts. Coelho and Maringanti (2012) assert that urban poverty should be framed as a dynamic and complex phenomenon shaped by institutional structures that significantly impact economic mobility and access to health care and education.

Child poverty. Until 1999, the discourse about poverty focused almost exclusively on adult and household poverty. There was little data identifying international or regional patterns of child poverty (Minujin & Nandy, 2012). As conceptions of childhood were reconstructed and the rights of children began to be recognized and respected, the discourse on poverty widened its focus to include children and it soon became obvious that children are the hardest hit by poverty. Children’s development renders them more vulnerable to certain deprivations that can have lasting effects making children more vulnerable than adults to the effects of poverty (Boyden, Hardgrove, & Knowles, 2012). Emerging data on child poverty indicates that children are disproportionatelty represented among the poor (Vandemoortele, 2012). Vandemoortele (2012)
argues that any effective effort to reduce poverty must address and correct unequal opportunities in childhood.

Emphasizing the importance of child poverty, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the first international definition of child poverty in 2006:

…children living in poverty are deprived of nutrition, water, and sanitation facilities, access to basic health-care and services, shelter, education, participation, and protection, and that while a severe lack of goods and services hurts every human being, it is most threatening and harmful to children, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, to reach their full potential and to participate as full members of society (UNGA, 2006, para 460).

UNICEF (2007) campaigned for the multi-dimensional measure of poverty which would take into account access to basic social services, especially nutrition, water, sanitation, health care, shelter, education, and information. Gordon and Nandy (2012) suggest that any measure of child poverty in addition to including criteria identified by UNICEF (2007) also must conceptualize deprivation as a continuum ranging from no deprivation through mild, moderate, and severe deprivation, to extreme deprivation at the end of the scale. Poverty and deprivation are tightly linked, the more severe the poverty, the more severe the deprivation and the more likely it is to cause serious long- and short-term harm to the development of a child. Alkire and Roche (2010) have developed a 12-step child poverty measurement methodology. Countries like Mexico, Vietnam, Iran, and Tanzania have adapted versions of this multi-dimensional measure of poverty to fit their local contexts. Each of these countries has, in turn, identified the minimum threshold for each measure below which no child should have to subsist.

Poverty and education. Poverty shapes an individual’s environment in a way that the environment reinforces and reproduces poverty. The fact that education has the potential to
break the vicious cycle of poverty by allowing for economic and social mobility is now widely accepted. An education bestows economic, social, and political benefits thereby giving individuals multiple advantages that allow for a fuller and more effective participation in society (Dreze & Sen 2013). For these reasons, education, particularly primary education, has been a central focus of poverty reduction measures at all levels, from grassroots to those of international aid agencies. It is also for this reason that parents from economically disadvantaged groups perceive education as “the most promising chance for upward mobility for their children” (Dreze & Sen, 1995, p. 110), and are willing to make tremendous sacrifices to keep their children in school (PROBE, 1999; De, Khera, Samson, & Kumar, 2011).

A strong focus on education at all levels has resulted in heightened literacy rates, increased school enrollment, and an increase in completed years of schooling in all major regions of the world (Dorius, 2012). Increased literacy rates have resulted in some decrease in economic and social inequalities since education and inequality are assumed to have a dialectical relationship—the spread of education is shown to reduce traditional class and gender barriers, and reduction of these barriers, in turn, increases educational access (Ramachandran, 1996). The educational achievements of Dr. Ambedkar, the principal architect of the Indian constitution, who was born into poverty and went on to become the first Dalit to earn a college degree (in law, economics, and political science from Columbia University and the London School of Economics) are a testimony to the potential of education. As discussed in Chapter 3, access to education, however, continues to be limited for children living in poverty in India where educational inequalities are increasing (De, Khera, Samson, & Kumar, 2011; Dorius, 2012; Dreze & Sen, 2013; Kapoor, 2013; Kingdon, 2007).
 Limits of Girlhood: *Ladkeo Ki Hud*

Mirroring “two economic” Indias are “two gendered” Indias. Deeply rooted patrifocal family structures and ideologies have shaped traditions and practices that reinforce the value of a male child while limiting the value and mobility of the female child. In general, these gendered traditions and practices are more deeply rooted in the “other” India creating double barriers to economic, educational, social, and political participation for girls and women living in poverty. Women in the “first” India have access to education and actively participate in the political, social, and economic sphere. The “first” India is home to women who have the ability and freedom to exercise their right to choose careers that defy all gender boundaries and expectations, for instance, India has had the longest running female head of any country in the world. Women in the “other” India, however, have limited or no access to education and face significant barriers to economic and political participation. These women lack the freedom to make even the most basic choices in their lives, including those related to marriage and childbearing. Between these two extremes, there exists a multitude of economic and gendered realities.

Gender-based inequalities in educational attainment, health and survival, and economic and political participation are not particular to India; they exist in most countries in varying forms. Gender inequalities, however, are found to be highest in countries that are predominantly patriarchal and with high populations of women and children in poverty, such as India. The extent of gender inequality along with rising awareness that gender equality and women’s empowerment are essential—not only at the individual and family level but for the health of a country—have made issues of gender equality a significant focus of national and international discourse and policy reform efforts. Until recently, discussions and efforts aimed at
achieving greater gender parity were targeted almost exclusively at women; however, the
growing awareness that issues of gender equality begin at birth and shadow the lives of girls into
womanhood has broadened the focus to include girls in discussions and reform and movements.
Inclusion of girls in the equality discourse is also supported by the shifting conception of
childhood.

**Conception of childhood.** How a society relates to children is largely determined by its
conception of childhood. Conceptions of childhood, like conceptions of poverty, have evolved
over time and vary across cultures. Freeman (1998) argues that children continue in
contemporary times to be “measured” against an “unexplained, unproblematic rational adult
world, which is (of course) both complete and desirable” (p. 434) while the view of children as
dependent and passive is normalized. The social construct of childhood as passive “imperfect,
incomplete versions of their adult selves” (Archard, 2008, p. 2) allowed, and continues to allow,
adults authority over children (James & Prout, 1990). The comparison further creates a sharp
dichotomy between wise adult and immature child which disrespects and limits the capacity of
the individual child to exercise her voice and agency while simultaneously justifying parental
jurisdiction over their children. It is only recently that childhood has started to be understood as
a cultural construct necessitating the consideration of the influence of race, class, gender,
religion, ethnicity, and so on. (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004).

Among the CRC’s (refer to Chapter 2) many significant contributions is the role it has
played in changing the understanding of childhood. The CRC recognizes and respects children’s
autonomy, dignity, capacity, agency, and voice, and it is the most widely adopted and
comprehensive legal instrument granting autonomous rights to children. The CRC
acknowledges children’s unique vulnerability by entitling them to special care, protection, and
assistance (paragraphs 4 and 5 of the preamble) while simultaneously respecting their emerging capabilities. Article 12 gives unprecedented recognition to the emerging capabilities of children by affirming the rights of children, in accordance with their age and capability, to exercise their voices and participate in making decisions, about their lives. In doing so, the CRC recognizes children as social actors capable of influencing their own lives and of making decisions thereby challenging the conception of children as being passive or incompetent (Hammarberg, 1990). Additionally, Article 3 of the CRC respects the natural dependency of children on adults, without reducing the dependency to victimization, by obligating parents, guardians, and the state to make the best interest of the child a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. In doing so, the CRC abolishes the conception of children as possessions of their guardians and recognizes them as human beings of equal value to adults (Ensalaco & Majka, 2005; Hammarberg, 1990).

As stated earlier, in India’s highly socially stratified society, children are placed near the bottom of the hierarchy, their status affording them little legal, social, or economic protection (Kakar, 1982; Bhakry, 2006). Under India’s long history of patriarchy, children are seen as members of a family rather than as individuals; as property of their fathers rather than autonomous; and boys are far more highly valued than girls. Kismet (destiny), believed to be shaped by one’s deeds from the previous life, is widely accepted as determining a child’s life course (Kakar, 1982; Clarke, 2001; Bhakry, 2006). The view of children in India as being immature and destitute continues to be the prevalent understanding of Indian children in the international context (Balagopalan, 2011). The field of childhood studies is relatively new in India and is contributing to conceptual shifts, although children continue to be understood first as members of a family with primary responsibility to their family and community (Murray, 2010).
Disparity in power and status between adults and children continues to be the foundation of most families such that adult authority is absolute and children’s obedience is demanded (Balagopalan, 2011). Propelled by the CRC, child participation is increasing, though the level of participation is limited to what Hart (1992) refers to as either “decorative” or “token.” In a recent article in *Childhood*, Sreenivas (2011) captures the emerging conceptual changes in conceptions of childhood in India through her review of literature which focuses on minority children’s realities. She argues such literature is essential to expanding the understanding of childhood both in India and internationally.

**Conception of girlhood in India.** Girlhood is described by Manjrekar (2011) as a “category at the intersection of gender and childhood, in the distinct domain of ‘gendered childhood’” (p. 354). Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell (2006) believe that girlhood is a highly contested space which often is over-determined by social forces that imbue it with particular behavioral dictates, social norms, and ways of being seen and of seeing the world. Dube (2001) conveys that rituals and practices are vehicles through which these social forces act upon the lives of individual girls. In India, the term “girl-child” emerged in the 1980s within the post-colonial development agenda as an instrumental and universal category (Manjrekar, 2011). Critics argue that the conception of the “girl-child” within this developmental discourse is one of “voiceless victim” (Leach, 2010, p. 5). India’s dominant patrifocal family structure and ideology have shaped rituals and practices that regulate the life cycle of a girl child, many of which limit her participation in public spheres such as education and the economy. With an increasing focus on the status of girls and women, the question of discourse has arisen. Mohanty (2003) cautions that Western research on feminism often views non-Western women as a uniform and stable group rather than as individuals whose lives are distinctly shaped by local social, economic, and
political contexts. Access to education, health care, nutrition, and economic and political participation varies greatly for girls and women throughout India based on their class, religion, and geographic location. Kumar (1994) believes girls and women often are conceptualized as lacking agency to act within the structures of their lives. It is essential, however, to recognize the sometimes subversive and hidden ways in which girls and women exercise their agency while seeming to participate in a repressive normative order (Kumar, 1994; Oldenburg, 1991). Resistance does not always have to be violent, large-scale, or male dominated, and it is with this conceptualization of girls and women as active agents of everyday resistance within repressive structures that I have chosen to work for this study.

**Patrifocal family structure and ideology.** Conceptions of childhood and girlhood in India are greatly impacted by India’s dominant family structure, which Mukhopadhyay and Seymour (1994) refer to as the patrifocal family structure and ideology. The authors differentiate between patriarchy and patrifocal family structure arguing that while the former refers to a monolithic system of gender hierarchy in which males always dominate, the latter is an ideology which better explains family systems in agricultural hierarchical societies. The concept of the patrifocal family structure acknowledges the diversity of family structures across India and is able to adapt to the wide religious, class, language, and geographic diversity characteristic of India. Mukhopadhyay and Seymour (1994) outline seven features of the patrifocal family structure and ideology, features that create complex socio-cultural impacts that profoundly affects the lives of girls and women, including their access to and achievement in education.

**Importance of family.** Within the patrifocal ideology, family is emphasized over the individual. Irrespective of sex, individuals are placed within this wider circle of family and kinship necessitating consideration towards others’ views and a sense of responsibility towards
the members of this wider circle (Karlekar, 1994). Decisions are made for the benefit of the family and kinship group. It is the family rather than the individual child who decides whether the child (son or daughter) will go to school, which school she or he will attend, and, to a large extent, what she or he will study. These decisions are made with the benefit of the family in mind and it is expected and normative for children to subordinate their goals and interests to those of the family. Interdependence rather than independence is nurtured in children in an effort to ensure the security of the family structure. The nurturance of interdependence creates a sense of obligation and responsibility among family and kin members.

**Son preference.** Son preference is emphasized and reinforced through structural practices of patrilocal residence, patrilineal descent, and patrilineal inheritance. The continued normative practice of patrilocal residence ensures that sons are valued since they continue to live with their parents into adulthood and are able to provide long-term care for the family. Additionally, patrilocal residence means that after marriage, sons bring home a daughter-in-law to care for the family. Daughters are given peripheral status since they are considered only temporary members of their natal family, and are raised as *paraya dhan* (borrowed wealth) ultimately to become permanent members of their husbands’ family into which they are married. In a society where “purity” and status are intricately linked and expressed through family name, patrilineal descent adds to the status and importance of sons. In intensely agricultural societies, land is valuable and, until recently, patrilineal descent dictated that only sons were allowed to inherit *pushtoni jaidat* (ancestral property). While inheritance laws have changed and now grant women inheritance rights, inheritance practices remain relatively unchanged. Within these traditions, sometimes the only way a woman can rise above her subordinate status is by bearing
sons (Manhoff, 2006) so new brides often are given the blessing, “may you be the mother of many sons.”

Gender bias is evident in significantly different rates of child mortality and literacy. It is most evident in India’s distressingly low sex ratio (number of girls for every 1,000 boys). Reported at 970 in 1901, the sex ratio has declined to 919 for the age group 0-6 years (Government of India, 2012a). The sharp decline is attributed to technological advancement which allows families to know the sex of a fetus giving them the opportunity to abort the fetus if it is female. The increased practice of female feticide has led to what Sen (2013) refers to as the “missing women.” As with most indicators in India, the sex ratio shows significant regional variations and is higher for states in the south and east. Kerala, a state with strong matrilineal traditions, is the only state in India that has a positive sex ratio for girls.

Public and private spheres. The patrifocal ideology clearly defines gender roles and responsibilities, assigning to men the public sphere responsibility for earning money, and the private sphere responsibility for child care and household chores to women. It not only is the clear definition of gender roles and responsibilities but the value associated with them that impacts the lives of girls and boys, women and men. Women’s limitation to the private sphere has resulted in their exclusion from the labor force making them economically dependent on the male members of their family. Limiting girls and women to the private sphere is also justified as a way of keeping them “safe,” a concept that presumably took root under Mughal rule and got stronger during the British rule when the public space became associated with the “other” and the private with “familiarity and tradition” (Sinha & Chauhan, 2013). Again, limits on female mobility and participation in public spheres vary significantly across class, religion, and region and are greater for girls living in poverty, especially for Muslim girls living in poverty in the
northern and western states. It should further be noted that the fact that education requires girls to enter and participate in a public space, has been an additional barrier to educational access and attainment for many girls living in poverty.

**Power hierarchy.** Patrifocal ideology provides a clear authority structure in which men have authority over women of the same generation (i.e., brother over sister, husband over wife) and older generations have authority over the younger generations (i.e., parents over children of all ages).

**Female mobility and family honor.** Within the patrifocal family structure, girls and women are expected to be the carriers and protectors of patrilineal “purity” and family honor. For this reason, families regulate female sexual behavior by severely restricting male-female interaction and limiting female mobility, and this is a primary reason parents give for withdrawing their daughters from school after grade 8 or 12.

Fear of rape is a significant reason in contemporary times for why parents put strict limits on their daughters’ mobility (Dreze & Sen, 2013). News of the brutal rape, torture, and subsequent death of a twenty-three year old student in New Delhi on December 29, 2012 stirred outrage and protests, not only in India, but throughout the world. No other event in recent history has drawn more attention than this case to the status of women in India. The incident also brought to light several facts: a) Most rapes in India go unreported, b) police and other officials are largely indifferent, c) male prejudice and sexism that blames the victim, and d) girls and women are highly vulnerable to sexual assault. Dreze and Sen (2013) report that the incidence of rape is very high in India and reports are mostly ignored when the victim is poor, uneducated, and lives in the village. They report that conviction rates for rape are very low
mostly because the police are unfriendly to the victim, the courts are slow to act, and the stigma of rape is very high in a society that values “purity.”

**Limits of girlhood: ladeko ki hud.** The patrifocal ideology encompasses a blueprint for “appropriate” female behavior which emphasizes obedience, chastity, self-sacrifice, modesty, adaptability, nurturance, domesticity, and being “home-loving,” while teaching self-restraint and the importance of social appearance and social conformity for the purpose of fostering group harmony and welfare at the expense of independence or pursuit of individual goals (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994, p. 4).

Sinha and Chauhan (2013) suggest that “appropriate” female behavior is represented in the term *lajja* which is a hard-earned marker of Indian womanhood and remains so even in contemporary times. They, along with others like Chaterjee (2002) and Parish (1991), argue that it is difficult to find a single English term that would fully capture the essence of the term *lajja* which incorporates many behaviors such as being “civilized”; knowing one’s rightful place in society; knowing how to conduct oneself in a becoming manner; being conscious of one’s duties and responsibilities; persevering in performance of social role obligations; being shy, modest, and deferential; and not encroaching upon the prerogatives of others (pp. 134-5). Sinha and Chauhan (2013) suggest that the complex, gendered Indian concept of *lajja* influences individual motivation, emotions, self-concept, role identity, and group dynamics, and is socialized primarily by the family and kinship and reinforced through media, particularly literature, films, and advertisements. “Appropriate” behavior and *lajja* are expressed through dress, eating habits, social demeanor, and religiosity. Girls and women exercise self-regulation and restraint because of their regard for others’ well-being and because they are concerned with how others perceive them (Sinha & Chauhan, 2013).
This “essential nature” of women has remained relatively unchanged over the centuries (Karlekar, 1994; Sinha & Chauhan, 2013). While this is not the only model for appropriate female behavior, it remains the dominant model because it supports the social order. From the earliest times, women have been assigned the burden of responsibility for family honor by remaining pure and submissive. “Purity” of the bride is a critical factor in determining marriage eligibility since it is seen to impact not only family honor but the purity of lineage. Within these strict caste-maintenance practices, maintenance of “appropriate” female behavior then becomes the responsibility of the family and the kinship (Karlekar, 1994).

Mukhopadhyay and Seymour (1994) and Sinha and Chauhan (2013) caution that expectations for female behavior do vary across class, religion, and region. A strong obstacle to girls’ education has been its assumed negative impact on the “appropriate” behavior of girls since education is understood to make girls more questioning, less compliant, and more independent (Karlekar, 1994; Vatuk, 1994).

**A good marriage.** The patrifocal ideology is accompanied by family control of marriage arrangements to ensure the “purity” of caste and status. A “good” spouse is one that is of the same caste and often even the same sub-caste as the family. Arranging their daughter’s marriage to a family of the same or better status than their own is accepted by most Indian parents (consistent across caste, class, and religion) to be their primary duty and responsibility towards their daughter and towards maintenance of family honor and status (Grover, 2011; Uberoi, 2006). To ensure a good marriage, parents focus their attention on socializing their daughters to be desirable brides, to behave “appropriately,” and have *lajja*. Securing a “good” family for their daughter can be quite costly for the parents since the practice of dowry not only persists but is increasing. The higher the groom’s education level and salary, the higher the demands are for a
dowry. Also, the more educated a groom is the more likely he is to want a reasonably educated (but not too educated as that is assumed to have a negative impact on a girl’s ability to behave “appropriately”) bride, a fact that motivates many parents to allow their daughters limited (usually up to grade 8 or 12) access to education (Drene 1994; Grover 2011; Uberoi, 2006; Vatuk, 1994). Most parents who are faced with the choice of investing in their daughter’s marriage or her education, choose to invest in marriage (PROBE, 1999; Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994). Child marriage, defined as marriage under the age of 18 years for girls, continues to persist in India with one in four girls being married before the age of 15 (NFHS-3, 2006). The job of protecting a girl’s character, honor, and purity is demanding—a reason why parents and tradition encourage early marriage. Despite national laws prohibiting child marriage, it remains the norm in many of Indian states, and mass marriages of children at public functions, such as Akha Teej in Rajasthan, continue to be performed in the presence of public officials (IACR, 2004; Law Commission of India, 2008). “Love marriages,” or self-selected marriages, are frowned upon not only because they are non-normative but because they often break boundaries of caste, class, or religion. Girls who choose “love marriages” are likely also to lose the critical support of their natal family. With the increase in female education and economic participation, girls are exercising greater autonomy in mate selection and the practice of “love arranged marriages” where the partners select each other and families arrange the rest is on the rise (Grover, 2011).

Culture, however, is not static and neither is family. The shift in India’s economy from agricultural to consumer-based is impacting families and gender roles, but it is too soon to tell the extent and quality of the impact.
Intersection of Poverty and Gender

There is a reason that a majority of the world’s poor are women. Gender inequalities are part of most societies; these inequalities are, however, relative and vary significantly across class, religion, and region. Gender, like poverty, can be understood in terms of capability deprivation (Sen, 1999; Dreze & Sen, 2013). It is not surprising, therefore, that when poverty and gender intersect, they create double disadvantages (Nussbaum, 2000). It is essential to understand the mechanisms whereby poverty and gender intersect to shape the lives of the millions of poor girls and women in India.

As discussed in the previous section, within India’s dominant patrifocal family structure women’s participation in public spaces is severely limited. This has resulted in lower female literacy rates, low female employment rates, and low female representation in elected office.

It is estimated that only 50% of Indian women between the ages of 18 and 60 years are literate. Girls’ access to education has traditionally been limited since a) girls and women are expected to take care of the household for which education is deemed irrelevant, and b) education traditionally has been seen as a threat to the “appropriate” behavior ascribed to girls. Limited education is one reason for the low participation of women in the labor force. Only 15% of urban women and only 34% of rural women are employed in India. Cultural norms prohibiting female work-force participation and the lack of recognition of women’s work as economically productive are two leading causes for the very low rates of female work participation (Desai, 2011). The rate of female work-force participation is higher in rural areas because poverty there is higher and poverty forces families to disregard cultural norms. In keeping with cultural norms shaped by patrifocal ideologies, women who do earn income have two options: a) hand over their earnings to their husbands or the male head of the household, and
having little to no participation in economic decision making, or b) spend it to maintain the household.

The continuing practice of patrilineal inheritance adds to women’s vulnerability, in spite of laws allowing daughters the right to inherit. This economic vulnerability also extends to women from wealthier families who have no access to their own money and are therefore economically dependent on their husbands or fathers. Another dimension to women’s vulnerability is their lack of power to make reproductive choices, which in many instances forces women in poverty who have little education to have large numbers of children thereby impacting their health and increasing household and childcare demands. Sen (1999) defines a “good life” as one that affords genuine choice as opposed to a life that forces an individual into a particular path, however rich that life may be in other respects.

Families living in poverty have limited resources to allocate among family members. Within the patrifocal family ideology, girls and women are the last recipients of these limited resources (Sen, 1999). Research indicates that when families have to choose between feeding or educating, they choose sons over daughters (PROBE, 1999). Since a majority of the parents continue to perceive their daughter’s marriage as their primary responsibility, when forced to choose, they choose to save for marriage over education (Uberoi, 2006). Household responsibilities and sibling care are the primary responsibility of the oldest daughter in families living in poverty and a primary reason for their educational exclusion (PROBE, 1999).

It is this continued intersection of gender and poverty in the economic, social, and political spheres that increases women’s economic, social, and political vulnerability and which makes women more likely than men to be poor. A growing awareness of these intersections is leading to increased attention to issues of female education and empowerment (Desai, 2011).
There is little doubt that significant progress has been made in India since the time of independence: life expectancy has doubled (66 years in 2011 as compared with 32 in 1951); infant mortality has been reduced four-fold (44 deaths per thousand live births in 2011 as compared with approximately 180 deaths in 1951); female literacy has gone from 8.8% to 65% between 1951 and 2011 (Dreze & Sen, 2013). India has also established itself as an innovative center for information technology and is becoming a leader in providing the world with affordable medicine. In spite of these remarkable strides, deep class, caste, gender, religious, and regional inequalities remain persistent in India. Dreze and Sen (2013) refer to the multi-dimensional inequalities arising from class, caste, gender, religion, and regional disparities as “a unique cocktail of lethal divisions” (p. 213). The authors state that “social norms and value systems underlying these historical inequalities are still alive, even if their manifestation is moderated by modern laws, norms, and institutions” (p. 215). These disparities reinforce each other in such a way that a Dalit girl living in poverty in rural India is faced with multiple layers of disadvantage and is most likely to be living in conditions of extreme disempowerment. Education and empowerment of women through work-force participation is critical for reducing these multiple layers of disadvantage.

Dreze and Sen (2013) point to the case of Bangladesh, a country whose per capita income is half that of India but which has in the last twenty years surpassed India in most social indicators, including female literacy rates, mean year of schooling, life expectancy, child mortality, sanitation, and so on. The authors attribute Bangladesh’s impressive improvement in social indicators primarily to efforts targeted at increasing female literacy and female participation in the workforce, which is twice that of India. There are many reasons for why
deep inequalities persist in India, one of which is the fact that the needs, rights, and experiences of the large number of Indians in the “other” India remain largely invisible.

**Democracy, Constitution, the Legal System and Inequalities**

Democracy is a widely accepted instrument for reducing injustices and inequalities. The architects of free India committed to a democratic path (which must be recognized for the fact that democracy was far from the norm in South Asia at that time) despite considerable odds—widespread poverty and illiteracy, deep-rooted class, caste, and gender inequalities, a pluralistic society, and high levels of religious tensions. In the past six decades, India has earned its status as a leading democracy as it expanded to include multi-party politics, free elections, relatively censor-free media, an independent judiciary, and a substantial guarantee of free speech (Dreze & Sen, 2013).

Jawaharlal Nehru (1946), a leading architect of free India and its first Prime Minister, recognized the existence of deep-rooted class, caste, and gender inequalities in his book, *The Discovery of India*, when he said “…backwardness or degradation of any group is not due to inherent failings in it, but principally to lack of opportunities and long suppression by other groups” (p. 250). In his statement, Nehru recognized that inequality is rooted in harmful traditional practices that have resulted in a significant imbalance of power among groups of people. Nehru shifted the focus of blame for inequality from the individual or group to lack of opportunity: “In India…we must aim for equality…. It does mean equal opportunity for all, and no political, economic, or social barriers” (Nehru, 1946, pp. 251-252). Recognizing the need for economic, social, and political reform, Nehru and other architects of free India (Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, among a few), founded the Indian Constitution on principles of democracy, secularism, equality, and freedom (Thomas, 2005).
The constitution’s Preamble commits its people to secure for all its citizens social, economic, and political justice; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith, and worship; equality of status and of opportunity; and the promotion of fraternity assuring dignity of the individual and unity of the nation. Dreze and Sen (2002) maintain that India’s constitution was radical for its time as it was one of the first to provide affirmative action to combat social and economic inequality. India provided women with voting rights well before many “developed” countries like Canada, Sweden, or Belgium. Fundamental Rights under Article 14 of the Indian constitution afford the right to equality, especially for women and children; Article 15 affords the right against discrimination based on religion, race, caste, or sex with special provisions made for children, women, and Dalits; while Article 17 abolishes the practice of “untouchability” (Constitution of India, 1950).

India’s constitution establishes a parliamentary liberal democracy which provides for a Supreme Court along with High Courts in various states. The Supreme Court is the ultimate interpreter of the Fundamental Rights, and the role of the Supreme Court has evolved over the years to protect social goals from a conservative judiciary (Sarkar, 2002). The Supreme Court has played a significant role in enforcing the equality granted to each citizen by the Constitution. A good example is the landmark ruling in the 1993 case of Unni Krishnan, J. P. v. State of Andhra Pradesh in which the Supreme Court ruled that the right to an education flows directly from the right to life and is related to the dignity of the individual. This ruling is often credited with spurring efforts to make primary education free and compulsory in India (Raina, 2010).

Over the years, India has passed many laws to address issues of class and gender inequalities. Most of India’s policies on paper can certainly be seen as being progressive and egalitarian. The policies, however, lose their potential as a result of poor implantation, lack of
accountability, and high rates of corruption (Dreze & Sen, 2002). The issue of the declining sex ratio was addressed by the Government of India in the Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act of 1994, the law had little effect on the declining sex-ratio. In 2001 the Supreme Court of India ordered the central government and state authorities “to implement [the law] with all vigor and zeal,” and, in 2002, state governments were ordered to impound ultrasound machines from unregistered clinics that advertised the use of ultrasound testing for sex selection. These measures have had limited impact on the abnormally low sex-ratio (Manhoff, 2006).

In spite of a strong dedication to equality and freedom, Indian society remains deeply unequal. Democracy is a sum of its parts and the effectiveness of each part—democratic ideals, democratic institutions, and democratic practices—determine overall effectiveness (Dreze & Sen, 2002). The authors consider India to have high democratic ideals and adequate democratic institutions, but poor democratic practices that further deepen political, economic, and social inequalities. Limited access to information, lack of accountability, poor infrastructure, high levels of corruption, and lack of political will are given as reasons for poor democratic practices in India (Dreze & Sen, 2013).
CHAPTER 2: INEQUALITIES, THE HUMAN CAPABILITY APPROACH, AND CHILDREN’S RIGHTS

Inequalities are neither “natural nor inevitable,” they are a product of a set of interactions shaped by class, caste, gender, religion, region, and history, among other factors (Pemberton, Gordon, & Nandy, 2011, p. 21). Sen (1980, 1999, 2006) and Nussbaum (1997, 2000, 2011a, 2011b) argue that inequalities and disadvantages are best understood within the capabilities and rights framework for several essential reasons. The two approaches recognize that a) all humans are entitled to certain levels of freedoms and certain rights simply because they are human, b) certain capabilities and rights are universal, c) these capabilities and rights are interdependent, non-hierarchical and indivisible, and d) both approaches place the responsibility on the state to ensure that central capabilities and granted rights are realized for all citizens. For these reasons, I have chosen to use the capabilities and rights framework for addressing issues of inequality in this study.

The Human Capability Approach

**Sen and the Human Capability Approach.** The capabilities framework was pioneered by Amartya Sen and emerged from his Nobel Prize-winning work on famines wherein which he showed that famines were not caused simply by food shortage but by lack of opportunity for individuals to access food (e.g., due to unemployment). Famine corrective measures would therefore be inadequate and ineffective if they focused only on providing food relief or handouts without correcting the structural barriers that result in opportunity limitations on the individual level. In his work on poverty, Sen (1980, 1992, 1999) took a similar approach to the issue of poverty measurement and outcomes by shifting the focus away from income and purchasing power and towards an assessment of individual wellbeing. He proposed that effective measures
for reducing income inequality must acknowledge and correct the economic, social, cultural, and political practices that limit access and utilization and also render unequal the distribution of critical resources, of which education is one.

Sen (1980, 1985, 1999) poses an outwardly simple question as the foundation of the capabilities approach: what is an individual actually able to do and be, and what is she actually doing and being? The Human Capability Approach is both a moral and an evaluative framework in which people’s freedom to achieve wellbeing is of primary importance, and their ability to achieve wellbeing is understood in terms of their capability. Capabilities, functioning, freedoms, and agency are central to the capabilities approach.

Sen (1999) defines capabilities in terms of freedoms and functioning. He explains that “substantive freedoms” are those that allow individuals to choose from among alternate lifestyles, in other words, freedom of opportunity. Sen defines “substantive freedoms” as the actual freedoms an individual has, making it a point to separate them from paper freedoms, which in many instances are meaningless to individuals (p. 75). For example, although the Special Marriage Act of 1954 grants the legal right for citizens across class, caste, religion, and region to choose whom they marry, few girls living in poverty in North India have the actual freedom to do so.

The capability approach places freedom center stage and argues for the expansion of freedoms as essential to reducing inequality (Sen, 1999). Functioning is the “actual doing or being” an individual is able to achieve (Sen, 1999, p. 75). The actual functioning an individual achieves is determined not only by her access to resources but also by her ability to convert the resource into a capability. Educational achievement, then, is not only dependent on a student’s access to school but also on her interest in education and her ability to read, write, and meet the
academic demands of school (which can vary considerably across gender, class, religion, region, and the individual’s physical, social, and cognitive abilities). An essential component of wellbeing is an individual’s ability to achieve the functioning she values; for example, going to school, having time to play, being well nourished, and so on. Sen (1999) makes it a point to distinguish between what a person values and what a person has reason to value.

It is important, Sen (1999) says, to recognize that functioning is only a part of capability. He illustrates the difference between the two through the example of starvation—one person could be starving because she/he chooses to fast, another could be starving because she/he has no access to food. While both the individuals have the same functioning, their capabilities are entirely different. It is essential to understand poverty in terms of capability deprivation, in that poverty deprives an individual of the choice “to choose a life she values, and has reason to value” (Sen, 1999, p. 73). Similarly, for two children not attending school, one could “chose” to not go to school while the other might want to go to school but lack the freedom to go; of these two scenarios, only the latter should be seen as capability deprivation.

Sen argues that income and commodity measures of poverty artificially homogenize the poor and reduce them to passive status. By contrast, the capability approach respects the individual as both an end of, and as a means to, development (Sen, 1999, 2006). Agency, an individual’s ability to act on behalf of what matters, is a central focus of the Capability Approach (Sen, 1985); therefore, efforts targeted at reducing inequality must focus on assisting individuals in their effort to do or be what they value and have reason to value. The Capability Approach views agency rather than organization (markets and governments) as central in efforts aimed at reducing inequalities, recognizing that individual agency must be seen as a social process shaped by interactions with other individuals and organizations (Dreze & Sen, 2002). Sen, however,
states that agency must not be limited to the individual level, emphasizing the importance of public debate and community efforts in reducing persistent inequalities.

**Criticism of Sen’s Human Capability Approach.** Sen’s Capability Approach has been criticized on several fronts. Central to the Capability Approach is the concept that a “good” life is one that gives individuals the freedom to choose a life they value and have reason to value. Critics fault Sen for not clarifying who makes this external valuation of what has reason to be valued. Is it the individual herself, or should the society at large determine what the common good is (Hartley, 2009)? Sen (2008) responds that it is because the valuation of a good life is contingent and relative that he leaves unanswered the question of who determines what is worth valuing. There is an assumption, however, that the individual will reflect on reasons for why she values a particular thing or being. Sen’s Capability Approach also is criticized for being heavily individualistic at the cost of the collective group, whether that is family or the larger society (Gasper, 2002). Individual wellbeing is central in the Capability Approach which argues that the individual must be what matters most in collective action, but the approach recognizes that individual existence is relational. Sen (1999) supports his focus on the individual by saying that a family unit might have high wellbeing indicators but a single family member might have low wellbeing indicators because of her gender, age, or disability, among other factors.

**Nussbaum and the Human Capability Approach.** While Sen laid the foundation for the Capabilities Approach, Nussbaum has added to it significantly through her collaboration with Sen and through her independent work. Nussbaum’s (1997, 2000, 2011a) work on gender inequality in India highlights the fact that both poverty and gender can lead to capability deprivation, and when poverty and gender intersect, it can lead to “acute failure of human capabilities” (2011a, p. 3).
Nussbaum shifts the emphasis to focus on creating a theory of social justice, and valuation of capabilities which she says is essential for the purpose of comparative quality-of-life assessment. Nussbaum (2011a) argues that since theories shape normative perceptions of issues and dictate policy direction and choice, the capabilities approach is a much needed “counter-theory” for understanding and correcting unjustifiable human inequalities. The capabilities approach, Nussbaum clarifies, should be viewed as a provisional (versus fixed) theory that allows for “comparative quality-life assessment and theorizing about basic social justice” (2011a, p. 18). She states that the primary purpose of her social justice theory is to make visible both the “entrenched social injustices and inequality” and the capability failures that are a result of discrimination and marginalization (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 19).

For the purpose of developing a theory of social justice, Nussbaum (2000, 2011a, 2011b) divides capabilities into three categories: basic, internal, and combined. She defines basic capabilities as the innate abilities and powers an individual has for developing the more advanced internal capabilities. An example of a basic capability is an individual’s innate ability to learn and, possibly, her innate interest in learning. Many of the basic capabilities are transformed into internal capabilities or “mature states of readiness” with the support of the environment, and they create “sufficient conditions for the exercise of requisite functions” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 84). A combined capability is an “internal capability combined with suitable external conditions for the exercise of the function” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 85). Following the previous framework, cultural and family norms and beliefs about the education of girls will largely determine whether a girl will actually be allowed to go to school to learn and, if she is allowed to go to school, whether she will be allowed to transform the realized ability into a functioning that has either extrinsic or instrumental value for her (employment). It is not enough
to focus attention on developing internal capabilities; creation of environments that promote the
development of combined capabilities is equally necessary.

While both Sen and Nussbaum focus on individual wellbeing, they caution against the
use of the utility approach (self-reported happiness or satisfaction) as a measure of wellbeing.
Nussbaum (2000) bases her objection on the concept of “adaptive preference,” the process
whereby individuals adapt their desires and wishes to the way of life they know. These
adaptations are made without awareness or choice and are therefore poor indicators of objective
functioning. She states that an individual’s lack of aspiration for central capabilities often results
from injustices, oppressions, and habit (similar to what Geertz (1973) refers to as “common
sense”). Sen also acknowledges the impact of adaptive preferences on capability aspirations and
uses the concept to explain why individuals living in objectively dire situations sometimes
subjectively assign higher assessments to their quality of life. Dreze and Sen (2002) give an
example to illustrate this point: Bihar has one of the lowest rates of life expectancy and highest
rates of morbidity in India, while Kerala has the highest rates of life expectancy and lowest rates
of morbidity. Widows (who, as a group, fall on the lower end of social indicators in every state)
in Bihar reported being satisfied with their health while widows in Kerala reported being
dissatisfied with their health. Public discourse and personal scrutiny are the keys to challenging
adaptive preferences (Sen, 1985).

The Capabilities Approach is a new theoretical paradigm committed to the attainment of
human dignity for all, irrespective of an individual’s class, gender, religion, race, or caste. It
offers a theory of social justice and a comparative account of quality of life. Nussbaum stresses
that it is the urgent role of government to ensure that all citizens have access to at least a
minimum threshold of all the central capabilities. It is essential that the government meet the
central capability needs of its citizens in a way that minimizes an individual’s vulnerability while maximizing reliability of provisions the government makes towards social justice.

**Criticism of Nussbaum’s Human Capability Approach.** Among the major criticisms of Nussbaum’s Capability Approach is the list of central capabilities. The list is criticized for several reasons: 1) it is a single-person generated list, not democratically generated (Crocker, 2006); 2) there is limited-to-no justification for why certain capabilities are on the list and others are not (in particular why education was left out considering that Nussbaum is a strong supporter of education; Robeyns, 2007); and 3) the general list does not allow for adaptation to different rationales for or contexts in which it is implemented (Sen, 2008). Nussbaum (2003, 2007) defends the list by saying that it provides a justification and argument for constitutional principles which individuals can then demand from their government. Nussbaum (2007) has in turn criticized Sen for not making a list which she argues renders his approach without teeth.

**Education and the Capability Approach.** Both Sen and Nussbaum identify education as an essential capability. In her latest book, *Creating Capabilities* (2011), Nussbaum introduces the distinction between “fertile functioning/capabilities,” and its opposite, “corrosive disadvantage.” A fertile functioning/capability has the potential for opening up multiple options across several contexts, while, on the other hand, corrosive disadvantage negatively impacts several capabilities (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2013). Education is a fertile functioning/capability while domestic abuse is a corrosive disadvantage. In addition, education has the potential for decreasing the number of corrosive disadvantages in an individual’s life.

Effective education which engages children’s minds and creativity is satisfying in and of itself but education has many long term benefits. Sen (1999) takes an emphatic stand that education is critical for individual and social transformation and increases individual access to
other “substantive freedoms” such as dignity, political participation, and employment. In their latest book, *Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions*, Dreze and Sen (2013) discuss multiple benefits of education that increase individual capability and functioning. Beginning with the benefits of the basic ability to read and write, they argue that being “illiterate in today’s world is like being imprisoned” (p. 107) since the modern world relies heavily on the print media. A significant benefit of education is increased economic opportunities. Dreze and Sen make connections between voice, security, and illiteracy suggesting that education empowers individuals with knowledge and confidence which increases their chances of seeking available resources and speaking out when their rights are violated. The schools are also sites at which students and their families can be informed of their legal rights, such as the right to an education and the right of girls not to be married before 18 years of age. Another significant benefit of education improves awareness of health issues and increases access to health care.

Dreze and Sen (2013), Nussbaum (2000, 2011a, and Sen (1999) all emphasize the particular importance of education for women. They point to the fact that education empowers women to speak up and be more actively involved in family decision making, and it changes the role of women in the family. Female education has been shown to impact fertility rates and improve child health and survival.

**Children’s Rights**

Sen (1999, 2004, 2006) and Nussbaum (2003, 2011a, 2011b) emphasize a close link between the Capabilities Approach and human rights. Rights are derived from a society’s understanding of what it means to be human (Woodhouse, 2008). Dignity, survival, privacy, protection, and equality are considered by most societies to be essential human rights, commonly granted to citizens—at least in theory if not in practice. Freeman (1997) defines rights as a
relationship rather than as a possession. Rights, he proposes, are institutionally defined rules that enable or constrain action and interaction between people. While rights are a society’s investment in an interest it deems important, rights grant the holder a protection to exercise choice (Archard, 2008) by allowing for redress (Freeman, 1997). This unalienable quality of rights make them a “valuable commodity” (Freeman, 1997 p. 14), especially for those without other means of power. Modern rights discourse has resulted in the universal acceptance of the fact that gender and color are indefensible reasons for inequality (Freeman, 1997). However these traits (along with age), continue to be an acceptable reasons for unequal treatment.

It cannot be denied that rights have the potential to grant an individual power, respect, dignity, wellbeing, and the ability to make demands in their absence; however, rights are not granted universally to all humans. One criterion used to determine who does or does not receive the benefits of a right is the possession of an assumed set of attributes. Autonomy, independence, capacity both to be aware of choices and effectively to exercise these choices, along with the ability to be responsible are considered primary prerequisites to the granting of rights (Woodhouse, 2008; Archard, 2008). The establishment of these prerequisites then leads to rights becoming both exclusionary and exclusive and denied to those individuals or groups that are assumed to lack the needed prerequisites.

The concept of children’s rights long has been dismissed, children’s advocates believe, because of the problematic use of age as a measure of presumed autonomy, independence, and capacity. Age creates a sharp and arbitrary boundary between children and adults such that a child at seventeen years eleven months and twenty nine days is viewed as incapable of being a rights holder, while two days later at the age of eighteen she suddenly is deemed capable of the same. It is undeniable that there are some advantages to using age as a determinant of who has
rights and who does not. Age is universal and objective. Determining capacity, on the other hand, is complex and individual.

**Children’s Rights: More or Less Human Rights?** Meanings assigned to childhood determine what, if any, rights and responsibilities children should have and correspondingly what obligations the family, society, and state should have. Those arguing against children’s rights view children primarily in terms of their relationships within a family and society and assume that adults, most specifically parents, naturally feel obligated to provide love, care, and altruism to children, and that these obligations cannot be legalized (Freeman, 1997). The belief is that family relationships (idealized under this construct) can be based either on mutual affection or on rights, but not on both (Archard, 2008).

On the other hand, those who support granting children rights, such as the signatories to the CRC, support the autonomy of children while respecting and protecting their family membership. Under this construct, rights are not a zero-sum game, rather parental and children’s rights are complimentary and not mutually exclusive (Woodhouse, 2008). The international child rights discourse recognizes the fact that for the majority of the world’s children family and societal membership is a far cry from being “ideal” and granting rights to children is necessary for guarding the boundary between adult authority that is abusive and adult authority that acts as a bridge to freedom (Woodhouse, 2008). Possession of rights, more specifically, participation and self-determination rights as in Articles 12, 13, 14, and 15 of the CRC, is recognized within the international child rights discourse to be a “valuable commodity” in reconstructing the power imbalance between adults and children.

Several arguments are offered against the need for children’s rights. Among them is the belief that children, as humans, are beneficiaries of human rights and do not need separate rights.
Feinberg (1980) distinguishes between rights that belong to adults (A-rights), rights that belong to both adults and children (A-C-rights), and rights that belong only to children (C-rights). Feinberg states that A-rights mostly include liberty rights, e.g., right to vote, right to religious choice, right to join associations, and so on. It is important to note that since the time Feinberg’s work was published, the CRC came into effect granting children a number of liberty rights such as the right to practice religion, join an association, and speak publicly. The right to vote and the right to work however remain exclusively adult rights. Welfare rights fall under the A-C-rights category.

C-rights recognize the complex dialogue between dependence and independence that transitions throughout childhood. Autonomy and the ability to make mature choices about when and how to exercise rights are assumed, within the human rights framework, to be qualifiers for granting rights (Woodhouse, 2008). Since children are not born autonomous, children’s rights need to account for their varying levels of dependence on families and society, and do so by appointing a guarantor (whenever possible the parents or legal guardian) to act on behalf of the child. Participation rights are granted to children in accordance with their growing autonomy. C-rights also include rights that limit parental and societal authority over children.

In addition, C-rights recognize the special vulnerability of children. Bentley (2005) says that the rights guaranteed to children by the CRC actually fall under the aegis of human rights, diverging only in their enforcement rather than their specification. Appropriate and effective enforcement of children’s right is critical due to the fact that children are more vulnerable and suffer more serious and permanent damage when their rights are violated. While lack of adequate food and clean water can cause harm to any adult, lack of such access is more seriously detrimental to children. Bentley (2005) further points to restrictions on children’s labor and
recruitment into armed forces to illustrate the need for appropriate and effective enforcement to protect children’s best interests. Both labor and combat, *per se*, are legal practices in which adults have the right to engage, but the likely harm caused to children involved in such tasks renders them unsuitable for children. Enforcing such limits protects children rather than curtailing their autonomy.

**Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).** In 1978, fifty-four years after the Declaration of the Rights of the Child was established, Poland, under the leadership of Prof. Adam Lopatka, submitted a proposal to the Convention for Child Rights in the hope that extending rights to children would be a fitting way to celebrate 1979 as the International Year of the Child. Poland’s proposal was met with little enthusiasm or hope, but it became a catalyst for the UN to set up a working group that coordinated and mobilized numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and brought to light a whole range of children’s issues (Cantwell, 2007).

In a historical move and after eleven years of democratic deliberation, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly on November 20, 1989. The CRC provides a legal framework that covers the full spectrum of human rights: economic, civil, political, social, cultural, and protective encompassed within 54 Articles organized under three parts. Part 1 of the CRC includes Article 1-41 and focuses on the direct rights of the child. Article 1 defines the term “child” as any “human being below the age of eighteen years.” Articles 42-45 in Part II outline procedures for implementation of the rights. Part III of the CRC covers Articles 46-54 that outline administrative procedures for the CRC and recognizes the Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish texts as authentic translations of the original Convention.
The scope and wide acceptance (all but two countries—the US and Somalia—have ratified the treaty) of the CRC make it the “most comprehensive single treaty in the human rights field” (Bentley, 2005, p. 109). Rights afforded to children under the CRC have the same characteristics as all other human rights in that they are inalienable, interdependent and indivisible, equal and non-discriminatory, and include obligations for all involved.

The CRC is cited by many child’s rights activists as a significant contributor (especially Articles 3.1 and 12.1) to shifting the dominant paradigm, albeit in many cases a reluctant and halting shift, from viewing children as property owned by adults to viewing them as individuals who deserve dignity, respect, and a high standard of living. The CRC is the first rights treaty that recognizes the evolving capacity of children and puts their agency, participation, and best interest in the forefront. Another significant paradigm shift credited to the CRC is the breaking down of the private/public divide in responsibility towards children. The CRC shifts the burden of responsibility from individuals (children and/or their parents) to the state. The CRC dictates that states examine causes of child suffering and create programs and policies that minimize, if not remove, these conditions.

**Philosophical, moral, and legal arguments for children’s rights.** The reconceptualization of children as capable, active, autonomous, and having both voice and agency preceded the CRC. It can, however, correctly be argued that the CRC has significantly furthered this perspective. The CRC is a product of ten years of negotiations among governmental delegations, inter-governmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations. Freeman (1997) points to five significant issues on which consent required lengthy discussions and compromise: freedom of thought, conscience and religion, inter-country adoption, rights of the unborn child, traditional practices such as female circumcision, and the
duties of children. Clarity about what it means to be a child, what children deserve, and how best to protect the needs of children was essential in resolving these differences and ultimately in providing for and protecting children’s rights.

**Philosophical argument for children’s rights.** Within the international human rights discourse, rights are defined as inherent, inalienable, and universal. Human rights are *inherent* in that we are simply born with them and they belong to us as a result of our common humanity. Under this argument, there are no pre-conditions to being a rights holder other than simply being human. The very first paragraph of the CRC states that “…in accordance with the principles proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family [emphasis added] is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” Children are part of the human family and therefore are deserving of rights. There are specific identifiable interests that are essential to sustain the humanity in each person whether that person is a woman, a child, disabled, or a minority. Life, dignity, respect, worth, and equality are identified within the international human rights and children’s rights discourse as essential for respecting peoples humanity. Children’s rights, particularly those provided by the CRC, recognize, provide, and protect children’s basic humanity. Granting children rights *includes* them in the human category (White, 2002), recognizes their *inherent* rights, and provides for the needs specific to *young humans*.

**Moral argument for children’s rights.** Rights are an investment by a society in an interest it deems important (Archard, 2008). In the provision and protection of the full spectrum of human rights (economic, civil, political, social, cultural, and protective), to children the CRC makes a strong moral argument for the recognition of a child’s worth through supporting the development of the child’s full potential. Within such a rights framework, children’s
development is not dependent on the mercy of states or charitable organizations but on the
legalized moral obligation of the parents and the state. In fact, Article 6 of the CRC mandates
that states “ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.”
The moral status of children shifts from that of being welfare recipients to being subjects
deserving rights.

Another significant moral foundation for granting rights to children within the
international discourse is non-discrimination such that rights are afforded to all children without
exception. Article 2 of the CRC requires state parties to:

…respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within
their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child’s or his or
her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other
opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

The principle of non-discrimination is of great significance especially for children with
disabilities, children in poverty, undocumented children, and children orphaned by HIV/AIDS
(UNICEF, 2009).

*Legal argument for children’s rights.* Rights, Freeman (1997) says, are institutionally
de ned rules that enable or constrain action and interaction between people making rights a
relationship rather than a possession. Rights as relationships, then, both define responsibilities of
the rights holder and identify the obligations of the ‘guarantor of rights’ (Clark, 1987 p. 32). The
CRC is the first international legal instrument granting children rights. Article 4 of the CRC
states that, “State Parties shall undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other
measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the present Convention.” Rights, of
course, cannot be seen as the exclusive vehicle for liberation. For rights to be effective they must be accompanied by change in public discourse.

Legal rights in many cases precede changes in moral, cultural, economic, or traditional practices. Archard (2008) states that in such cases, legal rights have the potential of being agents of change. Consider, for example, the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) which has been practiced in many countries to mark the transition of girls into womanhood. It is estimated that seventy percent of the girls in West African Mauritania undergo FGM, a practice violating the legal right of the child to be protected from harm, a right granted by the CRC. The passing of laws banning the practice of FGM in this case resulted in the beginnings of a significant change in public discourse whereby a fatwa (religious decree) in favor of banning FGM was signed by a group of Muslim religious leaders in 2010 (Arts, 2010).

The CRC recognizes that rights are limited by the resources allocated to ensure their fulfillment and that rights, by nature, are indivisible—they cannot be implemented segmentally. The language of the CRC is maximizing in that it requires states to commit to making children visible in state budgets by requiring that “…State parties shall undertake such measures to the maximum extent of their available resources.” The CRC provides the necessary link between economic policy and the obligation of guarantors to promote the “best interest of the child” by requiring state parties to make public the portions of the budgets, directly and indirectly, devoted to children (Ensalaco, 2005). Laws, however, have their limits, and it is important to recognize that rights are open to a restrictive and limiting interpretation by the guarantor.

Woodhouse (2008) argues that laws can be visualized to exist within concentric spheres. In the center is the common law (deeply rooted in traditions) under which families and children operate on a daily basis. In the next sphere are the statutory laws propagated by federal or state
legislatures or other state and local lawmaking agencies. *Constitutional rights* come within this layer. Rights granted under international human rights instruments such as the CRC, Woodhouse points out, fall within the ozone layer of the legal atmosphere and are only effective when local governments incorporate them into their statutory or constitutional laws. Archard (2008) believes that the CRC has not had a significant impact on domestic legislation, mostly because it lacks what Freeman (1998) refers to as “teeth.” Archard suggests that a significant contributor to the ineffective implementation of the CRC at the local level is the lack of an established international court to address breaches of the instrument.

**Women’s and children’s rights.** The responsibility of being the primary caretaker of children often has been cited as a source of oppression of women and it is also the reason women are greatly affected by the status of children (Olsen, 1992). It is no wonder then that parallels can be found between the rights movement for women and the rights movement for children. It also is no wonder that women are in the forefront of fighting for children’s rights (Minow, 1986).

As women’s consciousness of their oppression, has grown they have demanded access to their inalienable rights as a critical tool in the fight for a new status for themselves, and for a societal transformation in which both women and what women value will be recognized as equal (Clark, 1987). The adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) which requires states to eliminate discrimination against women in the enjoyment of all civil, political, economic, and cultural rights was a significant victory in this fight. Both the CEDAW and the CRC grant rights specifically to women and children (individually and collectively) knowing that while women and children have rights as humans under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)
each group needs special rights and protection in recognition of their long history of
discrimination and exclusion.

Commonality between children’s rights and women’s rights is reflected in the provisions
of both the CEDAW and the CRC which are viewed as complementary and mutually reinforcing
instruments (Goonesekere & Silva-de-Alwis, 2005). Additionally, the CEDAW and the CRC are
understood to “jointly provide the umbrella of rights and norms for gender-responsive
programme goals and strategies” (UNICEF, 2012a, p. 16). The linking of women’s rights with
children’s rights does engender a fear that doing so could reinforce the limited view of women
primarily as caregivers of children (Goonesekere & Silva-de-Alwis, 2005). The full spectrum of
rights granted to women and children under the two instruments however has been instrumental
in reconstructing traditional and limited views of women and children.

There are two primary levels at which women resist subjugation: 1) large-scale organized
public movements, and 2) the quieter and more subtle resistance at the individual level within the
family context. It is important to note that within India’s particular historical and cultural
context, changes brought about by the more organized and large-scale political and social
movements (such as marriage age) have to be negotiated by a woman individually within her
particular family setting, as was the case of Sunil, discussed in Chapter 1, who threatened to call
the police in order to prevent her parents forcing her to marry before the legal age of 18 years.
Parallel to the long history of women’s subjugation is the centuries old history of the Shakti
(women’s power) movement. Instead of being fueled negatively by anger, the Shakti movement
developed a “distinctive female culture” of positive creative force that is inspirational to women
and men (Liddle & Joshi, 1989, p. 5). In some instances, individual resistance transforms into a
large-scale movement as in the case of the “Gulabi Gang” (Pink Gang). The foundation of the
gang can be traced back to Sampat’s (founder of the gang) parent’s refusal to allow her to go to school. Sampat resisted by trying to teach herself to write on the dirt streets of her native village in one of the most impoverished regions of Uttar Pradesh. Illiterate, poor, married at twelve years, and mother of five, Sampat’s commitment to fighting injustice and women’s subjugation motivated her to start the grassroots vigilante group in 2006, which now has over 10,000 women as members, all of whom wear pink saris and carry long bamboo sticks. The group primarily addresses issues of domestic violence, rape, and forced marriages by pressuring police to register and investigate cases, organizing protests, raising awareness, and providing support to women at risk (Fontanella-Khan, 2013). Both individual and group resistance need to be recognized and supported for their critical role in bringing about meaningful change in women’s roles within the economic, social, and political contexts.

Women’s rights and girls’ rights. The link between women’s rights and the rights of girls is even more inextricable within a lifecycle perspective. Issues of gender equality begin at birth (in cases of sex-selective abortions they begin before birth) shadowing the lives of girls into womanhood. Sexual and physical violence against women and girls in both public and private spaces remain disturbingly prevalent and violates their entitlement to basic health, survival, and safety. In India, the practice of sex-selective abortions, domestic abuse (especially the practice of bride burning or dowry deaths in which brides are accused of not bringing enough dowry and are burned alive), prostitution, and sex trafficking are primary and brutal forms of violence committed against women and girls (Bhan, 2001). Educational and income levels of the family have been linked to the practice of child marriage which remains a common practice among the poor in most developing countries (UNICEF, 2012b). Child marriage violates the rights of girls to exercise choice, increases their sense of isolation, promotes sexual exploitation and
powerlessness (to refuse sex or provide domestic labor), and constitutes a major health risk (associated with premature pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV; UNICEF, 2012b). Child marriage impacts the health and wellbeing of women throughout their life span.

**Rights reform in India.** As discussed in Chapter 1, independent India made a commitment to freedom and equality by granting all citizens—with special provisions for children, women, and Dalits—fundamental protections against discrimination and inequality. Since independence, India has made significant progress in granting rights to women and children that protect their freedoms, dignity, and equality. Increasing the legal age of marriage for girls to eighteen years is one such example.

Understanding that discrimination often results in harmful traditional practices, Article 24 (3) of the CRC requires state parties to make all effort to abolish harmful traditional practices. CEDAW’s Articles 2 (f) and 5 (a) also mandate state parties to “abolish or change all existing laws, practices, and customs that discriminate against women.” It cannot be denied that rights are a “valuable commodity,” especially for marginalized groups. Freeman (1997) points out that because of their belief in rights as a vehicle for social change, some of the strongest supporters of rights are minority scholars and activists working on behalf of the marginalized. Consider child marriage, for example, which is a widespread cultural and religious practice in India. The Constitution of India, the CRC, and CEDAW all have made marriage for girls under the age of eighteen illegal. Such laws grant girls protection and legal recourse for child marriage, and initiate societal reconsideration of the status and rights of girls. It is undeniable that rights “are neither a perfect nor exclusive vehicle for emancipation” (Freeman, 1997, p. 16) and are most effective when accompanied by change in public discourse and in the legal enforcement.
India and the CRC. India ratified the CRC in 1992. In reviewing India’s reports the CRC Committee acknowledged the “existence of a broad range of constitutional and legislative provisions, and institutions for the protection of human rights and children’s rights” and welcomed “the frequent references to provisions of international human rights instruments by the court, in particular the Supreme Court” (CRC, 2000). Additionally, the concluding observations made by the Committee (CRC, 2004) commended India for its efforts towards expanding primary school access; for the 2003 passage of the amendment to the 1994 Pre-conception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act; and for the establishment of free telephone “childlines” (CRC, 2004). The Committee also recognized the extensive contribution of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in supporting human rights in India and commended India for its involvement in and cooperation with multiple international instruments.

On the other hand, the Committee critiqued India for its ineffective implementation of the existing legal framework; inability to resolve coordination and communication problems; lack of accountability; and for its failure to collect, analyze, and disseminate reliable disaggregated data that more effectively would reflect the complex disparity in children’s lived experiences (CRC, 2000). Similar concerns are voiced by local non-government persons and agencies working with and for children in India (Grewal & Singh, 2011).

In response to the Committee’s concerns, the Indian Government set up the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) in March of 2007 with a mandate to “ensure that all Laws, Policies, Programmes, and Administrative Mechanisms are in consonance with the Child Rights perspective as enshrined by the Constitution of India and the UNCRC” (NCPCR, 2013). The NCPCR brings a rights-based, child-centered perspective to policy development and implementation. It has played a pivotal role in engaging local communities,
including children, in discourse that challenges traditional discriminatory thinking, practices, and structures. NCPCR regularly publishes a national newsletter, *infocus*, which highlights its continuing work. Furthermore, it is encouraging states that have not yet done so to open State Commissions in an effort to decentralize efforts towards protecting and furthering children’s rights. In agreement with the CRC Committee, NCPCR has focused particular attention on reducing discrimination against children, especially gender-based discrimination which has a long, complicated and deep-rooted history in India (Grewal & Singh, 2011).

**Critique of the CRC.** The preamble to the CRC dictates that due account should be given to “the importance of traditions and cultural values of each people for the protection and harmonious development of the child.” Child activists criticize the CRC for failing to problematize the traditional and cultural values that are harmful to the child. While Article 24 (3) requires states to work towards abolishing traditions that cause harm to a child’s health, most activists believe the CRC is weak and narrow in its stand against harmful traditional and cultural practices such as genital mutilation of girls. This deficit flows out of the need to respect the diversity of local contexts in which rights must be implemented. In some situations, the line between respecting local customs and protecting the child is thin and complex.

Article 3.1 is heralded as a significant contributor in shifting the rights paradigm from viewing children as passive welfare recipients to viewing them as active citizens deserving the maximum available resources to meet their needs. The theoretical importance of this article for children is hard to dispute. In practice, however, it poses two significant difficulties. First, a right is the protected exercise of choice. Children’s evolving agency and capabilities mean that an adult representative has to be selected to make the choice for the child. Since adults ultimately have the obligation to exercise the right of choice on behalf of children, opponents ask
why rights should be given to children. Selecting a representative that would be able to recognize and uphold the child’s best interest plus know what choice the child would make on her own is fraught with difficulty. Secondly, determining what is in the best interest of the child is a subjective and complex (in the number of options, and value of these options, probable outcomes of these varied options) process which is interwoven with the needs and interests of the person making the “best interest” judgment (Archard, 2008). In response to these concerns, many countries have established Ombudsmen for children, Children’s Commissioners, or in the case of Canada, Child Advocates to promote and protect the rights of children (Grover, 2004). Increasingly countries are recognizing the need for these representatives to be independent from political affiliation, to be empowered to act legally on behalf of children, and to be adequately financed and staffed (Bellamy & Pais, 2007).

**Critique of children’s rights in India.** Literature on the critique of child rights in the Indian context is sparse and just beginning to emerge. While crediting the CRC for phenomenally expanding the focus on children and introducing new vocabulary with which to represent their lives, Balagopalan (2011) criticizes the CRC’s emphasis on a Western, universally “ideal” construct of childhood which she believes arises from the CRC’s “narrow policy-worldview.” Siding with the cultural relativist critique of rights, Balagopalan (2011) equates the CRC’s propagation of the normative Western ideal of “innocent” childhood to the “civilizing mission” of India’s colonizers. She argues that just as the colonizers judged the local population as being “primitive” by viewing it through the lens considered inherently more progressive, the CRC’s singular construct of childhood as a desirable “ideal” for all children judges local constructs of childhood as “less evolved” and therefore “inferior.” Balagopalan further critiques the conception of the West as modern, efficient, and on the singular end of the evolutionary
process where all transformation happens. In response, the supporters of the CRC ask whether the ideal represented by the universal conception of childhood is not something every child deserves (Archard, 2008). Supporters argue that often it is the lack of material resources that disallow the children in poor countries from experiencing the “protracted and protected way which the Convention seems to assume is the norm.” (Bentley, 2005, p. 17)

The CRC’s definition of “child” as a person under eighteen years of age, Balagopalan (2011) states, while necessary for setting legal boundaries does not coincide with the childhood construct of many non-Western countries, and this opens the gates for the Western world to judge culturally relevant childhoods as “exploitative.” Participation by the families of non-elite children, often as heads of households in the Indian context, challenges the CRC’s central conception of children as being biologically immature.

Sreenivas’s (2011) critique is similar to a central concern of some feminist critiques of rights in that the abstract and impersonal quality of rights endorses a selfish individualistic nature which she says is in stark contrast to India’s collective culture. Survival in countries that support a collaborative model rests on intergenerational dependency (Armstrong, et al., 1995). Children in these cultures are seen as members of a family rather than as individuals, placing children’s rights at odds with sense of responsibility to family and community (Murray, 2010). Moreover, within India’s strongly patriarchal culture, disparity in power and status between adults and children continues to be the foundation of most families such that adult authority is absolute and children’s obedience is demanded. Granting children rights to autonomy and freedom shakes the very foundation of this culture; nonetheless, it is important to recognize that change, however necessary, almost always is accompanied by resistance. Changing the status of women and
children will require redefinition of traditional patriarchal family structures and will threaten male dominance.

**Universal Rights and Capabilities in a Diverse World**

In its preamble, the CRC makes multiple references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as a foundation for granting children rights. Problems surrounding the concept of universalism, as contrasted with cultural relativism, were recognized by members of the United Nations who drafted the UNHDR, and in 1947 they asked some of the world’s best-known philosophers to ponder “How is an agreement conceivable among men who come from the four corners of the earth and who belong not only to different cultures and civilizations, but to different spiritual families and antagonistic schools of thought?” (Glendon, 2001 p. 240). The group received seventy responses from Western and non-Western thinkers. From these responses, the group gathered that while the concept of ‘rights’ and the rights-based language originated in the West there are certain common convictions, some actions that are so terrible in practice that they cannot publicly be approved, and some that are so good none will publicly oppose them (Novak, 1999). The idea of universal rights then is situated in the belief that the *humanity* of human beings is common across all cultures and religions and certain basic *truths* are universal in that they are *self-evident*.

Decades later, the debate between universal rights and cultural relativism remains heated and unresolved. Cultural relativists argue that the norms and values set forth by universal rights, including universal children’s rights, cannot be applied globally across diverse cultures and economies (Arts, 2010). The relativists label universal rights instruments as “instruments of neocolonialism” meant to spread Western homogeneity while threatening national sovereignty, cultural integrity, and self-determination of diverse peoples (Glendon, 2001). While in some
cases these accusations can be dismissed simply by the fact that they are leveled by some of the worst violators of rights, the defense is not sufficient and the critique merits serious consideration. Defenders of universal rights point out that just because the concept of rights was conceived in the West does not make it an exclusively Western concept. Sen (1997, 2006) responds by saying that concepts of human dignity, freedom, and equality are not Western concepts, they are universal concepts, and Sen (1997, 2005) gives examples from Ancient Indian and Chinese history and literature to support the fact that these values are as much Asian as they are Western.

Goonesekere and Silva-de-Alwis (2005) and Grover (2004) defend the CRC’s universal conceptualization of childhood by pointing out that there are commonalities to problems faced by children across cultures, and children in the East need the same protections as children in the West, protections provided by the CRC. The authors assert that just because childhood as a period of freedom from deprivation, exploitation and violence, is not a reality for many children in developing countries does not mean it should not be. Children across cultures need to be protected from poverty and injustice. In response to criticism that universal concepts like human rights and the Capability Approach are new forms of colonization, Nussbaum (2011a) responds by saying that Indian concepts of dignity, freedom, and equality are not a British legacy but a reaction against the lack of human rights under British rule. It is the architects of free India, including Gandhi who was a strong critic of the West, who committed to these “universal” principles.

The CRC supports universal rights for children but also recognizes that these rights will be applied in a particular social, political, historical, cultural, and economic context. The CRC, then, forges a middle ground by neither taking “normative universality in human rights” for
granted, nor abandoning it in the “face of claims of contextual specificity or cultural relativity” (Arts, 2010, p. 10). This middle ground is found in the CRC’s use of what Arts (2010) refers to as a ‘process approach’ to rights in which rights are seen as contextual and progressively realized, and culture and economies are understood to be dynamic and therefore changeable. Respect for a child’s culture is addressed in various articles that specify that the child’s “ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic background” must be taken into consideration. The CRC provides a full spectrum of clearly defined rights for children while consciously accommodating diverse interpretations and implementation of a significant number of the rights. Take, for example, Article 3 of the CRC that requires that a child’s best interest be given primary consideration in matters of her concern. The specific definition of “best interest” is purposefully left open, allowing the guarantor flexibility to implement it appropriately in varying contexts. Similarly Article 32 protects the child from economic exploitation but does not ban child work, thereby leaving it up to state parties to set the minimum age for admission to employment. This openness takes into consideration the reality of life in diverse economic contexts. The problem, Bentley (2005) says, is that without a universal minimum age, state parties such as Pakistan can make it legal for children as young as five to work. She further argues that the CRC’s inability to lay down any standards for implementation of its rights undermines their inclusion.

Among its many strengths is the fact that the Capability Approach explicitly recognizes the fundamental impact of gender, caste, class, and age (among other factors) on individual capability across cultures and families. Sen (1992) acknowledges the importance of human diversity in the theoretical and practical framing of equality by stating that human diversity is “not a secondary complication (to be ignored or to be introduced ‘later on’); it is a fundamental aspect of our interest in equality” (p. xi). Sen (1997, 1999, 2006) and Nussbaum (2000, 2011a)
defend the universality of capabilities while acknowledging that the economic, political, historical, and social context in which they are expressed varies greatly. The need to be respectful of diverse in local contexts is one reason Sen offers for his reluctance to make lists of capabilities. Nussbaum (2011a) affirms that the Capability Approach has its primary origin in India. The Approach negotiates the universal versus imperial debate by focusing on the individual rather than on the culture as a whole. The Capability Approach also emphasizes the fact that no culture is monolithic, what is considered normative or traditional in any society is the voice of the most powerful people in that society. Nussbaum (2011a) says it is for this reason that the Capability Approach recognizes, respects, and protects individual dignity and choice while offering a normative framework for understanding and correcting inequalities.
CHAPTER 3: EDUCATION IN INDIA

It is widely accepted that education is the most powerful tool for reducing poverty and promoting equality. The potential of education is universally accepted within the human rights discourse, making the right to education central to most rights instruments, such as: Principle 7 of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1948), Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966), Articles 2 and 10 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), and Articles 28 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

Education plays a particularly critical role in the empowerment of girls and women, especially for those living in poverty. Education in the Global South has been shown to improve health outcomes (by delaying marriage and reducing fertility rates) while also increasing their economic participation. Each year of schooling increases a woman’s earning potential, and, as a woman’s income increases, so does her participation in family decision-making and resource distribution. Increase in income also gives women the option to exit abusive situations, and it increases their mobility. Education further gives women a vehicle for stepping out of the private sphere by exposing them to different ideas and viewpoints, and offers them the opportunities to build wider social networks. In addition, women’s political participation increases as they become able to read the ballot, gain confidence to participate in public discourse, and find new opportunities for community involvement (Nussbaum, 2011a; PROBE, 1999).

The potential for education to act both as a “freeing” and “equalizing” agent has made the push for universal free and compulsory education the central focus of educational debate and educational reform efforts at all levels—local, national, and international. The First World Conference on Education (1990) held in Jomtien spread the slogan “education for all” while The
World Education Forum (2000), held in Dakar, established specific goals and targets for providing education for all by 2015. The Millennium Development Goals (2000) set educational improvement and poverty reduction goals. International rights organizations have pushed for education as a fundamental right in order to recognize and reinforce the benefits of education. The right to education is seen as a necessary precursor to attaining all other rights and to democratic citizenship. However, national and international education reform efforts have generally limited their attention to primary education.

The increased focus on primary education has resulted in impressive gains in school enrollment in all major regions of the world. Globally, the number of out-of-school children dropped from 105 million in 1999 to 61 million in 2010 (UIS, 2010). South and West Asia have reduced the number of out-of-school children by an impressive two thirds from 39 million in 1999 to 13 million in 2010 (UIS, 2010). In India, the enrollment rate at the primary level increased from 84.5% in 2005-06 to an almost universal rate of 98% in 2009-10. Corresponding rates for the secondary level are unavailable (Government of India, 2012b). The class gap in enrollment rates has been reduced in India at the primary level but remains persistent at the secondary level, reported at 29.6% for students in poverty as compared to 82.6% for non-poor students (UNICEF, 2008). The gender gap in enrollment rates also has diminished at the primary level but remains persistent at the secondary level, reported at 48.7% for girls as compared to 58.5% for boys (UNICEF, 2008).

The rapid and impressive gains in enrollment rates at the primary level need to be recognized as such, but enthusiasm must be cautious for two reasons: a) enrollment rates are not indicative of actual attendance rates, and b) enrollment rates reveal only how many students attend school but say little or nothing of the quality of schooling to which they have gained
access. In their follow-up PROBE research De, Khera, Samson, and Kumar (2011) found that while primary school enrollment rates had improved impressively, even for the most disadvantaged groups, actual primary school student attendance rates remained very low in all the schools included in the research, averaging at about 60%. With a growing achievement gap being noted between poor and non-poor students, attention is shifting to issues of school quality and achievement. A 2005 study using a large, all-India random sample, found that only half of the children ages eight to eleven enrolled in government schools could read a simple paragraph of three sentences, fewer than half could subtract a two-digit number from another two-digit number, and less than one third of the students could write a simple sentence (Pratham, 2012).

Access to primary education in India has improved significantly while access to secondary education remains limited, particularly for girls living in poverty. The enrollment rate at the secondary level in India is only 40.7% with a very low secondary graduation rate of 0.9% (Barro & Lee, 2012). Disaggregated data on the secondary enrollment rate is unavailable at this time, but it can be safely assumed that enrollment and graduation rates are even lower for girls in poverty. India continues to lag behind other countries with similar GDP in educational access and has an adult female literacy rate lower than that of Sub-Saharan Africa (Dreze & Sen, 2013; Kingdon, 2007).

The push for universal education has been criticized by some as the globalization of mass Western education (Lipman, 2004; Prakash 2008; Spring, 2009). Critics argue that globalization is fueled by two distinct yet interdependent forces: monoculturation and neo-liberal economization (whereby accumulation of personal wealth, insidiously fused with the concepts of liberty and freedom, is the ultimate symbol of well-being, success, and power [Harvey, 2005]). Spring (2009) argues that global education is characteristic of the “human capital model” (p.
149) within which accumulation of wealth and economic growth are the ultimate goal. Lipman (2004) agrees and characterizes global education as an “economizing education” (p. 9). She states that the dominance of global, neo-liberal philosophies in all aspects of national and international policymaking have led to the “common sense” belief that accumulation of wealth is a sign of progress and development. Sen (1999) counters this argument by saying that the pursuit of wealth by the poor should not be devalued particularly since it is not wealth itself that is being pursued but things associated with wealth—power, knowledge, resources, and wellbeing, among others. More essentially, Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) defend universal education due to benefits that extend far beyond economic gain to the development of human capabilities. The critiques of universal education parallel, to some extent, the universal-versus-relative debate surrounding rights and capabilities discussed in Chapter 2. The ideal of education as a vehicle for economic and social mobility and the enhancement of capabilities is, and must be, universal. The actual practice of schooling is, and must be, flexible to adapt to local culture and need.

**Brief History of Education in India**

**Education in colonial India.** By the time the British came to India in the seventeenth century, an indigenous system of elementary education had spread throughout India. This system catered mostly to the needs of landlords, merchants, and wealthy farmers, and instruction was limited to practical skills and the three R’s with no religious components to the education. The equipment in the schools was very simple, classes were taught under trees or in the home of the teacher or patron. Students used slates and had no access to printed books. The greatest advantage of this system was its ability to adapt to local contexts and individual needs. No fees
were charged so it was accessible to poor children, though even this educational system excluded participation by girls and children from the lower caste (Ghosh, 2007; Narullah & Naik, 1951). Several British officers took interest in the extent and type of schooling in India, and they conducted surveys in regions like Madras and Bombay. The reports reveal very low literacy rates (8%), insufficient schools with low enrollment and few teachers, and exclusion of girls and children from the lower caste. Some historians have raised questions about how carefully and with what intention these surveys were conducted, and they argue that the surveys were conducted with the British education model as the norm, therefore failing to recognize India’s more prevalent home-based instruction (Narullah & Naik, 1951). British attention to education in India varied significantly, depending on individual leadership, though the underlying philosophy remained consistent: to create a system that would provide “moral” education to a society viewed as uncivilized, primitive, and ignorant (Ghosh, 2007). The words of Thomas Mcaulay (1853), architect of British educational policy, best capture the self-interest of colonial education in India: “We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, words and intellect” (Mcaulay & Young, 1934, p. 28). The British concentrated on building educational institutions in the cities while completely ignoring the education of children in rural areas (Weiner, Burra, & Bajpai, 2006). English was declared the official language of India under British rule and became the chosen medium for educational instruction because the English language was argued to be the only “cure” for existing cultural “evils” and a suitable vehicle for the country’s improvement (Ghosh, 2007, p. 313). The British ignored the indigenous system of education, instead imposing diluted versions of the English system of education (Narullah & Naik, 1951). Inequality in educational access preceded British rule in
India. Educational policies and practices under British rule further deepened educational inequalities by reinforcing class, caste, and regional barriers to education.

**Education in contemporary India.** The poor state of education, reflected in the very low literacy rate of 12%, at the time of India’s independence in 1947 made education central to many discussions that shaped post-colonial India’s Constitution. Education’s importance was recognized in the Constitution which made a commitment to free and compulsory education:

> “The State shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years” (Constitution of India, 1950, Article 45). The commitment to education, however, came in the form of a Directive Principle (non-enforceable guideline on which states were to frame policy) rather than as a fundamental right.

The vision for education in free India was formulated in the Constitution amid strong disagreements as to whether the focus of education should be on building human capital for industrial development (a vision supported by Nehru) or on social transformation to realize the goals of democracy and equity (a vision supported by Gandhi). Nehru, independent India’s first prime minister, strongly pushed for expansion of the Western model of education with its focus on English, science, and technology as a way for India to become more advanced and shed its traditional past (Nehru, 1946). By contrast, Mahatma Gandhi spoke strongly against the enslaving character of the English-based colonial model of education proposing instead a culturally relevant, self-reliant model of education that would be accessible to the masses (Kumar, K., 1993).

In spite of multiple efforts over many decades, the right to free and compulsory education for Indian children remained unfulfilled until 2002—long past the ten-year goal set by the
Constitution. Failed efforts included directives from Educational Commissions, inclusion of educational goals within the various Five-Year Plans, and India becoming a signatory to three international instruments (the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948; the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, 1966; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) all of which guarantee the right to education. Grassroots-level campaigning, along with the aforementioned efforts, and the landmark ruling in the 1993 case of *Unni Krishnan, J. P. v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (discussed in Chapter 1) carved the path to the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act (2002), which under Article 21 guaranteed free and compulsory education to every child between the ages of six and fourteen as a fundamental right (Constitution of India, 1950). The Act was reformed significantly in an effort to address concerns of accessibility, equity, and quality, especially for “disadvantaged” and “weaker” populations that were not adequately addressed in the previous bill. The amended bill was passed by both houses in 2009 and became law as the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) on April 1, 2010.

**History of Girls Education in India**

It is widely thought that women and girls, as a group, were excluded from the benefits of education in Ancient India. Historians note otherwise, indicating that women were in fact allowed to study the Vedas, sacred texts (Agrawal & Aggarwal, 1992). Instances of learned women, like Maiteryi and Gargi, who openly challenged men in public discussions on topics of philosophy and metaphysics are also noted during the Vedic period (Agrawal & Aggarwal, 1992).

It was in the Brahmanical period (200 BCE-1200 CE) that attitudes towards women’s education shifted as orthodoxy took root (Ghosh, 2007). It was during this time that female
education received a serious setback which corresponded with the lowering of women’s religious status through increased rigidity of the caste system.

Stricter restriction of women to the private sphere and the practice of *purdah* (veiling) under Muslim rule further limited women’s access to education. Women from royal families, however, could access an education that focused on domestic and fine arts, and it was provided within the safety of the private sphere (Agrawal & Aggarwal, 1992).

The 1920s was a decade of great social and political awakening in India, though most early efforts to increase girls’ education were voluntary (Chanana, 1994). Female education became an important issue before independence, though most reform efforts were concentrated in urban areas. Coeducation and the impact of education on a girl’s marriageability were significant barriers to educational access at this time. Coeducation was highly discouraged to limit male-female interaction which was considered a threat to girls and families; because increased interaction with non-familial men could heighten the risk of girls marrying by choice and potentially out of caste; and because increased interaction between men and women spurred concerns about the safety of girls and preservation of their “purity.” Additionally, education was thought to negatively impact marriageability in that increased education was considered a threat to female compliance in that it exposed young girls to new ideas and new ways of thinking; educating girls meant they had to marry men who were at least equally educated, increasing the cost of dowry which is directly correlated with levels of male education; and education of girls was seen as irrelevant to preparing them for their primary role as homemakers.

In efforts to reduce barriers to women’s education, reform movements concentrated on opening separate schools for girls staffed by female teachers and offering separate curriculum that reinforced and enhanced girls’ traditional role in the family. The high cost of sustaining
separate schools for girls led to the closure of many schools and the slow shift towards coeducational institutions. It was educational radicals like Choksi (1929) and Menon (1944) who pushed for a broader curriculum for girls, one that would emphasize intellectual training and the study of science and math. For the most part, education for girls continued (and, to a large extent, continues) to be placed within a larger social and political context that demands an education for women that reinforces rather than challenges their traditional roles (Chanana, 1994).

After independence (1947), attention turned towards educational access for the poor and for women. In 1958, the Indian government established the National Committee on Education of Women to look into issues of education for women, particularly, the difference in curriculum for boys and girls and the philosophical policy framework of women’s education. The Committee reported that women’s education must be seen as a constitutional right rather than as a volunteer or welfare effort, and securing this right for women through institutional and legal reform must be a central concern of the government. Additionally, the Committee recommended developing widespread adult literacy programs for women, particularly in rural areas. The Committee, however, also endorsed the “traditional” role of women in society and limited educational equality to simply equal access (Chanana, 1994).

The 1970s and 1980s saw a significant shift in the conceptualization of gender equality in India pushed mostly by grassroots movements and NGOs that started to identify education as the ideal vehicle for social transformation (Vaugh, 2013). The National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986) along with its Program of Action (PoA, 1992) greatly emphasized the promotion of gender equity in educational access and achievement, and included a section on “Education for Women’s
Equality” that looked towards empowering women by enabling them to enter worlds—economic, social, and political—previously restricted to men (Vaughn, 2013).

In the 1990s, the education of girls and women became a central cause of global concern and debate. The growing awareness of the need for social and educational reform in India was strengthened by increasing demands for accessing education placed on countries by several international education treaties such as Education for All and Millennium Development Goals, and by international conventions such as the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Since the 1990s, the Indian government has launched many incentive programs to increase girls’ school enrollment including the introduction of the midday meal program (for children in grades 1-5), Sarva Shiksha Abhyan (a central government campaign for Universal Education for All that funds improvement in school facilities, teacher salaries, bridge courses for dropouts, etc.), community mobilization efforts, formation of mother-teacher associations, education guarantee schemes, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidhyala (programs designed specifically for girls who drop out after primary school), paying families to send their daughters to school, passing out school uniforms and other school supplies, and residential and non-residential bridge programs (Govinda, 2011). A number of studies have shown the positive impact of the midday meal program in increasing enrollment and attendance rates for children in poverty, particularly girls (De, Khera, Samson, & Kumar, 2011; Kingdon, 2007). Programs like the Shiksha Karmi and Lok Jumbish, which train women to become education workers whose duties include escorting girls to school, providing child care for siblings, helping young girls with their household chores, and so on, have been very successful in reducing barriers to girls’ education thereby increasing girls’ educational access. The success of these programs demonstrates the need to empower women to become actively involved in the
effective implementation of educational reform movements. The government also has established *Mahila Samakhyas* (MS, Women’s Representation) as part of all education departments and initiatives in an effort to better understand and more effectively address educational concerns of women through their participation in the planning and implementation of educational reforms (Bandyopadhyay & Subrahmanian, 2008).

An impressive increase in female literacy rates is attributed to improvement in both the supply and demand side of education. Female literacy rates have grown faster than male literacy rates for the first time in Indian history, increasing from 53.6% to 65.4% between 2001 and 2011, as compared to an increase from 75.2% to 80% for men over the same period (Government of India, 2012a). A substantial increase in female literacy was noted in all states, including the more conservative and low literacy states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh where female literacy jumped from 33.1% to 53.3% and from 42.2% to 59.3% respectively between 2001 and 2011 (Government of India, 2012a). On the supply side, it is the increase in the number of schools and the widespread incentive programs focused on girls that are credited for improving educational access for girls. On the demand side, it is the increasing opportunities for girls to enter the work force and an increasing interest in educated brides that are credited with improving educational access for girls (Govinda, 2011).

**The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE)**

The RTE (2010) has been hailed by many as a significant step forward in meeting the educational goals and ideals for equality set forth by the Indian Constitution in 1950. With the adoption of the RTE, educational debate in India shifted focus from the need for universal education to issues of educational equity and quality. Issues related to poverty, education, and equality are multilayered and multidimensional, and the RTE addresses some of these issues.
The RTE must be recognized for several significant steps it takes to ensure that primary education is free and accessible to every child in India between the ages of six and fourteen.

In recognizing that policies in India suffer from poor implementation and accountability, the Act created and charged the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) with the task of monitoring the implementation of the RTE and for addressing concerns and complaints. In order to work more effectively in the complex and diverse cultures of India, the Act also requires that each state establish a State Commission so that the Act can be implemented and monitored in keeping with local needs and requirements. The RTE also makes it the concomitant responsibility of the central and the state governments to fund the provisions of the Act. In a significant shift in responsibility, the Act makes it the responsibility of the government rather than the parents to ensure that every child has access to school; however, the Act does make it the parents’ duty to enroll their child to school. Going beyond enrollment, the RTE also requires schools to ensure regular attendance of students.

Article 9 of the RTE provides special protection to children from “disadvantaged” and “weaker” groups by making it the state’s responsibility to ensure that children in these groups “are not discriminated against and prevented from pursuing and completing elementary education on any grounds.” “‘Disadvantaged group’ means a child belonging to the Scheduled Caste (SC), the Scheduled Tribe (ST), the socially and educationally backward class or other groups having disadvantages owing to social, cultural, economic, geographic, linguistic, gender or other factors, as may be specified by the appropriate Government, by notification” (RTE, 2009). “‘Weaker section’ means a child belonging to parents or guardians whose annual income is lower than the minimum limit specified by the appropriate Government” (RTE, 2009). Girls from poor families find protection as members of both groups.
Cost of education often is listed as a significant barrier to educational access for children in poverty, and so the RTE broadened the meaning of free of any cost to go beyond simply admission and tuition costs to include “any kind of fee or charges or expenses which may prevent him or her from pursuing and completing the elementary education” (RTE, 2009). This broader definition addresses both hidden and open cost barriers to education and places the burden on the state to cover the cost of uniforms, books, and other regional expenditures.

By mandating that the lack of a birth certificate or proof of residence cannot be used as grounds for non-admittance, the RTE removes another significant obstacle to educational access for children in poverty. The RTE also requires the state to make neighborhood schools, particularly upper primary, available to all children within a three year period. When and if a child needs to transfer schools, the RTE requires that officials at both schools work cooperatively and effectively to ensure the process happens in a timely and smooth manner. Stricter guidelines for quality of school facilities are imposed by the RTE which requires every school to have access to clean drinking water, separate functional bathrooms for girls and boys, and a playground.

In addition, the RTE addresses concerns of quality of education by requiring the state to provide a framework for a standardized national curriculum, requiring that the curriculum be fully taught each year, and by requiring that each student be assessed for individual progress and needs which must be met by the school. In doing so, the RTE indirectly addresses the obstacle of tutoring by stating only that it is not disallowed. The RTE requires that the student-teacher ratio not exceed 30:1. The Act also clearly defines the minimum number of teachers a school must have based on its size, requiring every school to have at least one teacher for each of the core subjects. The minimum number of required school days (200 for class 1-5 and 220 for class 6-8)
and minimum number of instructional hours (800 for class 1-5 and 1,000 for class 6-8) are defined by the Act. In addition, the Act sets guidelines for teacher certification and in-service. The RTE prohibits schools from having students repeat a class and makes it the state’s and school’s responsibility to ensure that every student complete a primary school education.

School management committees regularly monitor the schools, and the RTE further requires that three fourths of a school’s management committees be made up of parents, with significant representation given to parents living in poverty and from the lower caste. It also requires that fifty percent of every school management committee be made up of women.

The RTE requires all private schools to be recognized (licensed) by either the State government or the central government using an established set of criteria for determining recognition (licensing) eligibility. While the RTE makes it so schools cannot deny admission to students lacking documentation (birth certificate, immunization records, and academic transcripts), it does not change the corresponding criteria for granting recognition to a school. In spite of the RTE’s mandate for all private schools to be recognized, the number of unrecognized low-fee private schools are mushrooming as an alternative to low-performing government schools. Students who attend unrecognized schools face many disadvantages since often the school infrastructure and quality of teaching do not meet even the minimum standards for recognition. Moreover, transferring from an unrecognized school to a recognized school is extremely difficult, particularly at the upper elementary and secondary levels, and recognition status of the school from which a student graduates is a significant consideration in the college application process. In efforts to reduce the class divide in access to quality schools, the RTE requires that all private schools be recognized and imposes a high fine on schools that are non-compliant.
One of RTE’s most debated provisions is the required twenty-five percent reservation of seats in all private schools for students from “disadvantaged” and “weaker” groups. The Act does so without making any provisions for meeting the specific academic and social needs of children in poverty, particularly within a more affluent school environment, making it a paper right rather than a substantive right. The impetus behind the requirement was to make schools a place for bridging social inequalities, but the private school sector has been unwilling to comply and has taken the battle to the courts. Others believe that reserving seats in private schools to bridge social disparities is simplistic, and that the needs of the poor students will be met in schools that cater to middle-class students (Chandiramani, 2013; Kumar, 2010).

There is little doubt that RTE is a significant step towards providing primary school children a free, compulsory, and quality education. There also is little doubt that the Act has several shortcomings. The use of terms such as “weaker” and “backward” limits the possible success of the Act by reinforcing deficit thinking. Among some of its other serious drawbacks is the exclusion of children from birth to age six and fourteen through eighteen, and lack of attention to issues of child labor is another of the Act’s shortcomings. Impressive gains in school enrollment have not reduced the extensive problem of child labor in India, where 13 million children are officially estimated to be engaged in child labor. The absolute number of children engaged in labor is much larger considering the underreporting of official numbers and the limited definition of child labor to only include children engaged in paid work (Reddy & Sinha, 2010). Worthy of note is the fact that the official count of child labor does not include children forced by circumstances to beg. There is no accurate count of the number of child beggars in India, though unofficial counts give a range between 300,000 to one million. Transitioning children from begging into schools poses challenges similar to transitioning children working in
other areas because going to school means a loss or reduction in the overall family income. There are challenges in the begging-to-school transition that are particular to that situation, however, including extreme impoverishment and lack of readiness for learning, among others.

It is important to also recognize that certain provisions of the Act, while appearing to provide equality, in reality, counter it. For example, teachers in private and government schools think the Act’s requirement for age-appropriate classes hurts rather than helps children in poverty (Private Communications, 2012). They ask how a nine-year-old starting school for the first time will be able to succeed in grade 4. Drawing on years of experience teaching children from impoverished backgrounds, teachers express concern that such a requirement would only be effective if students in poverty are given access to adequately funded and staffed bridge programs that help address the academic and social needs of first-generation learners, particularly those entering the school system later than their classmates. The RTE mandates class placement by age but makes no provisions for meeting the needs of first-generation learners entering the school system later than their classmates.

While Article 9(c) of the Act mandates that schools ensure that students from the “weaker” and “disadvantaged” groups do not face discrimination, the Act leaves the mandate vague and broad. As with many Indian policies, the RTE does a reasonably good job of recognizing and addressing the educational needs of children living in poverty but falls short in implementation. During my 2011 internship with the NCPCR (National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights, the agency specially set up to monitor the implementation of children’s rights including the RTE across India), I was told that the biggest obstacle to the RTE’s effective implementation is the fact that many states refuse to acknowledge the RTE. Four years after its passage, the RTE’s requirements are unrecognized by a majority of schools.
across India (Chandiramani, 2013). The NCPCR is trying to encourage each state to set up a SCPCR (State Commission for Protection of Child Rights) to monitor the implementation of the RTE and other children’s rights at the state level, so far only 13 of the 29 states have set up SCPCRs (NCPCR, 2013). Non-compliant states remain consequence free.

Another significant shortcoming of the RTE is that it does not address issues of teacher shortage, absenteeism, teacher training, or teacher in-service. Issues of cost and the need for tutoring are absent from the RTE as are issues surrounding high stakes standardized exams. RTE is a step in the right direction, but it must be viewed as a work in progress.

**Structure of Contemporary Education in India**

Since passage of the RTE, education has become the joint responsibility of the central government and the state governments. More than sixty years after independence, the dominant Indian education system continues to follow the British model where grades 1 through 8 and are referred to as the primary years, with grades 1-5 referred to as lower primary and grades 6-8 referred to as upper primary. Grades 9-12 are the secondary years (the term “plus 1” refers to grade 11 and “plus 2” to grade 12) and “plus 3” indicates the three years of undergraduate studies. Some variation in school structure exists across India with twenty-two states categorizing grades 9 and 10 as secondary and the remaining thirteen states categorizing grades 8, 9, and 10 as secondary (Govinda, 2011). The minimum age of admission to first grade is 6 or older. Most schools have a two-year kindergarten program—lower kindergarten and upper kindergarten. In addition, families that can afford it, send their children to preschool, also referred to as play school, starting at the age of two or three years. The RTE makes education between the ages of 7-14 (corresponding to grades 1-8) free and compulsory for children. The
cost of early (preschool and Kindergarten) and secondary education varies based on the
institution and location.

Students in grades 10 and 12 are required to take board exams. The board exams
correspond to the board the school is affiliated with: state or national. There are three different
national boards: ICSE (Indian Certificate for Secondary Education), CBSE (Central Board of
Secondary Education), and the Open Board (National Institute of Open Schooling). Both
government and private schools are required to be affiliated with one of the above boards, and
the primary and secondary school curriculum and examination schedule are set by the
corresponding board. The ICSE and CBSE Boards are considered “prestigious” because they are
associated with English rather than regional medium (language) schools and have a more
rigorous curriculum than the other boards. The Open Board offers the most flexibility in choice
of subject and examination schedules and best fits the needs of children in poverty. It is also
considered the least “prestigious” board and is not given consideration by a majority of the
schools in the admissions process.

Students in all grades take monthly, quarterly, half-yearly, and annual (cumulative)
exams. The curriculum for grades 1-10 is broad-based and general while the curriculum for
grades 11 and 12 is specialized into streams. Performance on Grade 10 Boards determines which
stream of study a student qualifies for: science, commerce, arts, or vocational (not all schools
offer this option). The science stream is considered the most prestigious and has the highest
cutoff for marks. Commerce (mathematics, accounting, economics, and commerce) and the
other streams, arts/humanities (history, geography, political science, philosophy, psychology,
language arts, and music), and vocational courses (hospitality, fashion design, etc.) follow in
descending order. Vocational courses are a newer option and are offered only in government
schools. Actual course offerings vary based on availability of staff. Contrary to expectations, enrollment in vocational courses is low, forcing many schools to cut back on courses offered. There are two primary factors for this low enrollment: a) the assumption that only very poor or failing students choose (or are forced by low grades to choose to choose) vocational courses, and b) poor quality of teaching and equipment (Govinda, 2011).

**Contemporary Educational Issues**

**Private versus government schools.** The concept of two Indias again is clearly seen in the highly stratified (both in resources and ideology) school system. Elite schools for children from the “first” India are housed in air-conditioned, private schools with sprawling buildings that are fully stocked with the latest state-of-the-art teaching and learning equipment and which provide extensive extra-curricular opportunities. Schools for children in the “other” India are housed in minimally basic (if any) rundown buildings, with little (if any) access to teachers or teaching-learning resources, and where teaching occurs in a way that reinforces existing inequalities and prejudices (Govinda, 2011).

In 1950, independent India established the Planning Commission to develop and oversee the Five-Year Development Plans (FYDPs) that establish economic and social objectives, including those related to education, for each successive five-year period. The goal for education under the first FYDP was primarily the large scale creation of schools. Since the British concentrated on educational institutions in the cities and completely ignored the education of children in rural areas, the chief areas of focus were villages, especially those in remote areas (Weiner, Burra, & Bajpai, 2006). With this focus, 327,728 new schools were built between 1950 and 1986 (Little, 2010).
The rapidly increasing number of schools can be placed into three categories: government, private aided, and private unaided (interestingly referred to as “public”) schools. Government schools are funded and managed either by local or state government, and are further categorized into regular government schools that provide education to the poorest students in the regional language, government model schools that provide an English medium education to slightly more advantaged children, and *Kendriya Vidyalas* that provide education to children of high-ranking government officials. Private aided schools are managed privately by individuals, organizations (charitable or non-charitable), corporations, and so on, but are fully funded by the government. Private unaided schools are privately managed and funded (Tooley, Dixon, & Gomathi, 2007). Private unaided schools are further categorized as being recognized (by the government as meeting the educational standards set by it) or unrecognized (schools that have not applied for or have not been successful in meeting government standards; Tooley, Dixon, & Gomathi, 2007).

Private unaided schools, financed mostly by tuition, vary in quality based on location and tuition charged. Growth of private schools has accelerated since the 1990s with private schools absorbing 96% of the increase in primary school enrollment in urban areas and 39% in rural areas (Kingdon, 2007). Low-fee private schools are proliferating even in rural areas (though a significant number of these are unrecognized), providing an economically viable alternative to government schools, albeit not in quality of education (Kingdon, 2007). High levels of dissatisfaction (poor infrastructure, medium of instruction, and teacher quality being the primary reasons) has led to a dramatic loss of enrollment in government schools, leaving mostly first-generation learners from very poor households—those who have no other choice—in attendance (Mooji, 2008). Almost all private unaided schools use English as the language of instruction.
making them far more desirable to parents in the current market-driven system. Government schools, free of tuition cost, base instruction on regional language. With English fast gaining status as being necessary social capital for economic success, and therefore a caste and class equalizer, the value of government schools is fast dropping (Mooji, 2008; Tooley, Dixon, & Gomathi, 2007). It is no wonder, then, that private schools, especially low-fee private schools, are a burgeoning business in many villages, and poor parents are making significant sacrifices to pay private school tuition (PROBE, 1999). Critics believe that the deterioration of government schools is purposeful, to make way for tuition-seeking private schools that commodify education (Kumar, 2006). They rightly point to the fact that high-functioning government schools, aimed at providing education to children of high-earning Armed Forces officers, like the Kendriya Vidyalas, demonstrates the government’s ability to create and maintain quality schools (Kumar, 2006).

Alongside the multiplying private schools, there has been a marked increase of “private institutions.” These institutions capitalize on the academic needs of students living in poverty by offering a wide range of courses such as computer training, software “engineering,” teacher training, master and bachelor degrees, and more. Some private institutions also offer degrees in engineering. These private institutions offer courses that are in high demand, particularly by students who are seeking to exit poverty, because of the potential job opportunities and assumed earning potential. Even on a short, thirty-mile drive, it is possible to see small buildings, storefronts, and private houses with signs advertising them as private institutions. In addition to the actual institutions, a multitude of signs advertising various private institutions can be found on almost any short drive in North India. The attraction of these institutions is that they offer much sought after diplomas in a short period of time, and they admit students with low or failing scores.
and students who otherwise have been rejected from other formal and recognized colleges and universities. A majority of these students are poor. These private institutions charge very high fees, are not regulated by any agency for quality control, and have inadequately skilled staff. Such private institutions have been highly criticized for their extensive malpractices and fleecing of poor students, yet, in spite of this, the institutions continue to flourish. It is not uncommon for students attending these private institutions to pay the fees, not attend classes or fail exams, and still receive a diploma (Sethi, Ghuman, & Ukpere, 2012). There is no reliable data to determine the graduation rate for students who attend these private institutions, just as there is no data to show what jobs these students are able to secure upon graduation.

The Eleventh (2007-2012) and the Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2012-2017) pay particular attention to promoting the Public-Private Participation (PPP) at all levels of education. Policy papers guiding both plans point to the need for encouraging the PPP in “financing, service delivery, provision of workspaces and training of trainers” to support the education system in India (Tilak, 2012, p. 39). The promotion of the PPP in the education system has led to an “alarmingly high” increase in private schools and private educational institutions (Tilak, 2012, p. 40). Neither of the two Five-Year Plans provide an effective regulatory framework for the increasing number of private educational institutions, the majority of which are for-profit. While the aim of promoting the PPP was to reduce educational inequalities in enrollment and academic achievement, the results are indicating a reverse trend of widening educational inequalities (Tilak, 2012). In her article, Private schools for the poor: Business as usual, Nambissan (2012) reviews the research linking the rise of low-cost private schools with increasing educational inequalities in an already stratified educational system. She argues that the promotion of private schooling in India is “inherently unjust and discriminate[s] against the rights of children”
Most of the research examining the impact of the growing private educational industry is limited to the primary level. There is an urgent need to research and critique the impact of private institutions at the secondary and higher education levels.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) addresses the need to close down unrecognized schools by imposing a one lakh Rupee fine on schools that fail to apply for or receive government recognition by meeting educational standards set by RTE. While the government supports direct subsidies and makes substantial exceptions (allowing them access to premium property at reduced prices and providing tax exemptions) for private schools catering to children from the upper class, it does so without obligating them to fulfill issues of equity set forth by the Constitution (Kumar, 2006). The RTE now requires private schools to reserve twenty-five percent of seats for children from educationally “backward” communities, and the private school lobby is defiantly ignoring and actively opposing the law, without any consequences imposed. Moreover, while reserving seats might appear to be a good faith effort towards redressing inequality, doing so without requiring the development and availability of resources that would allow educationally “backward” students to succeed in private schools makes the effort appear to be a token-gesture.

Infrastructure. While the goal of expanding access is rapidly being met by the government, it comes at the cost of quality of infrastructure and attention to educational resources and pedagogy (Kumar, 2006). The National Education Policy (1986) reported that 90% of rural students had access to a school within one kilometer of their residence (Little, 2010), leading the Department of Education to state in its 1997-98 annual report that “accessibility of schooling facilities is no longer a major problem” (p. 30). In some regions where government schools are available the children have to negotiate rough terrain—walking
long distances uphill, walking through forests or streams—to reach school (PROBE, 1999).
Moreover the PROBE report states that it is of little use to have a school within one kilometer of a child’s residence if the school is overcrowded; the building is crumbling or filthy; or lacks basic facilities such as toilets, drinking water, or teaching supplies. Most government schools in urban areas are located in crowded poorly lit, noisy, and under-resourced buildings (Dyer, 2008). Rural government schools are even more poorly equipped with 42.5% lacking access to drinking water and 48.1% without toilet access for students (Tooley, Dixon, & Gomathi, 2007). The PROBE survey found equally dismal results reporting that only 58% of the surveyed government schools had at least two finished rooms, two thirds of the schools had roofs that leaked, 59% of the schools did not have a functional water supply, and 89% of the surveyed schools lacked functioning toilets. Moreover, the survey found that 78% of the surveyed schools were used for other purposes like election centers, centers for health services, *panchayat* (village government) meetings, and private functions. The 2006 follow-up PROBE report found that significant improvements had been made in school infrastructure since the first survey in 1999 so that 73% of the surveyed schools had at least two all-weather rooms, 60% of the schools had functioning toilets, and three fourths of the schools had drinking water facilities (De, Khera, Samson, & Kumar, 2011).

Another significant infrastructure obstacle influencing school attendance is the use of government schools by either paramilitary or rebel forces in areas experiencing armed conflict. The Ministry of Home Affairs reports that 16 out of 28 states in India face armed internal conflict (HAQ, 2008). A Human Rights Watch Report (2009) reported that 25 schools in the states of Bihar and Jharkhand were attacked over an 11-month period in 2008-09. Disruption is caused primarily by the occupation of schools, lasting anywhere from one month to several years. Once
occupied, the schools are fortified and armed guards are stationed and often live in the school buildings. This not only places students at risk but causes disruption due to fear, especially among girls who are likely to stop attending school altogether for fear of being assaulted or raped.

The RTE addresses infrastructure concerns by requiring that neighborhood (within one kilometer) schools be made available to all children within a three-year period and mandates the government to adequately fund this provision. It further sets minimum standards for school buildings as follows: must be all-weather with at least one classroom for every teacher and an office/store/Head Teacher’s room, must be barrier-free, must have separate toilets for girls and boys, must provide safe and adequate drinking facilities for all children, must have a kitchen where midday meals are cooked, must have a playground, and must be secured by a fence or boundary wall.

**Teachers.** The increased number of school buildings has created a severe shortage of teachers and it is estimated that there are 97,670 schools with only one teacher, 281,278 schools with only two teachers, and 108,228 schools with only three teachers (Kumar, 2006). Almost all of the teacher understaffing is concentrated in schools serving children living in poverty (PROBE, 1999; De, Khera, Samson, & Kumar, 2011). In its unannounced visits to 234 government schools across five states, the PROBE team found examples of committed and passionate teachers who were able to overcome significant obstacles (poor infrastructure, lack of resources, etc.) to successfully teach their students; unfortunately, such examples were rare. In a majority of the schools, the teacher was found to be either absent or occupied with tasks other than teaching. Combined with high student absenteeism, the probability of a student and her teacher being present on the same day is just about 50% (Dreze & Sen, 2013).
Teacher absenteeism, found to be as high as 27% in a study conducted by UNESCO (2009) and estimated to cost $2 billion a year, is a significant reason for poor quality practice of education (Misra & Muraoa, 2010). Human Rights Watch (2009) reported that one of the reasons for absenteeism is that teachers are reluctant to teach in “difficult” areas and are able to bribe their way into being posted to more desirable settings. In 2002, the government sanctioned the funding of para-teachers (un-trained, non-contracted teachers who are paid one-fifth the salary of a government teacher) to teach in high needs areas. The number of para-teachers jumped from 220,000 in 2002 to over 500,000 in 2005 (Kingdon, 2007).

Findings of the PROBE (1999, 2006) report reveal that there is an over-representation of male teachers with economic privilege belonging to the upper caste. Only 21% of the teachers surveyed by PROBE were female. Moreover female teachers are less likely to teach in schools in “difficult” (economic, political, or geographic) areas. The presence of female teachers can provide an incentive for parents to enroll their daughters in school, especially those who want only female teachers to teach their daughters. The presence of female teachers can counter a male-dominated school environment while also providing much needed role-models for both girls and boys (PROBE, 1999).

Problems of teacher absenteeism are magnified by issues of teacher apathy. During unannounced visits to schools the PROBE (1999, De, Khera, Samson, & Kumar, 2011) team found that for the teachers who were present, only a small percent actually was engaged in teaching. A majority of teachers came late, left early, and spent the time engaged in non-teaching tasks like drinking tea, reading the newspaper, or socializing with other teachers. Fifty percent of the schools surveyed had no teaching activity at all during the surprise visits. Lack of teachers’ interest in teaching is a primary complaint among parents living in poverty (Mooji, 2008).
Government teachers presently make a decent salary with an average of Rs. 4,479.47 (approximately $75) per month as compared to an average salary of Rs. 1,725.36 (approximately $29) earned by private school teachers (Tooley & Gomathi, 2007). Government school teachers are required to complete a government-mandated teaching certification program at the bachelor or master level, while private school teachers are exempt from this requirement. The salaries of government teachers are higher or equivalent to those of teachers teaching in the wealthier private schools (Dreze & Sen, 2013). The income disparity between teachers and the much poorer communities in which they teach creates a significant social class divide between the teachers and their students.

Additionally, most government teachers are seen as government representatives rather than as community supporters. A significant part of a government teacher’s responsibility is to act as a civil servant and perform a wide range of non-academic responsibilities (Mooji, 2008; Tooley, Dixon, & Gomathi, 2007). The non-academic responsibilities of government teachers (which include, but are not limited to, family planning education, staffing election booths, and running polio and other vaccination clinics) detracts from their teaching and adds to their frustration at having to function in a highly centralized hierarchical system with high levels of political interference (Mooji, 2008; Antal, 2008).

Teacher development. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) was set up in 1961 to be the central regulator for all pre- and in-service teacher training programs. The curriculum of pre-service teacher training include courses in sociology, psychology, and pedagogical issues. Almost all of these programs are situated in cities rather than rural areas and, therefore, all practice teaching is conducted in cities (Blum, 2009). The largely theoretical curriculum with its focus on conceptual teaching in “ideal” situations
involving high enrollment and a teacher for each classroom has been highly criticized for under-preparing government teachers for the “real world”—schools in remote, impoverished areas, low enrollment, multi-grade teaching (Blum, 2009). The primary focus of pre-service programs is to make teachers familiar with textbook content. Rote memorization for the purpose of doing well on a high-stakes test is the primary form of teaching in most government schools, teachers, therefore, are not taught multiple modes of teaching content and teachers often do not know how to help failing students (Dyer, 2008).

Lack of attention to teachers’ attitudes and beliefs, or reflection on the context in which they grew up, limits the teachers’ will to teach effectively (Dyer, 2008). The poor fit between the content and process of teacher development and the actual contexts in which teachers teach, or poor “ecological fit,” is a serious shortcoming of pre-service programs (Dyer, Choksi, et al., 2004). Labeling of students by teachers is almost universal (Dyer, 2008). Government teachers are strongly embedded in the “deficit model” when assessing their students. Poverty, caste, and illiteracy are viewed as inherent deficits to learning. Children from literate, middle-income, upper caste families are viewed as the “cream” of society, while children from low-income, lower caste, illiterate families are seen as uncivilized and “backward” with an inherent inability to learn (Dyer, 2008). This political, cultural, and historical construct is unchallenged during teacher development programs, allowing for continued perpetuation of this prejudicial cycle of inequality and injustice. There is a distinct lack of awareness and sensitivity on the part of teachers in understanding pedagogical reasons for slow-to-no progress (Dyer, 2008).

The National Policy on Education, 1986 (and its PoA, 1992) pushed for the revision of the traditional teacher role to “facilitators of learning rather than transmitter of knowledge” (Dyer, 2008, p. 239) and for teacher in-service training. Most teachers share that there is little or
no guidance for developing appropriate pedagogical skills and the few in-service programs that exist focus on diagnosis or evaluation rather than guidance and support (Tyagi, 2010).

While making a commitment to reducing the student-teacher ratio to 30:1 (on average the range is around 50:1 but can be as high as 100:1 in plus 2), the RTE fails to outline measures to achieve this student-teacher ratio goal. Moreover, the RTE lays down minimum standards for teacher qualifications but makes it possible for teachers to teach for up to five years without these requirements. The Act fails to address the issue of large-scale teacher shortage or the need to reform teacher training programs.

**Assumption of parental indifference.** One of the many successes of the PROBE report was its challenge to commonly held assumptions about students and parents. The indifference of poor parents towards their children’s education has long been assumed to be the reason for low schooling levels. The PROBE report found otherwise. Most parents, according to the report, believe that education is indispensable in modern society and have high educational aspirations for their children. Hunger for education was found to be high both among students and their parents. Employment reservation policies, which reserve a percentage of seats in most government professions for people from “disadvantaged” sections, enforced by the government have had a strong impact on the educational aspirations of parents from disadvantaged castes (PROBE, 1999). For many parents who value education, however, the sum total of school failings (poor infrastructure, poor or no teaching, social isolation, etc.) leads to a “discouragement effect” that negatively influences their motivation to send their children to school and often is the “last straw” for parents who consequently withdraw their children from school (PROBE 1999?).
Assumptions about child labor. Another widely held assumption thought to underlie the problem of low schooling has been that poor children cannot attend school because they have to work. This simplistic explanation for out-of-school children places the fault on the families rather than on the school system. Do children work because they need to, because they have no access to school, or because they have been pushed out of school? The movement to label all out-of-school children as child laborers is gaining strength with the dual intent of forcing much-needed changes to child labor laws and increasing access to education for poor children (MV Foundation, 2011). Until these changes are implemented, advocates against child labor and in support of schooling suggest that area schools understand the needs of child workers and make the necessary accommodations to meet these needs. For example, can local schools have the flexibility to create school schedules that accommodate children’s work commitments? Can communities build quality and affordable anganwadis (day care centers) so girls do not have to miss school to take care of their siblings? The PROBE report found that none of the girls who dropped out of school did so voluntarily but rather because their help was needed at home. Child labor is a far greater barrier to schooling for girls than for boys (PROBE, 1999).

Article 9(c) of the RTE mandates that all governing bodies (central, state, and local) “ensure that the child belonging to the weaker section and the child belonging to the disadvantaged group are not discriminated against and prevented from pursuing and completing elementary education on any grounds.” The statement is broad, and lumps girls, students from the lower caste, and poor students together without identifying and addressing each group’s unique obstacles to educational access and achievement, it is therefore, at best, a token gesture.

English as a necessity. Article 29(1) of the Constitution of India states that “…citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of
its own shall have the right to conserve the same.” It further states in Article 30(1) that “All minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.” The importance of valuing and maintaining a child’s local language and culture also is expressed in Article 29(c) of the Convention for the Rights of the Child (CRC). The RTE recognizes the importance of retention of native language and states, “medium of instruction shall, as far as practical, be in the child’s mother tongue” (RTE, 2009).

The reality of schooling in India, however, is contrary to these ideals. In the contemporary educational system, there is a distinct value judgment placed on language whereby English is considered both “civilized” and a necessary social capital for economic gain. It is no wonder, then, that English is fast gaining status as a possible caste and class equalizer (Mooji, 2008; Tooley, Dixon, & Gomathi, 2007). The belief in the value and superiority of English has led to a group of Dalits building a temple in honor of the Goddess of English (Pandey, 2011). The Goddess of English is modeled after the Statue of Liberty, holding a pen in one hand to signify literacy, and the Constitution of India in the other, as a reminder of the right to equality already granted to Dalits by the Constitution. The significance of the statue, standing on a computer, is explained by the originator of the idea Chandra Bhan Prasad: “we will use English to rise up the ladder and be free forever” (Pandey, 2011). The desire for an English education is one of the primary reasons parents withdraw their children from government schools and enroll them in tuition-based private schools, increasing both the cost of education and subsequent educational inequality.

The fact that significant differences in educational access and quality of education persist between children based on family income is undeniable and span the entire educational experience—from access to preschool, school availability, infrastructure, teacher availability and
quality, resources, assumptions about the learners, child labor, drop-out rates, and so on. While the RTE, at least on paper, addresses some of these class differences in educational access and quality, it does so in a very limited way. It is only over time that the RTE’s impact on actual educational practice will be revealed.

**Exams and tutoring.** In India, student achievement is exclusively measured through performance on tests and examinations. Weekly and monthly tests are supplemented with quarterly, half-yearly, and annual comprehensive examinations. In addition, centrally developed and administered board examinations are given in several grades varying from state to state (though all states administer board exams in grades 10 and 12, the results of which determine entrance into highly competitive colleges). The high-stakes test and examination system is a significant contributor to inequality in education and is cited as a significant reason for school dropouts (Reddy & Sinha, 2010). While the exams are falsely projected as being objective and neutral, they are, in reality, strongly culturally-biased in favor of students in the one India while creating an often insurmountable obstacle for students in the “other” India (Kumar, 2006). Most tests and all board examinations are administered in English in English medium schools. For students in poverty who aspire to an English education but have a limited grasp of the language, these tests and exams serve as an additional barrier. Tests and examinations are heavily reliant on textbooks that, in turn, are heavily biased in favor of middle- and upper-class experiences and values. Timings for tests and examinations are fixed and unrepeatable.

Tutoring (interchangeably referred to as “tuition”), a parallel and booming industry to schooling in India, gives students who can afford it a significant advantage with test and examination preparation (Kumar, 2006). Under this highly biased setting where children living on the street are expected to compete on the same tests as children living in mansions and
without any additional social or academic support, is it any wonder that tests and examinations are often the primary reason children living in poverty drop out of school (De, Khera, Samson, & Kumar., 2011; PROBE, 1999)? The contrast between their educational aspirations and ability to pass tests and exams leads to high levels of demoralization, stress, and sometimes suicide (PROBE, 1999).

The RTE sets standards for a curriculum that considers “conformity with the values enshrined by the constitution: all round development of the child, building up child’s knowledge, potential, and talent; developing physical and mental abilities to the fullest; and learning through activities discovery and exploration in a child friendly environment” (RTE, 2009). While these pedagogical ideals might be appealing, the law makes no mention of what changes in teacher training (and thinking) will be needed to prepare teachers to teach in such a manner. The law also fails to address the need to make significant changes to textbooks or to address the issue of how these pedagogical practices will actually prepare students for the market economy. The RTE requires that “no child shall be required to pass any Board examinations till completion of elementary education” but does not address the problems with heavy reliance on tests and the problems with post elementary board exams (RTE, 2009). The RTE mostly leaves the issue of tutoring unaddressed.

**Obstacles to Educational Access for Girls Living in Poverty**

Poverty and gender continue to have a significant impact on educational access as reflected by the low attendance rates (49.7%) for girls from poor families as compared to 87.4 % for girls from the wealthier families. The disparity in attendance rates is even higher for girls
between the ages of 15-17—reported at 12.8% for girls from poor families as compared to 68.8% for girls from wealthier families, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS3, 2006). There is little doubt that educational access, at least at the primary level, has improved considerably for girls living in poverty but significant barriers persist to their educational access at the secondary level and to their educational achievement at all levels. A brief listing of these obstacles follows:

- Son preference persists so poor parents make educational choices in favor of their sons rather than their daughters when forced to choose (Bandyopadhyay & Subrahmanian, 2008).

- Persistence of traditional roles for girls and women make household and sibling care their primary responsibility. This limits the time girls have to devote to school and also adds to the belief that education serves little purpose in the lives of girls (Govinda, 2011).

- Fear that education will be counter-indicative to girls and women’s “desirable” nature by teaching them to question authority and resist tradition (Bhan, 2001).

- The public nature of education which exposes the girls to greater interaction with boys (Ramachandran, 2003).

- Marriage traditions dictate that the groom have higher education than the bride. In turn, dowry expectations are positively correlated with the groom’s education level, making the cost of dowry higher for girls with higher education (Ramachandran, 2003).

- Concern for girls’ safety (Bhan, 2001).
• A majority of male teachers, lack of role models, and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in the curriculum and in teaching (Kingdon, 2007).

• Lack of access to quality education, limited or no access to tutoring, along with limited or no access to critical information needed to make good educational decisions (Ramachandran, 2003).

• Exclusive reliance on tests and exams to measure student achievement (Govinda, 2011).

• Child marriage remains the biggest obstacle to education for girls in poverty (Bhan, 2001; Govinda, 2011; Ramachandran, 2003).

It is important to note that some of the barriers to educational access for girls living in poverty have been reduced, if not removed. The RTE makes it the right of all children, including girls in poverty, to have an education up to grade 8. As the economy has shifted to a more consumer based economy, the demand for educated brides who are able to financially contribute to the family income has increased and, with increased access to education, girls are better equipped to resist the limits placed on their substantial freedoms which in turn results in increased educational access (Govinda, 2011; Ramachandran, 2003)

Policy versus Will

There is little doubt that, on paper, India aspires to be a progressive and egalitarian state. There is also little doubt that the reality is far different. While it has been argued that India’s limited economic (at least until recently) resources have been the major obstacle to implementation of its apparently progressive policies, Weiner (1991), among others, has vehemently rejected this thesis stating that it is the socio-political belief system supported and propagated by the “elite” that is the obstacle and not economics. Specifically, Weiner points out
that India’s educational system is built on the belief that “…there is a division between people who work with their minds and rule, and people who work with their hands and are ruled, and that education should reinforce rather than break down this division” (p. 5). Exclusion is not about outcomes but patterns that lead to them (Das, 2011). It is regrettable, then, that most of the policy in India, including the RTE, continues to focus on surface expressions of deeper institutional and cultural exclusions based on class, caste, and gender.

Aggregate national data, for the most part, is rendered meaningless in light of India’s significant regional variation. Kerala tops the country in human development indices (poverty, education, and health) with a total literacy rate of 96.02 % (up from 94.24% in 2001) and female literacy rate of 91.98% (up from 87.72% in 2001; Census India, 2011). Moreover, Kerala is the only state with a positive sex ratio (number of girls for every 1,000 boys) reported at 1,084 for the 2011 census (up from 1,058 for the 2001 census), has the highest life expectancy rate (71.3 years for men and 76.3 for women), and has the lowest infant mortality rate (13 per thousand). Kerala’s poverty rate is 14%, and the rural poverty rate fell from 69% (1970-1971) to 19% (1993-1994). The school dropout rate is the lowest in Kerala, reported at 13%, and it has the lowest number of out-of-school children (14% each for boys and girls). Kerala’s progressive policies and high public participation are indicators of the government’s will to make equality a reality. Bihar, on the opposite end of the spectrum, is consistently at the bottom in terms of human development indicators with a literacy rate of 63.82%. The gap between male and female literacy rates is significant at 73.39% for men and only 53.33% for women (Census India, 2011). The poverty rate in Bihar is high, 41%, with an average life expectancy of 61 years. Bihar has a sex ratio of 916. Its school dropout rate is 88%, and 57% of boys and 74% of girls are not attending school in the state of Bihar (Government of India 2012a; Reddy & Sinha, 2010).
The contrast in developmental outcomes between Kerala and Bihar can, to a large extent, be explained by the difference in each state government’s will (shaped, of course, by the history and socio-cultural climate of the state) to develop and implement central policies, limit corruption, and effectively utilize central and state funding.

Remarkable educational progress made by the state of Himachal Pradesh (HP) further exemplifies the role of governmental will in reducing inequality. Fifty years ago, HP had literacy rates almost as low as those of states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In the 2011 census, Himachal Pradesh’s literacy rates and school participation rates are second only to those of Kerala. Primary school enrollment is almost universal in HP with a negligible gender difference. Enrollment rates and gender parity in education drop at the secondary level but are significantly higher than national rates and are improving rapidly for HP (De, Khera, Samson, & Kumar., 2011; Govinda, 2011). Some factors that have contributed to HP’s education revolution are the government’s commitment (including funding) to increasing educational access particularly at the primary level, provision of quality *anganwadi*’s (day-care centers) that relieve girls from sibling care duties, initiatives that have expanded female work participation which increases educational motivation, governmental investment in teacher training programs with particular attention to increasing the number of female teachers, and changes in marriage practices like limiting dowry abuse (Govinda, 2011; PROBE, 1999).

Sen (2006) stresses that rights are an “articulation of social ethics” and, for rights to be meaningfully implemented, public discourse has to be changed and engaged. Besides offering protection and provision, rights can and often do serve as a vehicle for engaging public discourse. There are certain conditions that are necessary before rights can be realized, among these is a functioning and relatively efficient government that places priority on addressing issues
of inequality. Necessary also are active social policies, adequate funding, accountability, and transparency (Dreze & Sen, 2013; Sen 2006). Equally important to effective implementation of rights is active public participation. Dreze and Sen (2013) posit that it is the lack of public outrage at the inhuman treatment of the poor in India that partly contributes to the perpetuation of the situation; to change the living conditions of the poor, the public needs to get righteously angry. In addition, Dreze and Sen (2013) state that in a functional democracy with a mostly uncensored press, the media can and should play a larger role in demanding the effective enforcement of rights.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The focus of my dissertation research was exploring the school experiences of girls living in poverty in northern India. Through small-scale ethnographic case studies of twenty girls living in poverty, I explored their educational access and their educational aspirations as well as the broader impact of educational policy on their lives, shaped by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE).

Children’s Participation in Research

My pre-dissertation research indicated that there is very limited research in India that makes the children’s perspective of their own educational experiences and aspirations the primary focus. I found that while research focused on issues of educational access and equality is growing, the research is almost exclusively informed by researchers, policy makers, teachers, and parents, while children’s voices and participation are critically absent. In keeping with Article 12 of the CRC, I believe that it is important to provide children with meaningful opportunities to participate in the construction of understanding of their lives. For these reasons, the primary informants of this study are adolescent girls.

The fact that there is limited participation of children in research is not entirely surprising given that children have typically been categorized in research as being either objects or subjects (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). Research paradigms that view children as objects—something others act upon—are founded on the assumption that children are incapable and vulnerable beings. Such a view supports the paternalistic instinct to protect children and relies on parents, teachers, and other adults to give account of the child’s experiences (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). The conception of children as objects is in keeping with the patrifocal family structure; therefore, it is not surprising that a majority of the research on
children in India has thus far operated under this framework. The research paradigm that views children as subjects recognizes their personhood, and it is categorized as being child-centered. Children’s involvement in research within this paradigm is limited by assumptions about their cognitive abilities and social competencies, both of which are determined by age-based criteria (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008).

Contemporary international research is beginning to grant children central and autonomous status in the research process (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). The significant shift within research to view children as active participants and co-researchers is supported and encouraged by the CRC. Articles 12 and 13 of the CRC are revolutionary in that they give unprecedented recognition to the emerging capabilities of children by requiring that societies grant children the right (in accordance to their age and capability) to exercise their voice and participate in making decisions about their lives. Article 12 (Respect for the Views of the Child) of the CRC states:

When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account. This does not mean that children can now tell their parents what to do. This Convention encourages adults to listen to the opinions of children and involve them in decision-making—not give children authority over adults…. Moreover, the Convention recognizes that the level of a child’s participation in decisions must be appropriate to the child's level of maturity.

Under this framework, it becomes the researcher’s responsibility to provide safe ways for children to voluntarily express themselves and to ensure that children’s views are carefully heard and acted upon (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). Such research, then, must be done with children rather than on or about them (O’Kane, 2008). In making decisions at every stage of the research
process—research design, data collection, data analysis, and writing—my central consideration has been the voice and choice of the teenage girls who chose to participate in this study.

**Qualitative Research**

A central philosophical assumption of qualitative research is that knowledge is socially constructed and is expressed through multiple realities that must be understood as expressed within their complex and natural contexts (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research was therefore a natural choice for my dissertation since it is essentially a complex process of discovering meanings that people assign to their experiences in order to expand or challenge existing understanding. Qualitative research allows for flexibility, openness, and reflection through the entirety of the research process (Glesne, 2006). Qualitative research requires that the researcher be willing to spend extended amounts of time in the field in order to develop trust, understand the context in which the participants live, and gather sufficiently rich data (Glesne, 2006). Additionally, the researcher should be respectful of the participants by developing rapport with them and making every effort “to learn about their views and actions and to try and understand their lives from their perspectives” (Charmaz, 2010, p. 19).

By choosing qualitative research as my research design, I was able to give the girls in this study a meaningful opportunity to participate in the construction of meaning of their individual lives. Qualitative research made it possible to reveal the complexities and particularities of each girl’s life. This choice also allowed me to be flexible and adapt to the girls’ wishes and needs, and I quickly realized that interviews would provide me with only limited access to information. After seeking the girl’s opinions individually and in small groups, I expanded my data collection methods. Following their recommendation, I gave each of the participants a journal, pen, and camera through which they could choose aspects of their lives they wanted to share with me. A
number of the girls carried their journals with them and made entries throughout the day, some made entries nightly, some made minimal entries preferring to share information in informal conversations when we walked from school to their homes, at extracurricular events, and at sports practices.

**Ethnography: mode of choice.** The primary focus of this study was to provide adolescent girls living in poverty in northern India the opportunity to share their educational experiences. Ethnography is the process of placing the “descriptions, interpretations, and representations” of daily life practices within “historically, politically, and personally situated accounts” (Tedlock, 2003, p. 165), and it is the mode of choice for my study.

Ethnography is situated in the daily life practices of the participants and focuses on learning from the participants themselves (Spradley, 1979). Immersion in the day-to-day lives of the participants is essential in ethnographic research. One of the primary responsibilities of the ethnographer is the “construction of other people’s construction” of meaning (Geertz, 1973, p. 9). To grasp what for the participants is “experience-near,” the researcher needs, as delicately as possible, to put herself into the participant’s skin (Geertz, 1983). Intense immersion allows for such a possibility. Ethnographers, of course, cannot perceive what their informants perceive; rather they uncertainly perceive, “with,” “through,” or “by means of” the participants (Geertz, 1983, p. 58). Cultivating a trusting relationship allows participants to tolerate the intrusion of the ethnographer into their lives (reducing the “distance” between ethnographers and participants) while also allowing participants to accept the ethnographer as a person worth talking to (Geertz, 1983). I spent seven weeks immersed in the process of data collection and had the option to extend my stay or return to India at a later date if needed. Given that I had spent considerable time during previous visits preparing for my dissertation data collection combined with the fact
that I could completely immerse myself into the process of data collection without any distractions of childcare, work, or household responsibilities, I was able to collect sufficient and rich data. I did not need to extend my stay nor return for a follow-up visit.

Ethnography is as much a process as it is a product (Tedlock, 1991) and both the process and product of any given ethnography is determined by the choices the researcher makes. The doing and writing of ethnography, therefore, necessitates that the ethnographer pay particular attention to issues of critical reflexivity, positionality, and translation, each of which significantly influences perception and the production of meaning.

**Critical reflexivity.** In ethnography, the researcher is the research instrument, therefore, it is critical for ethnographers to recognize that “neither the researcher nor the researched come to the scene untouched by the world” (Charmaz, 2010, p. 15). It is essential, then, for the ethnographer to critically reflect on how her own life experiences will, “filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and misconstrue” (Peshkin, 1998, p. 17) not only her understanding of what she chooses to study, how she interacts with the participants of the study, how she perceives the data she gathers, but also how she chooses to interpret and tell the story. One of the central responsibilities of the ethnographer is to be aware of the assumptions and subjectivity that guide her actions and interactions and continuously ask herself, “How do I know what I know?” (Peshkin, 1998, p. 18) in an effort to develop the highest level of self-reflexivity.

The process of critical reflexivity begins with the selection of the research topic. Once I narrowed my topic to focus on understanding the impact of changing educational opportunities on the lives of poor girls in India, I wrote extensively about my own gender and education experiences in order to make visible my reasons for undertaking the study. This allowed me to draw the line between my passion for the topic and my need to use the topic for therapy (Glesne,
This process also afforded the opportunity for me to identify the most important filters through which I perceive the topic which, to my great surprise, was a reductionist understanding of girls as helpless victims. As soon as I accepted this truth, I made it a point to constantly check that my assumptions, questions, observations, and interpretations were not being filtered through this reductionist filter. I made a conscious effort to recognize the small and big ways the girls were exercising their agency and courage on a daily basis.

Critical reflexivity also requires the researcher to be attuned to her emotions. During the research process I was attentive to my emotional responses, what Peshkin (1988) refers to as the “warm and cold spots,” as indicators of my assumptions and I used this knowledge to guide my perspectives, interpretations, and questions. Having “sound footing” and “familiarity” with the field in combination with discerning observation and attentive listening allowed me to pick up on obvious, and not so obvious, influences on my and the participants expectations, assumptions, and behaviors (Charmaz, 2010). I kept extensive and detailed research notes during the data collection and analysis process. It was in the process of writing these nightly notes that I made decisions to either continue as I had planned or make changes to my plans. I also used these notes to reflect on my own subjectivity and that of the participants and how the two sometimes interacted to influence data collection.

With a sense of efficiency, I set about arranging the schedule for data collection. During the first few days, I felt pressured to set up as many meetings as I could. It took me a few days to adapt to the more relaxed, flexible, and informal way scheduling is done in India. A friend (a chartered accountant who has lived her entire life in India) shared that she has learned to complete her tasks as quickly as she can so when an unexpected business opportunity, or an opening in a client’s schedule comes through she is available to make the most of it. Though I
did set up a schedule, I needed to remain flexible and open to changes and last minute requests throughout the process.

I was fortunate to be given full access to Sikhya, a unique private school for children from the slums. The principal of Sikhya was very welcoming and gave me an office to use. I conducted the first interview in this office. The office had white walls and a large desk with a teacher’s chair at one side and two visitors’ chairs on the other side. The office had a door that closed, a window, and a fan. I chose the room thinking it would be convenient for the students, would allow me to close the door and offer the participants some privacy, and the fan would offer respite from the high humidity and heat. My first interview lasted a brief ten minutes and I knew I had made several mistakes. I realized respect for authority and compliance is ingrained in the students, and by conducting the interviews in the school, I was only reinforcing the power imbalance. I also realized that by conducting the interview in the school, the students assumed I was representing the school and were hesitant to share anything that might appear to be critical of the school. In addition, the office setting with desk and chairs reinforced these assumptions and the power imbalance. I did not schedule any other interviews in the office.

When I began the interview process I started approaching the participants to set up times to meet with their mothers. Most of the girls agreed that I should come to their homes to meet with their mothers but were at first quite reluctant to set a firm date. I quickly realized that they were nervous about inviting me into their homes given our class difference. One of the older participant said to me, “we live like servants.” The student who lived in the “nicest” part of the slum was the first to set up a time for me to meet her mother. This would be my second visit to a slum. My first trip to the slum was during my pre-dissertation research a year ago. I was completely unprepared for the strong feelings of guilt, privilege, disgust (at the amount of feces
and flies), fear, and sympathy that I felt. In the year since my first trip, I had reflected on all these feeling on several occasions in my research journal and felt I was better prepared. The evening before my visit to the slum friends and family told me to be careful since the slum I was going to was the “most crime ridden” in the city. I decided the best way to enter the slums would be to walk from school with the participants. It was a good choice since it allowed me to experience the reality of the participants at some small level. There were a few times I wanted to stop and take a pictures in order to capture an image that evoked strong feelings in me but I decided against pulling out my camera and taking pictures because I felt I would be acting as a rude and intrusive tourist.

**Positionality and crossing borders.** Classic ethnography focused on clearly defined “others”—referred to as “native,” “tribal,” or “non-Western,” among others. The belief was that Western researchers were perfectly tuned to their “exotic surroundings, a walking miracle of empathy, tact, patience” (Geertz, 1983, p. 56). Issues surrounding positionality, where and how the ethnographer places herself (as an insider, as an outsider, or as an insider-out) have become even more complex as those who were previously referred to as “natives” are now scholars and are increasingly taking on research in their own countries and communities (Behar, 1996). An insider is one with priori familiarity with the research setting and people, and an outsider is one who lacks this priori familiarity. Each perspective reveals “certain truths” and each has its own set of intellectual and practical advantages and disadvantages (Hellawell, 2007). My familiarity with the culture and the language allowed me acceptance by the participants and their families with relative ease. I speak Hindi and Punjabi fluently and understand both the academic and more vernacular versions of the two languages. The Muslim participants spoke a combination of Hindi and Urdu, and I did not have difficulty understanding or communicating in their use of
Urdu. Recognizing that in many ways I would be an “outsider,” I spent a significant part of my pre-dissertation research time in India in various educational settings—government schools, low fee and high fee private schools, and “charity” schools—to maximize every opportunity I had to speak with students, parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers in an effort to familiarize myself with the on-the-ground reality of issues with which I had theoretically familiarized myself.

In my research, I was an insider-out (Hellawell, 2007). I was born and raised in India which gave me some familiarity with the field and the people. My insider experience enhanced my rapport and communication with the participants and increased the likelihood they would be willing to reveal intimate details to someone they considered empathetic. Moreover, it allowed me to gauge the honesty and accuracy of responses. I have also lived outside of India, residing in the United States for 23 years now, which creates distance, of time and perspective, on this *priori* familiarity. As an insider-out I had the advantage of both “empathy” and “alienation” (distancing or making strange) to my research (Hellawell, 2007).

While my overall position in the research was one of insider-out, I held multiple other positions, each of which was bordered by the inherent power, expectations, language, customs, and behaviors associated with it. I was aware of and traversed these multiple borders with as much skill and delicacy as I could. As a middle-class, adult, Indian-American, female, with an advanced educational degree, I was aware of and crossed borders separating child from adult, poor from middle-class, no caste from low caste, “First” world and “Third” world. While I assumed I was aware of many of the expectations, behaviors, customs, and power associated with each of these positions, traversing each of these borders with respect and skill was a complex task that I needed to consciously negotiate through the continuous process of listening,
observing, writing, reflecting, learning, and practice. While I was aware and prepared for many of the “border crossing” issues, I also recognize that I was equally unaware of many of these issues and had to be prepared to traverse these unexpected issues with delicacy and respect. I did so as openly, humbly, and honestly as I could and was forgiving of myself when I thought I fell short. My “alienation” from living in India allowed me to recognize things I would have had a harder time seeing if I had not left and then returned to India. This “alienation” also made me judgmental, brought to my attention by a friend who said to me, “Why are you focusing on things that are not being done or things that are being done poorly? Why don’t you recognize things and efforts that are being made to bring about change, however small these efforts may seem to you?” I am very grateful for that valuable insight and the much-needed correction of my focus. As much as I could, I tried to keep true to the following quote from Geertz (1983):

To see ourselves as others see us can be eye-opening. To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulations and tolerance a sham, comes (p. 16).

One of the first things I did upon my arrival in India was to visit the markets close to the slums to buy fabric and had three simple cotton salwar kameezes tailored because readymade clothes are expensive and purchased by the wealthy; tailoring is the cheaper alternate in India. Throughout the data collection process I wore these modestly tailored salwar kameezes, much to the disappointment of a few of the older girls who expected me to wear more “trendy” and “modern” clothes as I was visiting from America. I wore a pair of cotton pants and a t-shirt to one of the older girls’ baseball practices at their request.
Marriage is almost a universal practice in India and, at one point, I was asked by one of the girls whether I was married, everyone else assumed I was. This posed a dilemma for which I had not prepared. I worried that if I revealed I had broken tradition and married and divorced a Caucasian American, I would be denied access to the girls by their families who would want to protect their daughter’s from my “bad influence.” On the other hand I did not want to lie. I replied, “I was married in 1992.”

**Translation.** Translation is the process by which meaning is moved in such a manner that leaves the “mind at once more knowing, more uncertain, and more disequilibrated” (Geertz, 1983, p. 49). Writing is linear while culture is anything but linear. Geertz (1983) says that while thought as product is “spectacularly multiple” and is “wondrously singular” as process it creates a paradox whose nature has to do with the “puzzles of translation”—how “meaning in one system of expression is expressed in another” (p. 151). The writing and reading of ethnography then can be understood to be contingent on power, rhetoric, language, and history (Clifford, 1986).

There were several significant issues of translation in my research. One of these issues had to do with language translation. While all the girls understood and could write in English, they preferred to communicate in Hindi with English words thrown in. This is a common practice among educated Indians and is referred to as “Hinglish,” a combination of Hindi and English words in one sentence. The mothers communicated in Hindi, Punjabi, or Urdu, languages on which I have a good grasp, and all the interviews were conducted in either Hindi, Punjabi, or Urdu. Some of the girls chose to write their journals in English, others wrote in Hindi. For the most part I had little difficulty in translating the interviews or the journals. Occasionally, I struggled with words that were culturally bound and that lost their meaning when
translated into Hindi. One such word I struggled to translate was “undhekha,” which literally translated means “unseen” but is a combination of feeling invisible and unrecognized. “Kutch bun na he,” literally translated, means “I want to become something.” The phrase in Hindi embodies the desire to become someone whereby “someone” is representative of having power, dignity, and respect. When I struggled with a word or a phrase, I consulted with friends and family who speak Hindi, Punjabi, or Urdu fluently and frequently. For simpler translations, I sometimes consulted Google Translate. In the process of transcribing an interview with one mother, I came across a phrase that made me burst into laughter when I tried to translate it literally. Trying to point out the uselessness of having a husband who would not allow this mother to get her tubes tied so she would not have any more children, the woman for whom this mother worked for said to her, “Pathi ka achaar dal na he?” Literally translated it reads, “Do you want to make a pickle of your husband?” After many amusing conversations with fellow Hindi speakers I decided to leave the phrase untranslated! All Hindi words are spelled phonetically in English by me and do not follow any standardized spelling format.

A significant translation issue in my research arose from the fact that I conducted my research as a middle-class student at an American university with girls living in poverty in India, and the research is written primarily for an American audience. I had to address issues of representation, voice, language, and power while making translation choices. My intent has always been to make the participants’ voices central in telling the story by generous use of verbatim with some words used in their original form. When transcribing interviews and writing the dissertation, I chose to leave sentence structures and repetitions intact. The girls and their mothers sometimes repeated phrases they wanted to emphasize, left some sentences incomplete, and spoke in conversational form—all which I chose to leave unedited.
Another significant translation issue I faced in my research was deciding how to represent something that is deeply different in a way that is respectful of the local culture while also having cross-cultural and cross-historical accessibility. I needed to be careful in my interpretations so that what is referred to as the “Third World” is represented not through oppression, but rather is represented in terms of its historical complexities and struggles for change (Mohanty, 2003); therefore, the terms Western and Third World, retain political and explanatory value in the world and these values must be acknowledged and addressed in cross-cultural writings (Mohanty, 2003). As a representative of both worlds, I address issues of translating meaning across culture very carefully, especially in recognition of the fact that most traditional ethnography was colonial and represented the West as “civilized” and the Third World as “primitive.” During the process of data collection, analysis, and writing my dissertation, I have been very conscious of this particular border crossing. While I realize the majority of the readers will be English speakers, I have chosen to give the dissertation a Hindi title. I made this choice purposefully hoping that it would act as a constant reminder to the reader that the research is situated in India. At no point in the dissertation do I make any comparison between India and America (or any other Western country), emphasizing instead that realities must be understood within a political, historical, and cultural context, and that change must be understood as being relative and progressive.

**Site Location**

There were two primary reasons for locating my research in India: 1) I was born in India and lived there until I graduated with my first Master’s degree, giving me some limited personal connection to the issues and a certain level of familiarity with the local culture, and 2) India has a long patriarchal history and the lives of girls and women continue to be shaped by these forces.
My study is located in Chandigarh for three reasons: 1) there is a stark contrast in the residents’ economic and social realities; 2) it is the capitol of two states (Punjab and Haryana) with two of the lowest sex ratios in the country (895 and 875 girls per 1,000 boys respectively) and recent studies have identified the North (of which Chandigarh is a part) and West regions of India as having wider class, caste, and gender disparities as compared to the Southern and Eastern regions (Dreze & Sen, 2013); and 3) it is where my family lives which added a measure of familiarity and accessibility for conducting my research.

Chandigarh is the dream city of independent India’s first prime-minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who hired the well-known French urban architect Le Corbusier to design it. Chandigarh has the third highest national per capita income. It is a city with broad, clean, flower-lined streets and palatial houses. On the other hand, a significant portion of its total population lives in slums in abject poverty: dirty streets lined with open sewers and temporary houses often roofed with scrap sheets of tin.

Chandigarh has a significant number of domestic workers (specific numbers are not available) who often reside in separate servants’ quarters built on the employer’s property and thereby have some limited access to educational capital in spite of their poverty. The contrast between housing for the employers and the employees is stark with clear (visible and invisible) boundaries that separate their social and economic lives. The families of the domestic workers live in cramped quarters because of location advantage—clean and safe neighborhood, free food, access to better schools, generosity of employers who might donate clothes and money or offer leverage for accessing other resources such as school admissions or after school tuition. Accommodation in the servants’ quarters is also highly desirable because it is rent-free. Rent is
high in the city; families in the study who had no other option but to pay rent spent up to 60% of their income on rent.

Chandigarh was originally designed for a population of 500,000. Since the 1960s, the city has seen sharp increases in population increasing by 144.59% between 1960 and 1970, 75.5% between 1980 and 1990 and another 40.3% between 1990 and 2000. The population of the city is projected to be over two million by the year 2020, four times what it was developed to accommodate (Government of India, 2011). One consequence of this overcrowding is shortage of available seats in schools and a sharp increase in the number and size of slums. The Bapu Dham colony is one of the many slums in the city. It is located by the Grain Market and has 3,000 one-room mud homes, referred to as “jhuggies,” that house its 15,000 residents, most of whom are migrant workers. In spite of its severely limited access to basic utilities like clean water, electricity, and sanitation, Bapu Dham is one of the “better” slums of Chandigarh. Children of Bapu Dham have access to three public schools. Yuvsatta, a non-profit organization, has had an established presence in the colony since 2009 and runs the Sakhi program for teen girls who have either never been to school or are dropouts.

**Participant Selection**

In keeping with the purpose of the study, participants were selected based on their gender, age, family income, and school enrollment. The 20 girls who volunteered to participate in the study were between the ages of 13 and 17, enrolled in school, and were living in poverty.

Participants for this study were selected using the snowball, chain, and networking sampling method in which potential participants are identified by people who know people (Glesne, 2006). During previous visits to India for my pre-dissertation research, I had established networks with members in Chandigarh’s educational community. It was with the
help of these networks that I gained access to the participants of this study. One of the contacts was the principal of a private school, Sikhya, which provides quality education for children living in the slums. I respected the principal for her unique insight into the needs and challenges of children and families living in deep poverty and for her passion and dedication to providing the children and families with dignity and success. The principal and I stayed in touch between my visits. Within the first two days of arriving in Chandigarh, I telephoned the principal of Sikhya and set up a time to visit the school. When I met with the principal we discussed my research, she was supportive and generous with her help and advice. I was given the use of an office, introduced to the staff and given open access to the grade 10 students. At the time I was there, the school did not have a ninth grade, so I focused exclusively on the girls in the tenth grade. There were 10 girls and six boys in the class with whom I discussed my research project explaining why I was only including girls in this study. All ten of the grade 10 girls at Sikhya wished to participate in the study.

During my pre-dissertation research, I discussed my research interest with my aunt who is a teacher at a local Hindi language government school, and she offered to let me spend several days with her at her school. Since my aunt was familiar with my research interest, she had arranged for some of her former students to meet with me. Her former students were 16 and 17 years old and in grade 12. My aunt set up initial meetings with several of the girls at her house, the girls were all friends and came in groups. We met over tea and snacks, and I discussed my research project with them. Some of them were willing, some not. The girls who were willing offered to ask friends they thought might be interested in participating. Eventually I had six girls attending grade 12 as participants in the study.
During my pre-dissertation research, I had also met with two women who worked as maids in the affluent sectors of the city and who had daughters. My conversations with these two women gave me valuable and practical insights into my research topic. They and their daughters volunteered to be a part of this study. Both girls were grade 8 students. Through their network, I gained access to two other grade 8 students willing to participate in the study. The final participants included four grade 8 students (ages 13 to 15); ten grade 10 students (ages 14 to almost 16); and six grade 12 students (ages 15 to 17). Twelve of the participants lived in the slums, six in servants’ quarters in the city, and two in government housing. Twelve of the mothers worked outside the home—ten as maids, one worked at Sikhya, and one sold fruit. Family incomes of the participants ranged from very low to high enough to be exiting poverty (one family).

Since family is the primary unit in India, I met with the families as early in the process as I could. Each family had their own preference for the level of access I had to their daughter and their family, and I was very careful to respect the limits and the freedoms established by each family. Part of my research design was to interview the mothers, and I was glad when all twenty of the mothers agreed to be interviewed.

From the 20 girls that participated in the study, 15 are referenced in the chapters that follow. Profiles of ten of these 15 girls are featured in Chapters 5 and 7. Babita, Durga, Nashra, Pooja, and Poonam’s profiles are presented to highlight issues of poverty. Meenu, Sapna, Gulafsha, Maya, and Promila’s profiles are presented to highlight gender-related issues. Five additional girls (Frat, Kamalpreet, Shaveta, Prerna, and Sonu) are referenced in Chapters 6, 8, and 9.
Of the 15 girls referenced in this study, nine of the girls lived in the slums. Four of the girls from the slums (Babita, Nashra, Poonam, and Promila) had mothers who worked. Babita’s mother sold fruit while Nashra, Poonam, and Promila’s mothers worked as part-time maids in multiple homes. The mothers of the other five girls living in the slums (Meenu, Gulafsha, Prerna, Frat, and Kamalpreet) did not work outside the home.

Six of the girls referenced in this study lived in the city. The mothers of four of the girls (Durga, Pooja, Sapna, and Sonu) worked as maids and the family lived in the servants’ quarters of the homes for which the mothers worked. Maya and Shaveta’s fathers were government employees, their mothers did not work outside the home. Maya and Shaveta’s families lived in rent-free government housing. Besides Pooja’s mother, who had completed her class 12 education, the mothers had an education lower than class 8.

Five of the girls (Babita, Nashra, Poonam, Durga, and Kamalpreet) were the oldest girls in their family. Nine of the girls had older sisters (Meenu, Sapna, Promila, Maya, Gulafsha, Prerna, Sonu, Frat, and Shaveta). Pooja was the only child of her parents.

Seven of the girls attended Sikhya, a private tuition-free school that exclusively caters to children from the slums: Babita, Nashra, Poonam, Meenu, Gulafsha, Kamalpreet, and Frat. Two of the girl (Durga and Sonu) attended a well-known government model school. Five of the girls (Maya, Sapna, Prerna, Pooja, and Shaveta) attended a lesser-known government model school. Promila, whose family was one of the poorest in the study, was the only one attending a Hindi medium school. Poonam, Kamalpreet, and Frat were the only girls in this study who did not own a bicycle. Appendix A offers a table outlining the participants’ demographic information.
Data Collection

What an ethnographer *discovers* is inherently connected to *how* she finds it out, making the selection of data source critical (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1996). Data for this study was collected through open-ended interviews, observations, participant journals, photographs, field notes, and other relevant documents such as policy documents, government reports, NGO reports, research articles, and newspapers (among others).

As noted previously, I spent seven weeks immersed in the process of data collection. As soon as I was satisfied that I had participant and family consent and that the purpose of the research was understood by all, I started setting up schedules for interviews and observations. Since I was in the field for a limited time, I started collecting data as soon as I could and added participants over time. Within a short time of conducting interviews and observations, I realized I needed to be very flexible as last minute changes in plans and invitations almost became the norm. There were many occasions when I would arrive at Sikhya prepared to go home with one of the girls to interview her mother only to be told someone in the extended family had died or an unexpected visitor had arrived, would I mind coming another day? There were several days I had planned to spend with the older girls at their baseball practice or matches, but the monsoon rains changed those plans. The first few times this happened I felt frustrated and a little anxious about completing data collection in the time I had. I consciously worked at letting go of these feelings since they limited my ability to adapt and make alternate plans. I quickly realized that, in the end, each day was very productive, though often in ways very different from what I had planned. The fact that almost all the families and many of the older girls had access to cell phones was very helpful. Many of the older girls called often to “chat.”
Open-ended interviews. The central focus of this study was to explore the relationship between education and the lived experiences of girls from poor families in North India. I had planned on using open-ended interviews as a primary source for data. Knowing that creating rapport and building trust is essential for effective interviewing (Seidman, 2006), I spent time informally with individual participants before setting up an interview schedule with them. With the mothers, I made sure I had at least one informal meeting before the interview.

I learned from the first interview that it would be preferable to not conduct the interview in the office I was assigned to at Sikhya. Finding a location in which to conduct the interview presented a different challenge for each of the girls. None of them wanted to be interviewed at home due to lack of space and, therefore, privacy. Since many of the grade 10 girls were allowed out of the house only to go to school, school was the only option. I tried conducting an interview after school in the playground under the shade of an old tree, but the spot did not provide an enclosed sense of safety and privacy. For the girls at Sikhya, the best place to interview them was after school as they walked to their homes, or after school in their classroom when it was empty and we could close the door for privacy and the girls could sit at their familiar desks. The older participants generally had greater freedom of mobility. They preferred to be interviewed at my aunt’s house, who generously offered us a private and comfortable room for this use. The grade 8 girls chose to come to my mother’s house for the interviews. Since their mothers were familiar with the house, they gave the girls permission to come. I found a private place in the house where we could all sit side-by-side for the interview. The girls came with their mothers, and the mothers drank tea in the kitchen while I interviewed their daughters. The mothers, in turn, invited me to their homes to conduct their interviews. The interviews with the mothers sometimes included other family members and neighbors. I followed the mother’s
preference for whom they wanted to include in the interview. In two cases, the fathers were present for the interview. In one of these instances, the mother did not appear constrained by what she wanted to say, in the other case, I believe the mother would have spoken more freely if her husband was not present but he would not give permission for her to speak with me alone.

I began every interview by ensuring that each participant fully understood the nature and scope of the study by going over the consent form (Appendix B). After the consent forms were signed, I began the interview process. The girls, particularly the younger ones and all the mothers, were initially shy about being recorded. I assured them that I was recording the interview so I could remember the conversation accurately. I also offered to turn off the recorder if they preferred. In turn, they smiled and told me they were shy but not unwilling to be recorded. Almost all the participants forgot the presence of the recorder a few minutes into the interview. I always checked the battery in the recorder and only had to change it once during an interview that lasted over two hours as various family members came and went.

While it is true that flexibility and openness are necessary for the interviews to be emergent, a fine balance needs to be created to keep the process focused and effective (Hatch, 2002; Seidman, 2006). For this purpose the interviews all began with pre-determined open-ended questions that explored rather than probed, and encouraged the participant to recreate rather than simply remember. Learning to listen is an essential aspect of interviewing. Seidman (2006) suggests that for successful interviewing, listening needs to happen at three levels. At the first level, the researcher must listen actively to the words spoken by the participant; at the second level, the researcher must listen to their “inner voice;” and at the third level, the interviewer must act as a teacher and manage the interview process by watching the time and knowing when and how to ask for clarifications. Throughout the interview process, I paid
attention to assumptions and power struggles, allowed natural silences, was empathetic, and strove to bracket my assumptions and remain critically reflexive.

I expected each initial interview to last between 60 and 90 minutes. In reality, the interview with the girls lasted anywhere from 20 to 50 minutes at most. I quickly realized that sit-down interviews were not the most effective way to dialogue with the girls. They preferred to share their lives with me in more informal settings such as when we were walking from school to their home, hanging out at baseball practice, eating lunch together, or at recess. I adjusted my interview protocol and, after reviewing the initial interview with each girl, I wrote out follow-up questions on index cards that I pulled out any time I thought I might be spending time with a particular participant. While the sit-down interviews were tape recorded, these informal conversations were not although I did carry my notebook at all times and recorded verbatim on site. I made it a point to write out in detail these conversations at the first opportunity including any verbatim I had noted. Interview protocols for the youth participants and for the adult participants are included in Appendix C.

**Journals and pictures.** I quickly realized I needed to expand how I was going to collect data, and I discussed different ideas with the grade 10 girls at Sikhy a since I began my data collection with them. The girls agreed that journals and cameras would be a good way to go. That evening I went to the fanciest bookstore in town and bought 20 of the prettiest journals I could find and 20 gel pens in various colors. The girls each got the opportunity to choose a journal and pen. I gave them guidelines for what they could write in their journals while stressing that they had the freedom to write anything they wanted to share with me, or nothing. One of the girls wrote a story, another a poem about women’s suffering, another wrote a beautiful poem for me. The length of entries varied greatly from brief entries to very lengthy
entries that took all available space. It was clear that the girls felt safe revealing more vulnerable hopes and fears in their journals than they did in person. Adding the journals as part of the data collection proved to be a valuable addition to my research.

When I first visited Sikhya, the principal walked me through the school and I was moved by pictures of homes I assumed to be those of students at Sikhya. The principal shared that she had given a select number of students’ cameras to take pictures of their homes and families. These pictures were displayed around the school as an acknowledgment of the students’ realities. Inspired by this idea, I decided to ask the girls if they would like cameras to take pictures of their home, families, schools, and anything else they considered important to their lives. They liked the idea and I bought each girl a disposable single-use camera with 36 exposures each. Most of the girls had never handled a camera so I spent time teaching each of them how to use it. One of the girls lost the camera, two over-exposed all the pictures. I was able to get all the other pictures developed and made copies for the girls at their request. The pictures, particularly what the girls chose to photograph, added another level of depth to my data.

Observations. A significant part of the data for this study was collected as a “participant observer” (Spradley, 1980). An important aspect of good ethnography is building trust between the researcher and the participant. One way to achieve this is by reducing the “distance” between the researcher and the participant (Creswell, 2007, p. 18) by taking part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of the participants. The building of trust—developed through the demonstration of appropriate behavior on the part of the researcher, respect, careful and active listening, and reciprocity—is a key benefit of participant observation (Schensul, et al., 1999). Participating in the daily lives of the chosen families afforded me the valuable opportunity to learn about not only their explicit culture, a level of knowledge of their culture
they are able to communicate with relative ease (Spradley, 1980) but also their tacit culture, a level of knowledge that is mostly unconscious (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). I kept in mind that while it is important to minimize the distance between the researcher and the participants, it must be done with caution so that the researcher will keep her “eyes open” and does so without actually “going native” (Behar, 1996).

According to Spradley (1980), the basic unit of ethnographic inquiry is the “question-observation” (p. 72). Asking descriptive questions allows for descriptive observation and, in pursuit of this, the author recommends nine dimensions for making descriptive observations: a) space, physical space and places; b) actors, people involve; c) activity, a set of related acts people do; d) objects, physical things that are present; e) acts, single actions that people do; f) events, set of related activities that people carry out; g) time, sequencing of events; i) goals, the things people are trying to accomplish, and j) Feelings: the emotions felt and expressed.

As I wrote follow-up questions after reviewing the initial interviews, I did so by making use of these nine dimensions. Spending time with the girls in their schools (in the classroom, eating lunch, recess, and extracurricular practices), homes, and other informal social settings allowed me to observe the participants in a broad context. Doing so revealed many complexities I would have otherwise missed had I depended only on interviews as a source of data.

Geertz (1973) states that cultural patterns repeated over time become “natural,” creating a common sense cultural system that presupposes expectations, perception, behavior, and judgment (p. 92). Common sense, Geertz (1973) states, makes the world familiar: “it lies so effortlessly before our eyes it is almost impossible to see” (p. 92). I believe my “alienation” helped me in this regard. At each home visit, the girls were expected to take care of me by making me something to drink and eat. They did so happily. The families with sons never
expected the boys to participate in taking care of the guest. Differences in gender role and expectations were clear in many families though some of the girls said to me, “My parents do not differentiate between my brother and me, they treat us the same.” Soon after one of the girls said this to me, the conversation shifted to “pocket money” (allowance) and she shared that she and her sister get Rs. 5 (approximately $0.10) while her brother (who is much younger than her) gets Rs. 10. She did not question the difference in allowance and justified it by saying he gets more because he spends more, while she and her sister save their money.

Field notes. Field notes were another data source for my study. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1996) recommend that the “doing” and “writing” of ethnography should be seen not as separate but as dialectically related and interdependent activities. Writing field notes involves reflection, analysis, and interpretation and goes beyond description to allow for translation, narrating, and contextualizing data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1996).

There is no clear recommendation for how field notes should be formatted, and the posthumous publication of Malinowski’s personal journals brought to the forefront the controversy of whether filed notes are personal or public work (Pratt, 2003). I made disciplined use of field notes for recording both detailed descriptions during the interview and observation process and for recording my reflections and insights throughout the research process. I mostly limited note taking in the field to jottings and recording verbatim quotes in a notebook. The girls were curious as to what I was writing, and I let them read my notes. It pleased them to see their words written in my journal. At the end of each day I recalled, inscribed, translated, narrated, textualized, and analyzed the participant data at length on my computer in a file protected with a password. I separated my research notes into a different Microsoft Word file on my computer, paying particular attention to sensory data and emotions (the participants and mine). I made use
of my research notes to situate my participant and myself in the study. In particular, I used my research notes to reflect and shape the research process, my role in the study, the participant’s level of involvement, and issues arising from class and age differences.

**Data Analysis**

There are several key points I kept in mind while analyzing data for this study. First, that the purpose of an ethnography is not to reveal the “truth” but to “reveal the multiple truths apparent in others’ lives” (Emerson, Fertz, & Shaw, 1995) through my “construction of other people’s constructions” (Geertz, 1973, p. 9) of their life’s meaning. Second, the purpose of ethnography should be to understand the meaning participants assign to their life experiences as they are situated in a complex context shaped by historic, political, economic, cultural, and social forces. Third, good ethnography requires the ethnographer to make the familiar into the unfamiliar while revealing the “other” to be normal and “without reducing their particularity” (Geertz, 1973, p. 14). The process of data analysis for this study had an added layer of complexity given my insider-out positionality. In recognition of this fact, I paid particular attention to any assumptions that surfaced during the analyzing and writing process. The research journal played a significant role in helping me to identify assumptions that could potentially guide my choice of which data to include, or could distort the meaning I was assigning to the chosen data. In addition, I made liberal use of verbatim to support the meaning I assigned to the data. Lastly, I made a conscious effort throughout the research process, including the data analysis process, to recognize and respect the specificity of the cultural, social, historical, political, and economic influence on the meanings people assign to their lives. It is for this reason that I abstained from any comparison between Indian and Western contexts.
After I returned from collecting data in India, I put all the data I had collected in a safe place in my study and every time I prepared to start transcribing, I found some excuse that prevented me from looking at my data. After several failed attempts, I honored the fact that I needed a little time away from the data to create some distance and perspective and also to recover from the intense seven weeks I had spent in the field. I went on a short vacation with my children to New York City and, upon my return, set about organizing the various sources of data.

Realizing the large quantity of data I had, I decided to have half of the taped interviews transcribed by a transcription service. I chose to translate and transcribe the interviews that I thought I would include in my final analysis. I transcribed 15 of the interviews with the girls and five interviews with the mothers leaving five interviews with girls and 14 interviews with the mothers for the transcription service. During the process of transcription, I paid particular attention to translation, often needing to stop and think of the right word. I read each transcription and translation done by the transcription service as I listened to the interview to ensure the translations and transcriptions were done to my satisfaction. All the transcriptions were saved as Microsoft Word files on my laptop and were password protected. Where possible, I added transcriptions from observations, informal conversations, and field notes to the interview transcriptions. I read through each journal at least three times.

While there are multiple techniques that can be used to transform data for qualitative research, I used the three techniques of description, analysis, and interpretation recommended by Wolcott (1994) to transform data for my study. Thematic coding was used to analyze data for this study. Coding is a process by which data is progressively sorted and defined into an organizational framework (Glesne, 2006). I tried several different ways to code my data and during the initial process, often felt like I was drowning in the data.
I began the analysis process by selecting 15 cases that I felt would be a good representation of the participants while also demonstrating intra- and inter-group variation. For these 15 cases, I wrote one-page summaries contextualizing the central themes in each case. Next, I read and reread all the transcriptions I had for each of the 15 selected participants. While doing so, I identified the main themes and circled corresponding verbatim for each theme. I wrote the main themes for each case identifying common themes on index cards, then I used the triangulation process recommended by Denzin and Lincoln (1994) to select the themes for analysis. I first triangulated data obtained by different data collection methods (interviews, observations, and journals) for each selected participant. Next, I triangulated the themes in comparison with information from multiple participants. Finally, I triangulated data with existing research literature. Satisfied that the themes were significant and were emerging from the data, I proceeded to repeat the process for sub-themes.

During the process of coding, categorizing, and theme-searching, I continuously reflected on new connections allowing new insights to emerge (Glesne, 2006). I expected this process of coding, categorizing, and theme searching to be progressive, repetitive, and time consuming—and it was. Once I had identified the main and sub-themes, I put them on large sheets of paper and categorized them in relation to the purpose of the study. This was a challenging and time consuming task that I repeated many times.

The process of data analysis continued through the writing process. No ethnography can explain everything about a particular phenomenon, but it does explain something. The “burden of authorship” (Geertz, 1988, p. 146), then, lies with the ethnographer in not only selecting what is to be explained but how it is to be explained. The ethnographer’s challenge lies in telling a story in which “the deeply different can be deeply known without becoming any less different;
the enormously distant enormously close without becoming any less far” (Geertz, 1983, p. 48).

In writing ethnography, the tension lies in respectfully representing cultural and historical particularities in a way that has cross-cultural and cross-historical accessibility. For me, writing the dissertation was the hardest part since I felt the heavy burden of authorship. Throughout the writing process I was mindful of several key concerns: a) keeping the participants’ voices central, b) reducing the distance between the reader and the participants, c) highlighting the themes and sub themes from the research in a compelling manner, and d) adequately supporting my writing with research findings from multiple subject areas.

Along with these concerns, I was sensitive as to how I represented issues of poverty, gender, and education in India to a primarily American audience. I have attempted throughout the dissertation to diverge from conversation of either/or, better/worse, good/evil to speaking without blame and locating the participants’ truths within historical, political, and social contexts that allow change to be seen as progressive and relative.

Credibility and Plausibility

The purpose of ethnography is not to reveal a singular “truth” but to reveal the meanings people assign to their life experiences. This presumes that multiple realities of any given phenomena exist. The measure of a good ethnography is not how valid it is but how relevantly and appropriately it describes, analyzes, and interprets the “truths” revealed by the participants. Qualitative research is evaluated for its trustworthiness, structural corroboration, consensual validity, and referential adequacy (Eisner, 1990; Glesne, 2006). Throughout the research process, I have striven to be honest, open, and reflective of my role as the researcher recognizing, acknowledging, and addressing my assumptions throughout the research process. Audit trails are essential for providing credibility to a study (Creswell, 2007) so I kept detailed field notes of the
observations, interviews, self-reflections, and how data was collected and analyzed in order to provide that audit trail. A qualitative study has referential adequacy, according to Eisner (1990), when the findings of the study can be substantiated by other corroborating literature in the field. Along with the generous use of verbatim, I used multiple data sources from a variety of multi-disciplinary fields to substantiate the themes in a way that allows the reader to “see” facts in a new light. Data sources included: government statistics; government sponsored research findings; non-profit sponsored research findings (particularly research from the Young Lives studies and research done by CREATE); data from international organizations; research articles and policy papers from various fields including, but not limited to, economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, education, and women’s and gender studies; memoirs; newspaper and literary magazine articles; field workers; and information from non-profits.

Eisner (1990) defines structural corroboration as a process by means of which data from multiple sources are related to each other to either support or contradict the analysis. Data gathered for this study confluences with data from the variety of above-mentioned multi-disciplinary sources providing credibility to the analysis. Consensual validation is an agreement among competent others of the “description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics” of a study (Eisner, 1990, p. 112). Consensual validation for this study was provided by three competent readers, all of whom agreed with the descriptions and analysis provided in the study.

Ethical Concerns

Moral and ethical issues are interwoven throughout the research process, beginning with topic selection; extending into site, participation, and methodology selection; participant-researcher relationship; data collection, storage, transformation and writing; and how the researcher chooses to exit the study. Recognizing and addressing ethical issues is a critical role
of the researcher. “Seeking consent, avoiding the conundrum of deception, maintaining confidentiality, and protecting the anonymity of individuals” (Creswell, 2007) must be central ethical concerns of the researcher. The American Education Research Association (2009) and the American Anthropological Association (2009) have laid out stipulations for the ethical, voluntary, and “free from harm” limits for conducting research. The Institutional Review Boards of each research institution is responsible for monitoring and regulating compliance of the same by individual researchers.

Since my study is situated in India and involved the active participation of youth between the ages of 13 and 17, I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) online program for researchers and did more than the minimal requirement (risk training). The completed IRB form is attached as Appendix D. While the guidelines set by the IRB are essential, I recognize that they only address what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) refer to as procedural ethics. Ethics in practice brought forth additional “ethically important moments” (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004) that I had to resolve with respect, honesty, humility, and grace.

**Informed consent.** A critical ethical concern is the voluntary and informed participation of the subjects. An informed consent form is one way of ensuring that participants are informed and their participation is voluntary. The informed consent includes information about the purpose of the research; the role the participant, time commitment required from the participants; any potential harm, risk or vulnerability to which the participant might be exposed; the right of the participant to voluntarily participate, withdraw from the study and review interview material; right to privacy; potential benefits; how records will be kept confidential; how data will be disseminated; and my contact information. A copy of the informed consent form for this study is attached as Appendix B. Since the participants in my study were native Hindi, Punjabi, or Urdu
speakers, the consent form was be written in English for use in the IRB approval process and translated into Hindi (which all the participants understand) for use with the participants. After meeting the girls, I realized that all of them could read and write English so I adapted my plan and made sure I had a consent form in Hindi and English when I interviewed the girls allowing them to make the choice based on their preference. All the girls chose the form in English. I reviewed the consent form with the participants at the initial meeting, and when I felt that all the information on the form was fully understood and accepted by the participants, I had them sign it. I made sure to leave a copy with the participants. Besides paying particular attention to language use—making sure the words I choose were familiar to my participants—I was aware that some researchers conducting cross-cultural research in non-European countries have found that the formality of asking participants to sign consent forms might be viewed with suspicion since signing forms is often limited to official transactions that lack trust (Marshall & Batten, 2004; Tilley & Gormley, 2007; Robinson & Curry, 2008). The girls accepted the formality of the consent form but the mothers did have a moment of hesitation, wondering why I needed to have them sign the consent form when they were willing participants. I took the time to explain to them the need to formally acknowledge their consent and reassured them that they did not have to sign the form if they were doubtful. All the mothers who participated in the study did sign the consent form. I believe it was the unfamiliarity of the procedure that made the mothers initially hesitate.

The issue of consent is additionally made more problematic by the fact that the study involves the active participation of children under the age of 18 and because the research was conducted with children rather than on them, recognizing children as autonomous and competent individuals. Assent is the agreement to participate in a study by individuals deemed incapable of
providing legal consent to participate in the study. In such cases, parents or legal guardians are asked to provide informed consent on behalf of the participant. Typically, research conducted on children asks for their assent rather than their consent since they are assumed to be incapable of making an informed decision about their participation. Acknowledging that the capabilities of a 13-year-old are significantly different from those of much younger children, I made use of the informed consent rather than the assent process with my adolescent participants out of respect of their capabilities. While consent can sometimes be reduced to a one-time process conducted at the beginning of the research and then forgotten (Cocks, 2007), I made certain that the process of consent lasted the length of the research process. I remained vigilant of the adolescents’ responses and spent time explaining the purpose and process of the study.

**Participant-researcher relationship.** A respectful and trusting relationship between the researcher and the participants is central to a good ethnography. I conducted my study with particular attention to developing, nurturing, and maintaining a respectful and trusting relationship with the participants. Issues arising from class, caste, and age differences had to be negotiated in order to meet these goals.

**Class differences.** Researchers must have “sound footing” and “intimate familiarity” with the field in which they wish to conduct research (Charmaz, 2010). Growing up in India, visiting frequently, and speaking the local languages fluently gave me certain familiarity with the field in which I was conducting research. It is important, however, to recognize that specific cultural patterns repeated over time become “natural,” creating a common sense cultural system that presupposes expectations, perception, behavior, and judgment. Common sense, Geertz (1973) cautions, makes the world familiar. Many of these “common sense” notions of class and caste created “ethically important moments” (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004) that I had to resolve
with respect to local customs and traditions and sensitivity to any particularly need within myself to “fix” the social problems of a poor, developing country (Marshall and Batten (2004). The class difference between the participants and me was significant and needed to be negotiated at several levels. I was warmly welcomed into the homes of the participants. On my first home visit, I was invited to sit on the bed while the rest of the family proceeded to sit on the floor because local norms dictate that people from the lower class do not sit at the same level as people from the upper class. I do not agree with this norm and did not want to reinforce this very obvious imbalance of power and equality so I offered for the rest of the family to sit beside me on the bed. The children happily took up the suggestion but the mother, being of an older generation, could not bring herself to sit beside me. I went to sit on the floor beside her but she would not permit this. However uncomfortable this arrangement made me, I knew I had to respect the mother’s preference. There were only a few mothers who refused to sit on the same level as me in their own homes. When I met with them outside their home, they were more particular about conforming to the norms. I noticed that on my first visit to each girl’s home, I was closely observed for what I believed to be signs of discomfort or judgment. I spent the first few minutes of each initial home visit being respectful, warm, and grateful for the host family’s willingness to allow me access to their lives. After the initial “testing” period, the mothers opened up and spoke with ease.

Food is an essential part of Indian hospitality. In every home I was offered food and tea. I knew that my acceptance of the food and drink offered by the host families was also seen by them as my acceptance of them. This created a moral dilemma for me when I visited the families that live in the slum. I knew it was particularly important for them to have me accept and enjoy the food and drink they so thoughtfully and generously had arranged for me. It was
one way I could show my respect and equality to the family. On the other hand, I knew if I partook the food or drink, I would get sick since I limit myself to drinking boiled and filtered water when in India. I knew I had a limited amount of time to collect data and therefore needed to be particularly careful of my health. I felt there was no easy solution to this and felt badly about declining the food and drink some of the families offered. At the suggestion of Sikhya’s principal, I used one of two excuses when I needed to decline the offered food and drink: I was fasting or my stomach was upset. Knowing that my refusal to accept the food could be misinterpreted by the host family to mean I did not wish to be treated as an equal, I made every effort to dispel the notion. I made certain I sat beside the female members of the family, spoke with respect to all the family members, let them take the lead on conversations and accepted other offers of equality such as invitations to view family albums, tour the neighborhood, meet extended family, and so on.

**Adult-child relationship.** Recognizing children as social actors and active research participants challenges researchers to redefine traditional concepts of “adult” and “child” while also recognizing children’s capabilities, agency, and voice. Such a radical shift in the conception of childhood shakes the long-established and habituated power relationship between adults (a conception that largely remains unexamined) and children (Christensen, 2004; Christensen & James, 2008; Johansson, 2011).

Having grown up in a deeply patriarchal culture that clearly defined power structures between men and women and between adults and children, I knew that I had to pay particular attention to any and all of my assumptions and habits, that might negatively impact my ability to recognize and respect my participants’ agency and voice. Defining the kind of adult I wish to be in my engagement with the children was a central concern. Such a definition needed to take into
account the intersectionality of my assumptions of “childhood” and “adulthood” with those of my participants. I knew I was a “different adult” to the participants and adapted my adultness to the changing contexts and demands while also making the children’s needs, privacy, participation, and protection my primary concern. It was important to me to make myself familiar with the intricacies of the children’s lives, their culture of communication, and to ensure that their participation was voluntary. Sharing the purpose of my research with the young participants, actively listening to them and seeking their assent throughout the process, while adapting my research to accommodate what they shared were all ways in which I recognized and respected the voice of the young participants. Paying particular attention to how I entered and exited the lives of the young participants who volunteered to participate in my research was important to me. Many of the girls wanted to know what a Ph.D. is and why I was interested in their lives. At different times the girls wanted to know about my life.

One significant difficulty I had in involving the girls in the study was their limited experience with decision making. When I asked them to make a choice they would seem burdened and preferred to let me make the decisions, although many of them did not hesitate to agree or disagree with the decision I made, which I enthusiastically encouraged. I knew I could not force them to make decisions so I resorted to giving them options from which to choose. Realizing that a significant struggle the families and the girls were having in making educational choices was their limited access to information, I gathered all the girls together and encouraged the older girls to mentor the younger ones. I also used my connections at the local university to connect the girls with guidance counselors who were willing and able to provide them with educational and vocational guidance. Many of the girls asked to read the completed dissertation, a request I will honor on my next trip to India. As a way to thank the girls for their involvement
with this research, I took each of them shopping for an outfit of their choice. The most significant way I believe I can give back to the girls is by representing their stories as clearly and strongly as I can and in a way that makes their courage and spirit shine.

The next six chapters focus on presenting the lives of the girls, analyzed in relation to the complex and multidimensional intersection of poverty, gender, and educational access. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the impact of poverty on educational access; Chapters 7 and 8 explore the impact of gender on educational access; and Chapter 9 focuses on the educational aspirations of the girls in this study. Respecting the girls’ right to inform us of their lives, each section begins by highlighting the profiles of select girls. The profiles make liberal use of verbatim quotes in an attempt to make the participants’ voices both visible and central. Grammar and sentence structure of the direct quotes is intentionally unaltered. The girls’ profiles are supplemented by the profiles of their mothers. The insertion of my voice in these stories takes the form of introducing the girls and their families, choosing which part of their stories to include, rearranging their stories to improve flow, and adding commentary to lead the reader through each story.
CHAPTER 5: PROFILES OF POVERTY

Many of the girls in this study live in the various slums marking the outskirts of the city. The slums have some common characteristics—ineffective, dense, and overcrowded housing; inadequate access to water and sanitation; limited access to public transportation; difficult and limited access to schools; high rates of drug and alcohol use; and high rates of crime. Four of the girls live in the same slum, and as I walked with each of the girls to their homes on different occasions I quickly realized the slum itself was stratified into three sections. At one end was the “nicest” part of the slum—the entrance to which was marked by a small but functional police station, the crowded streets were lined with food vendors and shops selling basic supplies, and houses were relatively more permanent and slightly less densely populated than those in the other two sections. Each time I visited this section of the slum, I found the streets full of activity and humming with life. Of particular interest was the number of children dressed in uniforms crowding the streets either coming or going to school. On the other end was the “worst” part of the slum where the poorest of the poor lived. The contrast was particularly obvious in how children were dressed and what they were doing. A majority of the children in this section were raggedly dressed and children of all ages (including toddlers) could be seen just “hanging out.” Only a few children dressed in uniforms could be seen coming or going to school. The houses were smaller, denser, and many were made with scraps. The streets were narrower, had no vendors or shops in this section, and the air was filled with an overpowering stench. During one of my visits to this section of the slum, I had the unexpected opportunity to speak with a group of parents about their children’s education. As one parent shared:

If we are uneducated that does not mean our children do not deserve an education. We go to the school and the guard doesn’t even let us in. We are illiterate but we are not stupid.
We are human too. They can explain to us what we need to do to send our children to school.

Lack of schools, poor quality of schools, lack of teacher concern for students or their learning, and most importantly, the open disdain shown by all levels of school employees toward parents living in abject poverty were concerns shared by parents hoping to give their children lives of dignity and respect denied them because of their poverty.

Poverty is not monolithic, and the expression of poverty varies to such an extent that even those living in the slums divide themselves further into categories of being “not so poor” and “very poor.” The expression of poverty was even more obviously variable in the lives of the girls who lived in the slums and those who did not. The girls’ lives also revealed that both the number of deprivations and the level of deprivation determine the impact of poverty on individual capability, freedom, and functioning (Sen, 1999). Basic access to housing, food, healthcare, transportation, and schooling varied within the sections of the slum and significantly between the girls that lived in the slums and those that did not.

While poverty and gender intersect to shape the lives of each of the girls with whom I worked, I have chosen to share the stories of five girls in this chapter—Babita, Durga, Nashra, Pooja and Poonam—as their lives most clearly exemplify the complex and multi-dimensional nature of poverty; its varying impact on educational access; and the role of mediating factors such as family support, social network, and public policies in reducing the impact of poverty on the lived experiences of the girls. The girls’ stories reveal that the impact of poverty extends well beyond educational access and impacts other areas of life like health, housing, marriage, and social networks, which, in a cyclical relationship, impact educational choice. Babita,
Nashra, and Poonam live in two different slums, and Durga and Pooja live in the servants’ quarter of homes in the upper middle class section of the city.

**Babita: My Dreams are the Ones My Mother Has for Me and Nothing More Than That**

Babita is a short 16 year old with a quick smile and a cheerful disposition who attends Sikhya, a tuition-free private school. She is the oldest of three siblings, her younger sister (13) and a younger brother (10) also attend Sikhya School. As the oldest daughter, the expectation for household responsibilities falls on Babita. The fact that her mother works long and unpredictable hours means that Babita is mostly in charge of running the house, a task she has been doing since she was eleven years old. She attends class 10 at Sikhya, and speaking of her school, Babita shared:

I think my school is a good school…there is everything here…discipline…. I like all my classes…. We get a fruit break at 10:00 AM, lunch is sahi (right), not too much salt or chilies, just right so children can eat it…. I like the food at school better than the food at home…. My parents like it that their children study in a school which is such a nice school.

The majority of schools in India rely heavily on weekly tests, monthly, quarterly, and yearly exams. This heavy reliance on tests and exams is demanding and stressful for most students. Lack of communication from school officials resulting in unexpected changes in test schedules which add to students stress level, as Babita reveals:

Today after I get on the bus for school I am feeling very relaxed since my exams are over, some went well some did not. Yesterday we were told in school that there was a group of foreigners coming to visit our school. Because of this we were not going to have our Art exam. But once I got to school I found out that the visitors were not coming and we were
going to have our Art paper. I was feeling very scared about what I would do for my paper because I had not prepared.

The school Babita attends offers free extracurricular activities such as martial arts and boxing, both of which Babita participates in:

I come to school by 7:30 AM. I practice martial arts in the mornings…martial arts and boxing are a choice you either do them or you don’t but it is an interest of mine so I do it. I’ve been practicing martial arts for three years and have competed in three state championships.

Sikhya school goes up to class 10, so students have to seek admission in another school after they finish class 10, a difficult and stressful process for most students and their families:

I like this school so much I do not want to leave. I wish I could do my plus 2 here also. I’d really like to study more. Do my plus 1 and 2…. Mummy says that she’ll only educate me where there are only girls—sector 8, 18, or 32— one of these three schools. Mummy says girls should only study where there are only girls…she does not like the present atmosphere in government schools, that’s why…I want what my Mummy wants. I’ll go as far as I need to go to get to school. I don’t mind if I have to go by myself.

Neither of Babita’s parents are educated. In fact, no one in her extended family has studied past class 10, and so Babita will be the first in her extended family to study up to class 12. She has dreams for her future, but at this point has limited access to information on what she needs to do to convert her dreams into reality; however, Babita is well aware of her parents’ limited financial ability to support some of her choices:

My wish is to do a computer course along with plus 1 and 2. But if there is not enough time to do a course along with plus 2 then I’d like to do course after plus 2. Computers.
Beautician…I like doing beauty work…I keep dressing my younger sister…after that a normal job…I’d like to work in a nice shop in a mall. A really big mall…where even my boss will say, “Yes this girl does good work”…I’ll get up early to do work at home and come back from work and do housework—like I do now.

At first I wanted to be a nurse and then I found out how much it costs. It costs a lot of money and there is a wastage of money—keep depositing, keep depositing and if a person fails once then he is done for. All that money is wasted. Thinking of Mummy, where she would get all this money for that reason, I did not give it serious consideration.

For now Babita is doing well at school. She works hard and feels comfortable going to her teachers for help when she needs it. In spite of financial hardship, Babita’s parents pay for her and her siblings to have private tutoring every day after school. Babita and her family live a distance from the school but they do not mind the stress and cost of travelling to school because she and her parents like the school very much. For a while, Babita’s parents paid for an auto-rickshaw to drive them to school, but that was discontinued following the reduction in family income as a result of her father’s work-related accident. Getting to school becomes an issue during heavy rains.

Between managing the household, taking care of her siblings, and fulfilling her school responsibilities, Babita has little spare time, but she is able to find moments of joy. All of her mother’s many siblings live in close proximity so Babita spends most of her spare time with the extended family.

Today I did not wake up early because it is Sunday so I did not have any work to do. So I woke up at 8:30 and caught up on sleep. Today it was raining very hard and it was thundering loudly. When I woke up and went downstairs and saw that rain water had
collected inside the downstairs room. My Mummy and Papa were sleeping on mattress on the floor and our mattress was soaked. Quickly I helped Mummy and Papa take the mattress upstairs and throw the water outside…looking at the rain made me want to dance in it so my brother and I ran up to the roof and played in the rain. We had a lot of fun in the rain.

Babita’s mother sells fruit on the sidewalk in the busiest market of the city. The spot where she sells the fruit is only a short distance from where her own mother sold fruit and is adjacent to where her sisters and nieces sell fruit. Babita’s mother was born in her native village in Uttar Pradesh, her father died when she was very young. There were few opportunities for Babita’s grandmother to support the family as a widow in the village, so she came to the city and supported her family of seven by selling fruit. Babita’s mother wants a different life for her children and believes education is key for that:

My hope is that my children do not end up selling fruit, that’s it…I wanted to study but Mummy said she could not afford it…. My hope is that my daughters and son will study…if they study up to class 12 I will not have any worries…. I want Babita to learn to stand on her own feet…become someone.

Like all the other mothers I spoke with whose girls attend Sikhya, Babita’s mother likes the school very much for several reasons. Most significant is the respect and kindness parents receive from the school, something many of them share they do not receive often:

I like the school…. That’s why I send the children so far for school. It’s clean…I really like how clean the school is. All the teachers speak respectfully and kindly. They take time to explain things. Now we had a complaint against Babita. They explained it to her and she understood it and agreed…they told me not to scold her or hit her but to explain...
to her...so I explain things lovingly to Babita at home...my daughter is studying well.

She is doing well at her school but my son is hopeless—he does not study...now you see
Babita studied up to 11:00 PM last night.... It was raining this morning and I told her to take the day off but she said, “No Mummy I have studied hard and I have a test and I will not take the day off”...so her Papa arranged for a car and went and dropped her off.

Since the school only goes up to class 10, Babita’s mother worries about the transition to a new school:

Now we have been thinking about that. Admissions into class 11 are very difficult. For many schools there are no openings for class 11...it is easier to get into private schools but it is very hard to get into government schools...now I am worried about where she will go after class 10....

The cost of education adds to the worries about which school Babita will attend for class 11:

It gets expensive. I want to stop the tutoring but Babita said, “Mummy I have board exams this year”...easily or with difficulty the time will pass...but after class 10 or 12 there are only expenses...you know what my son says? “We are poor.” I tell them not to think like that...I don’t want my children to feel badly...I want my children to be good...somehow I manage...it is very hard work....

High levels of insecurity caused by poverty and its cyclical impact on quality of life are well articulated by Babita’s mother:

Ten months ago my husband had a car accident...his car overturned and his head split open...he got into the accident while he was driving the car for the company...the company paid for all the hospital bills but nothing else...he can’t do regular work...
now…he used to earn Rs. 5,000/month [approximately $83/month]…we lived comfortably…now we live on my income…we have to pay Rs. 1,500/month [approximately $25/month] for our room, kitchen, and bathroom…the medical cost so far has been Rs. 80,000 or Rs. 90,000 [approximately $1,300-1,500]…last year the doctor told me I have cervical [pain in her back]…when it hurts it really hurts…it’s hard to even sit…the doctor told me not to lift heavy things…now my job is lifting heavy things…sometimes I have to miss work for a month…that is why the poor remain poor, we can’t send our children to big schools with big fees, we can’t teach them any work. If we want to teach them to do some work it cost a lot of money.

Babita’s mother never went to school and, from her perspective, a class 12 education is a lot to have. She wants Babita to have an education so she can stand on her feet but does not know how to guide her in choosing a career that would fit their financial capability. Babita’s grandmother was forced to work—all the adult females in her mother’s family work—so there is no hesitation in allowing Babita to work before or after marriage. Babita’s mother considers her primary duty towards Babita to be her marriage, which she believes will provide Babita with security if the family can afford a “good match” (an educated groom earning a respectable salary from equal or higher caste):

Babita tells me she wants to learn to be a nurse or a doctor, I tell her, “Where will we come up with all the money?” I have spoken to some people and they say there is a government course for this. And I say if there is a government course the government probably pays for half the fees. Alright I tell her then whatever money I have I will pay for it. In these time no one helps with money…. If Babita can’t do a nursing course then I will help her complete a computer course…that is in our hands.
I want her to get married when she is 24 or 25 and not before that. I will choose who she marries. I have seen many marriages where the girls chose for themselves—none of them are happy after their marriage. I will choose someone for her. If God wishes and she finds someone nice we might just get her married to someone she chooses...mothers and fathers only want what is best for their children. It’s not like we can choose to not give dowry...I save for Babita’s wedding every month...first we have to think of marriage and then her education.... I remain sick and so does her father. What if something happens to us then what? If she is married at least she will be someone’s responsibility, she will have someone to take care of her.

It is marriage, not education, Babita’s mother ultimately believes, that will provide her daughter with security.

In keeping with tradition, Babita is willing to let her mother arrange her marriage. She is pleased her mother is in no hurry to get her married, because marriage means she can continue with her education:

Mummy already said not now for my marriage. Not until I am 24 or 25. She feels like she did not learn how to read or write anything...she says “my brother got me married early, I’ll get you married at 25 after you have achieved something, after you are standing on your own feet.” I really like that Mummy wants to educate us so much. I want to fulfill my mother’s dreams for me. My dreams are the ones my Mummy has for me and nothing more than that. She even says that I will get married to a boy she chooses for me so that’s good. I don’t want to do any wrong that will cause Mummy any pain.... If Mummy and Papa had the money I would surely have done the medical course. I would even have become a doctor, it’s not that hard if you try.
Durga: We Live Like Servants

The first thing Durga embarrassedly told me when I met her was, “Madam, it’s like you know we live like servants.” Durga is a bubbly 17 year old, one of the oldest girls in this study. Her mother works as a maid and her father as a cook. Through contacts of her step-siblings, many of whom are well-settled in the city, Durga’s mother found employment as a maid with an upper-middle class family. Though the job is demanding, it comes with a few significant (though unreliable) benefits, the most significant of which is free housing. Durga’s family of five (her paternal grandmother is staying with them while she undergoes medical treatment) has access to two rooms in the servants’ quarters which are in a small building detached from the main house in which Durga’s mother works. The rooms are made of concrete wall, the floor is concrete and the family has access to a bathroom they share with Durga’s maternal uncle (he works as a driver for the same family). One room is used as a bedroom and the second functions as Durga and her brother’s study, the family kitchen, dining, and living room. The house has a small courtyard. These accommodations meet all but one minimum measure for quality housing as defined by the Multiple Poverty Index (MPI, discussed in Chapter 1): it is too crowded for a family of five.

Having access to free housing in an upper-middle class neighborhood means Durga lives in a neighborhood that is significantly safer and cleaner than other neighborhoods.

Durga’s mother regrets her own lack of education and is very supportive and encouraging of Durga’s education. Durga states:

Mummy and Papa are not educated…. Papa stays busy, his main focus is earning money since he says money is important…he thinks if he earns enough money all his dreams will come true. But Mummy is different…she is after me all day telling me to study…. Mummy is after me all day with a stick saying study. Eat, sleep, and study like that she
keeps saying to me like a typical mother…she pays complete attention to where I go, where I don’t go, what I am studying…even though she does not understand everything she tries very hard for my sake and asks me, “What subjects are you studying? What are you doing in these subjects? What problems are you having?” She can’t solve the problem but she likes to know what the problem is.

Durga is spared from having to do regular housework so she can devote her time and energy to studying, this in spite of the fact that Durga is the only daughter in the family and her mother works long hours. Even though Durga is not required to regularly help with household chores, she is trained in all aspects of housework:

Mummy is usually inside [the house where she works as a maid] all the time, really all the time so sometimes when I feel like it and Mummy says, “Do this or that” when I am free and I feel like it I do the work. Like sweeping and mopping or kneading the dough…little things like that. The rest Mummy does so I can study. If I am not studying and wasting time Mummy really shouts at me “You are not studying and on top of that you are not working,” then Mummy gets upset and I quickly pick up my books and start studying.

Durga attended the Hindi medium government school in her neighborhood from Kindergarten through class 10. She did well in her Class 10 Boards and was able to secure admission into the competitive and demanding science stream at a nearby Government Model School. One significant difference between a government and government model school is that the latter is English language and has therefore traditionally drawn children from the less impoverished families. In comparing her experiences at the two schools Durga says:
My [government model] school is well reputed…I have only been there a short time, only a year…I went to another government school until class 10. I really liked the teachers there, but the students did not take advantage of the teachers and did not take the teachers seriously… The school is not well reputed…children did not wish to study there…they said the environment is not good for them…but I took it seriously…now it has changed a lot…it has changed to a Model school…the discipline has improved…first there was only the arts stream for plus 1 and 2 and it was a Hindi medium school…now they have added the commerce stream and it has become a English medium school. So now better children are entering the school.

Now this school I am in now has a lot of discipline. Like your chunni (scarf) should be a certain length, it should be pinned in a certain style, your rubber-bands can only be black, your hair pins can only be black, your socks should be “pure” white, your shoes should be polished, your uniform ironed…going from one class to another you have to have proper straight lines…I like the discipline a lot…I like the teachers and the cleanliness…I had a dream to study in this school but in the beginning it was a very different environment from what I was used to.

Durga is a serious student, willing to work hard, and has done well in school. The transition from a Hindi to English medium school was academically and socially challenging:

I had studied from the beginning in a Hindi medium school, all the subjects—science, math, everything I studied was in Hindi. Then suddenly all the three science subjects I had to study in English and at a higher level…in the beginning I felt like, “Where have I come?” It was a completely changed environment for me. It was aajeeb (strange).
One reason Durga is doing well is that she now has tutoring. “In the beginning I had no one to turn to, who would I turn to?… I had the books…everyone thought I could do it without tutoring…now I have tutoring.” The academic demands of the science stream are extremely high, and it is expected all class 11 and 12 students will seek tutoring after school. Success of students in science stream increases a school’s reputation, therefore, most schools turn a blind eye to the low school attendance of students in the science stream. One reason the schools support science students’ absences from school is because the more science students a school has, and the more science students that pass the medical entrance exam, the higher a school’s reputation and the more likely it is to draw serious and hardworking students like Durga:

I have an alternating schedule…on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays I go for tuitions from 8:15 AM until 10:30 AM and from 1:00 PM until 3:00 PM in sector 15 and from 5:30 PM to 7:00 PM…I do not go to school on these days…on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays I go to school. On Tuesdays I go to school from 8:00 AM until 12:30 PM since I have chemistry tutoring from 1:00 PM until 2:30 PM.… I joined tutoring late since I thought I could do biology on my own so now I take extra tuition to make up. The 8:30 AM to 10:30 AM classes are make-up classes and when I am all caught up I can attend school during that time…on Sundays I have three tests, one for each of the subjects I am taking tuition in…no break on Sunday.

All the children in the science stream in plus 1 and 2 have schedules like this…sometimes they have classes in the morning and sometimes in the afternoon…there is no regular schedule. The teachers know this and they understand. The teachers tell us we have to have 70% attendance at least. So for that reason we go to school on Saturdays. Saturdays are easy days, not much happens and we go for the attendance…at
school we have exams in September, December, and March and we cannot miss these…we have days off between each subject exam and that’s when we go for tutoring…we juggle our schedule so if I have a biology exam I will study biology and not for tuition for physics or chemistry and when I have a physics exam I’ll only study physics…during school exams tutoring is cancelled.

The tutoring program is costly and the only reason Durga’s family can afford is that the elderly couple Durga’s mother works for pays for half of the cost. Both of the couple’s grown children live overseas and Durga’s mother is the only person there to care for the couple. The couple’s children are grateful to Durga’s family for providing the necessary care and they reciprocate by talking to Durga at length about her studies when they visit. Durga’s parents still have to pay for half of the tutoring cost, which equals almost four months of their total salary:

I am taking tutoring because I want to go into the medical field. First I have to do well in plus 2 and then I have to clear the competitive entrance exam…to do well I need tutoring…it costs a lot for tutoring…. Rs. 15,000 [approximately $250] per subject for the year. So it’s Rs. 45,000 [approximately $750] a year just for the tutoring costs.…

The people for whom my mother works are helping with the cost…they say study and we will pay half the cost of the tutoring.

Durga knows she loves chemistry for sure, but she has changed her mind somewhat about what career she wants to pursue based on advice and information from within her social network. Her mother’s employer’s children taught Durga how to use the computer. Living in the heart of the city allows her access to Internet cafés where she sometimes goes with close friends to browse the net for information and social networking:
My main interest is in chemistry…what I can study more in chemistry I do not know…maybe pharmacy, but I do not know what it’s about…. I would like to do something unique…something different…I am thinking of the B.Sc. [Bachelor of Science] in Nursing…. I do not want to be a doctor…to become a doctor you have to first do your MBBS [medical degree] but people do not give you regard for just doing your MBBS so you have to do an MD. So much studying and so much money. Our background is not that financially strong…also there is so much competition for medical entrance in India…last year there were 60 students in my tutoring class and only two were selected for medicine…that’s why I thought I would do nursing…. Also the homeowners tell me to do nursing…their children all live abroad and so they know more. When they come to visit they talk to me and give me guidance…my friend is in college, she did not qualify for the nursing program…there is a competitive exam and they select the students with the highest marks and everyone else gets left out…. From watching her I have learnt a lot. She shares with me so then I also know.

Durga says she spends a lot of time thinking of her future, including her marriage:

When I am financially independent then I will marry. I will marry for sure. But in case my husband does leave then I will be able to stand on my own. I want to have the ability to stand on my own so I am not dependent on anyone. I spend a lot of time thinking of my life…how I want it to be…a lot of people wish for love marriage but I want my parents to arrange my marriage so in case my husband does leave me I can come back and live with my parents and tell them, “You got me married and now you have to deal with me.” Like that…I’ve even thought that if I have a baby I would like it to be a girl. I don’t want to have a boy. Boys give a lot of trouble.
Durga spends the majority of her time “doing battle with the books,” between school, tutoring, homework, and tests she has little time to socialize with friends. Staying current with the demands of the science program also required Durga to sacrifice her one fun activity:

I meet all my friends at practice…I take one day a week to go to softball practice. I have been playing for two years…I play first base…I have played at the national level and have travelled to Kolkata, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Chhattisgarh for matches…this is the only sport I play, besides ball badminton…but this year I am not allowed to play any games…. Mummy, Papa, and coach, who is like a family member, say I should concentrate on my studies. I should study and not play.

Durga has a younger brother, 15 years of age, who is in class 10 at the same government school Durga studied at until class 10. Like most sisters within the traditional Indian family structure, Durga feels a deep sense of responsibility towards her brother:

Now my brother…he does not study much…everyone says boys don’t study much but I don’t believe that…even though my brother does not focus on his studies much I will help him in every way to clear his plus 2 and then will get him admitted to some useful program like the army or the police. His height is 5’8.” That’s what I am going to do with him…he should think of his parents and how hard they are working.

Durga’s life is significantly different from her mother’s, who grew up in Nepal with a father who had two wives even though Hindu law does not permit it, as Durga’s mother tells:

My father has two wives and I am the daughter of the first wife. We are 14 brothers and sisters; nine from my mother and five from my second mother…my father resided with our second mother and we lived with our mother…second marriages are somewhat painful…. I got married at 16 and a year later I had my first child and then a year later
my second child was born…my first child was a daughter…it is the same for me whether my child is a boy or a girl, they are the same for me.

Durga’s mother regrets that circumstances prevented her from getting an education and finds every opportunity she can to learn. If she were still in the village, Durga’s mother says she would have gone to night school, like her mother did. The demands of work and the distance to the nearest adult education center do not allow her this opportunity. She has instead, committed herself to providing opportunities for Durga to pursue her education:

My parents were not able to educate me but I want my children to pursue their goals by completing their education so that they are capable of earning a good income and fulfilling their family’s needs…that is the reason I want to educate my children…I encourage Durga to study all the time…I tell her I am not educated but you have the chance to complete you studies…I was unable to study because I had to take care of my younger brothers and sisters. I am very fond of studies but after marriage I didn’t get time to study…I have taught myself to easily read Hindi and can understand English but cannot speak it…I can even guess English words from the first letter of the word…I am still interested in studying and if I could find the time and a school near to my house I would go to school…we had night school in our village and my mother studied there after her marriage…there are night schools in the city but I can’t afford the long distance to the school it will eat up more of my time…yes, studies are the most important thing in life and then everything else.

Durga’s mother works long hours as a house maid to afford Durga educational opportunities:
I have been working at this house for a long time now…I wake up at 5:30 AM…prepare breakfast for the children and leave for work by 7:30 AM…I work from 7:30-12:00 PM then I come home and make lunch for my family from 12:00-1:00 PM, then go back to work and serve lunch from 1:00-2:00 PM…from 2:00-4:00 PM, I secretly go to work at another house to cook for them…nobody knows I work a second job. I do it to earn money for Durga’s education…I rest from 4:00-5:00 PM and go back to work from 5:00-7:00 PM. I come home from 7:00 to 9:00 PM to be with my family and go back to work from 9:00 to 10:30 PM…I work seven days a week. The owners are an elderly couple…I do everything for them, cleaning, washing, cooking, entire house responsibility is on me…their children live abroad and they are both dialysis patients so they cannot go anywhere…I can’t get any time off because of this…if I do need to leave for half a day I have to prepare the entire day’s meals, finish all the chores, and make all the arrangements…my second mother’s son now works for them as a driver and he will sometimes cover for me…I have been working for the couple for over fourteen years and now we are like old relatives…I go to them when I need advice or guidance…. Durga decided to do medical but after some time she realized that it’s very expensive so she changed her mind towards nursing because of our financial situation…then the Sahib [master] I work for said they would pay for half of Durga’s tuition…we will see if maybe in the future we will have a better life,… Durga will be able to marry only after she starts earning otherwise our present conditions will not allow us to marry her. It’s very difficult.

Durga has dreams for her future:
I wish to do something with my life…my biggest dream is to get into college for B.Sc. nursing and then get whatever job I can get. Then I will have money. And when I have money I will fulfill my desires. I want to buy a house or an apartment. Now we live in someone else’s house. I want my own house. And I want my own vehicle. Even if it is small vehicle it should be mine.

**Nashra: Without Education Life is Unfulfilled**

Nashra is a short, neatly-dressed girl, 16 years old, and a class 10 student at the private school, Sikhya. Both of her parents are migrants from Uttar Pradesh where most of their extended family still resides. Speaking of her family, Nashra says:

There are ten members [which include Nashra’s father, mother, an older brother, four younger sisters, a younger brother, and an unmarried maternal uncle] in my family…in the beginning we used to live with my dada and dadi [paternal grandfather and grandmother] in the village…there was a property dispute and we had to come to the city. Nashra’s family are practicing Muslims. Nashra and all her siblings know or are learning to read the Qur’an. Nashra performs the Namaz (prayers) five times a day, she is well aware of the limitations places on girls and women by her religion:

...according to our Shariat, according to our religion they think it’s bad to let girls go to work. Girls’ who work and earn money are bad, that should not be allowed…girls are considered low even now in my religion…they see a lot of difference between girls and boys.

Limits placed on Nashra’s freedom by her religion have been eased considerably following her family’s move from the village to the city. Nashra is not required to wear the *naqab* in the city and has greater freedom of mobility in the city as she shares:
They [the grandparents] are very old fashioned, they won’t let girls out of the house…I don’t like to go visit my dada and dadi…when we go there we have to wear the naqab, the one they wear is black…I feel suffocated, like we have been imprisoned, so we do not go there very often.

From a young age Nashra has aspired to an education:

In the beginning [when Nashra lived in the village] I wanted to go to school but could not go to school…it felt there was nothing in my life, it was so boring. How unlucky I was that I couldn’t go to school and without education life is unfulfilled…there is nothing in life without education…it is total darkness.

However, in India, education decisions, like most important decisions, are made by the family and not the individual. A significant benefit of her family’s rural-to-urban migration is that it has positively changed Nashra’s parents’ attitude towards allowing girls access to education:

Mummy and Papa were not ready to educate me in the beginning…when we came to the city we saw everything here and my Mummy and Papa also gained some knowledge that it’s important to educate girls, so then Mummy and Papa started educating me and my siblings…after coming to the city Mummy and Papa changed a lot.

Nashra’s father is uneducated and works as an operator for a well pump that supplies water to local prisons. His job requires the family to move unpredictably and at short notice. This aspect of Nashra’s father’s job has had significant impact on her access to education. The unpredictable nature of her father’s job means that Nashra has switched schools many times and occasionally she has had to leave school in the middle of a term. The frequent transfers also meant that Nashra had to transition between Hindi and English medium schools, depending on
availability. Nashra shared the academic struggles resulting from her father’s frequent job transfers:

Because of changing schools I have lost a lot of years because Papa gets transferred anytime—in the middle, then I have to discontinue the class in the middle. It has happened many times…I would go to first term and discontinue in second term…many times I would not reach final term.

Both of Nashra’s parents suffer from poor health. The parents’ failing health has had widespread impact on the family by reducing Nashra’s father’s earning capacity. “In the beginning my Papa used to earn well…his salary was high, and it [living] was not that expensive…slowly he has this breathing problem so now he only works one shift.”

Nashra measures the cost of living in relation to the price of gold. In better times “gold used to cost Rs. 5,000 [approximately $100] for one sovereign of gold.” She does so because the steeply rising price of gold is a frequent topic of conversation in her house. Traditionally, the girl’s family is required to give gold ornaments as part of the dowry. The high cost of putting together dowries for five daughters is a source of tremendous stress for Nashra’s parents.

Reduction in income has forced the family to move to “this place.” “This place” is a house in one of the city’s several slums. The house Nashra and her family live in has two rooms, a mud floor, a rough roof made up of scrap sheets of metal and a scrap piece of metal serves as the only door. The two rooms function as bedroom, living room, study, and kitchen for the family of eight. The house has no bathroom requiring the family to use communal bathrooms or the fields. The house also has no access to running water, and the family has to use the community tap to gather water, a task that can take up to an hour. The bigger of the two rooms is equipped with a large bed that overtakes the room which also has an open flame gas cooking
burner on the floor besides the bed. Walls are painted a bright blue and wall space is creatively used to maximize storage. Access to quality housing is one measure of the Multiple Poverty Index (MPI, discussed in Chapter 1) in which quality of housing is determined by access to drinking water, provision for adequate elimination of sewer waste, adequate flooring, adequate walls, and no critical overcrowding. Nashra’s home falls short on all the MPI measures for adequate housing.

Nashra feels the “gareeb ka mahaul” (environment of poverty) prevalent in the slums has had a negative impact on all her siblings, particularly on their desire for an education, “After we moved to the colony [slum] everyone got spoiled, my brother and sisters—A to Z [meaning everyone]; the environment, mingling with the children here.” Like Nashra, all her siblings had the rare opportunity to attend a tuition-free private school, Sikhya. The school is funded through a foundation and limits admission to children from the slums. While Nashra and her youngest sister have made the most of this opportunity, her other sisters dropped out of the school and her brother was expelled from the school for bad behavior. Nashra and her mother now feel they have no choice but to send the struggling siblings to boarding school in spite of its high cost in an effort to distance the struggling children from the “bad” environment of the slum. Nashra tells:

The Hafiz [Qur’an teacher] who comes to our house told us about the madrassa where girls can stay and study there…so we are sending my two sisters to that madrassa…we are thinking we put the sister who does not study at all and the other one…both will have each other’s support…if one goes alone she will feel strange staying away from home…it will cost us Rs. 3,000/month [approximately $50/month].
Nashra and her parents really like Sikhya for several reasons—the big, beautiful, and very clean building; respectful and helpful staff and teachers; good discipline; no corporal punishment; and a good education. In addition, the school offers cost-free access to extracurricular activities such as martial arts and boxing, both of which Nashra participates. Being able to participate in these extracurricular activities has empowered Nashra who says, “No one can tease us because we know boxing a lot…I am not scared of anyone on the street and no one bothers me now on the street.”

Nashra’s daily routine outside of school is largely determined by the fact that she is the oldest daughter of the family and therefore expected to be most responsible for managing the household. Nashra cooks all three meals for the family, washes the dishes, cleans the house, and does all the laundry for her large family. These tasks take up a considerable amount of Nashra’s time. Nashra’s mother’s poor health has forced Nashra to take on most of the household responsibilities even during her exams. As the oldest sister Nashra, assumes responsibility for her siblings, including responsibility for their education, partly in order to save the cost of tutoring:

I forced her [youngest sister] to study and I used to teach her…focusing on her studies I didn’t focus on my own studies and my percentage became low…then Madam scolded me and said, “We told you to teach her but we didn’t tell you not to focus on your own studies”…I told Madam, “You said you would throw her out of school if she doesn’t study properly” so Madam started giving her tuition …I stopped teaching her and concentrated on my studies and we know a girl doing her Masters and we got my sister tuition with her. Since starting to go there she is doing well in her studies.
As a first-generation learner, Nashra’s educational efforts are impacted by several factors that include limited financial resources, limited access to information, and limited confidence to challenge authority. Computer skills are in growing demand in India and many children in poverty seek out computer training programs in efforts to increase their employment chances. Private institutions (discussed in Chapter 3) offering computer training are a fast-growing industry. While allowing easy access to desirable courses, these institutions are known for charging high fees and for their extensive malpractice. For many students like Nashra these institutions offer hope, and students are willing to find ways to pay the high fees. However, the extensive use of deceptive business practices, such as considerably increasing the fee mid-way, force students to drop out while allowing these institutions to profit from the vulnerable students. Nashra shares her experience:

In seventh grade I decided to do a computer course…Mummy told me I had to pay the fees because we cannot afford to pay the fees for your computer course…to pay the fees I started giving tuitions…for seventh, eighth, and ninth class I gave tuition…I earned Rs. 1,000 a month…when I gave the test at the computer place they said the fees would depend on the marks…I had 80% marks so my fees was Rs. 200…. I did the course for a year, then suddenly they said whoever wants a diploma and a job in the future will have to pay Rs. 1,200 a month…I was shocked to hear that…then after that I tried a lot to pay the fees but I couldn’t adjust so I discontinued the course. I couldn’t do it. I was learning software, a little bit of hardware and Madam was going to teach electronics and languages and I had to discontinue…I could have done it.

Nashra wants to be a nurse and help people who are “sick and poor.” This year, Nashra will take her Class 10 Boards, the results of which will determine whether she can take up the
science stream and prepare for a career in nursing or medicine. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the science stream is on top of the preference hierarchy of possible streams to choose from and is open to only the top performing students. Nashra hopes to secure 80-90th percentile grades but knows it is hard to do so without tuition, which her family cannot afford.

As a Muslim girl living in poverty, Nashra is glad she has her parents support to go to school. Nashra values her parent’s support of her education particularly since they do so in spite of the objections from the extended family and community. Nashra is grateful but struggles to accept the fact that her parents will not allow her to work after she completes her studies:

Everyone’s life has a purpose. My life has purpose too. When I grow up I want to be a nurse. I want to help the poor and the sick. But my family says, “We will let you do the nursing course but we will not let you work. You can work after marriage if your in-laws give you permission to do so.” But I am happy that I have such wonderful parents that they are educating me. And they are ready to fulfill my dreams. I am also happy that from my extended community I am the first girl to be educated because in my community girls are not allowed to study much. I want to thank God for giving me parents who understand my desires and feelings. My Mummy and Papa are the best Mummy and Papa in the world. I have trust that God will give me a husband who will understand me as well as my parents understand me. I hope my home with my in-laws is as nice as my home with my parents.

Like education, marriage is a family—not individual—decision. Nashra’s mother was married at the age of 15, and, as the oldest daughter in the family, Nashra faces tremendous pressure from extended family and kinship to get married. A few proposals of marriage have come for Nashra which she is grateful to have had the choice to refuse. Nashra’s ability to
exercise choice is supported by her teachers and, to some extent, by her parents. Nashra’s mother is ambivalent about her support for Nashra’s education, caught between following tradition and allowing Nashra to study.

Nashra values education and is working hard at her studies. Though she accepts her parents will choose a spouse for her, Nashra is also clear that she will not marry someone without an education:

Another proposal came for me…the boy was less educated, only up to third class so I refused…. I said I wouldn’t want to marry a boy like this, if I am educated, then why should the boy be like this? Mummy also didn’t like, so she also refused and Papa also refused. My maternal uncle was agreeing, because he [the boy] earns Rs. 30,000 [approximately $600]. But, the job will be there today, it might not be there tomorrow. And on top of it he is not educated. If he was educated, he would get some other job if he loses this. If you are not educated, it’s tough to get a job. So because of this father refused, mother had said no right from the beginning.

Nashra’s mother was raised in a village and moved to the city ten years ago with her husband and children. As Nashra mentioned, in her religion and in her family, it is not acceptable for girls and women to participate in public activities. Keeping with these traditional limits Nashra’s mother did not work until recently; however, the increased cost of living, demands of a large family, and the looming cost of getting five daughters married have forced Nashra’s mother into paid employment. She now has three part-time jobs as a maid.

The move to the slums, Nashra’s mother agrees with Nashra, has not been good for any of her children. She feels that sending the children who are most impacted by the slum environment to boarding school is her only option, even though it is a costly option. Nashra’s
mother regrets she never had the opportunity to go to school and has come to realize the value of education. She is deeply disheartened by the fact that her most of her children are not taking advantage of the opportunity to get an education:

Both of us—husband and wife—work hard and educate the children but the children do not care…this environment is not good for them…you will see some people’s children stealing, many children roaming the streets, some being vagrant. It’s because the parents do not care…I care but I am only one person…I cannot have my children tied up twenty-four hours…I sit down or go to the latrine he [son] runs away and I keep searching for him like a mad person…that’s why I will put him in a boarding school.

While Nashra’s mother recognizes that Nashra is responsible, hardworking, and competent, these facts fade in the light of the fact that Nashra is a girl not a boy:

In the whole family Nashra is the best. She handles everything very nicely. She also has a lot of care in her. If Nashra was a boy that would have been good…. In my whole family only Nashra is interested in studying. She is the smart one…I have tried very hard to get them to go to school…when they go to school they do not care…my biggest sorrow is my son…he is twelve or thirteen and he does not study…he changed when we moved here. He got used to the environment here…I only have one son. I had a strong wish he would study and we would help him do an engineering course. He was better in studies than Nashra.

Both of Nashra’s parents have had the courage to withstand family and kinship resistance towards Nashra’s education and struggle to make informed educational decisions:

Nashra is in class 10 and after this she will have to get admissions into another school…getting admissions cost money…Nashra would like to go to Sector 18 school
where her cousin goes but it depends on where she gets admission. I’ve also heard that they have zoned the schools so the colony children can only go to the local school...that’s how they are doing it now...we will look for a English medium school...but the English medium schools do not want to take children from here [slums]...we do not want to send her to a Hindi medium school.

Nashra’s mother supports Nashra’s education because she wants her daughter to have a different life than the one she has, a life with less suffering and struggle. She struggles with the conflict between education and the tradition of early marriage, which is what is familiar to her:

We will help Nashra study up to class 12...I do not want to waste anyone’s life.

Whatever she wants to be—if I have the courage I will help her...we have to help her stand on her feet. I did not study and married early and had children early. Now we are struggling and suffering. So now why should the children do the same? They should live their own life.

In my village they marry girls early fourteen, fifteen. But now we live here [city]...people here say things too. That’s why we call the unpad [the uneducated]. They do not have much wisdom.... I will get Nashra married at the right age and if she wants to do some training I will talk to the in-laws before the marriage. And we will only marry her to someone who recognizes the importance of her education. If the husband and wife both work they can make their life better and give their children a good life.

Nashra has a modest dream of becoming a nurse and having some autonomy over her life. She shared her fear that her dreams may go unrealized in her journal:

In my life I have experienced one more thing. Whenever I do anything like participate in a competition, at the very last minute I fail. Last time I participated in the long jump
competition. In practice I did very well but on the day of the completion my foot got caught on a rope and I fell. One time I participated in a race and on the day of the completion I twisted my ankle during the race. Whatever I do I fail in the last minute. When this happens to me I have bad thoughts. I wish I would die because at that moment I feel as if I will never be able to achieve anything in my life.

**Pooja: I Don’t Want My Mother to Clean Other People’s Toilets**

Pooja is 13 years old and in class 8 one of the local Government Model Schools. Pooja’s parents are from different states, her mother is from Orissa and her father is from Bengal, and they migrated to the city nine years ago, solely for the purpose of providing Pooja with better educational opportunities, as Pooja shares, “My Mummy and Papa came from the village for me. They want to make me a doctor… That’s why they came from the village so that I could become a doctor.… That’s why they both work so hard.”

Pooja’s mother works as a maid and her father works as a part-time cook in a small restaurant. Pooja and her family live in one of three rooms in the servants’ quarters of the house in which her mother works. The servants’ quarters are set at the back of the property and mostly hidden from the main house by trees and tall bushes. The family shares a bathroom with the other two families that also live in the servants’ quarters and have a small space of their own to cook in.

Pooja’s mother has high expectations for Pooja’s education, and Pooja is very aware of these expectations. She is also aware of the fact that her mother had educational aspirations of her own that were not realized. Sharing her educational aspirations, Pooja’s mother tells:

I had a dream from when I was young to do something, be someone. It was my heart’s desire to study. There was a lot of hardship for me to stay in school…I would sell my
books at the end of year and use that money to buy pencils and notebooks…I gave
tuitions to earn money for my education…. As I got older I stayed in hostels since no
one at home had much education so who could explain things to me? I would stay at the
hostel and cry a lot and study a lot…. I have five brothers and three sisters…I am the one
who studied the most.

In 1971, when Pooja’s mother was in school, the national rural female literacy rate was
16.86%, and Orissa’s rural female literary rate was below 8% (Government of India, 2012a). It
is a remarkable expression of Pooja’s mother’s resourcefulness and determination that she was
able to graduate high school. Pooja’s mother wanted to become “someone,” which meant she
wanted a professional career and wanted to wait to marry. There was tremendous pressure from
the family, Pooja’s mother says, for her to marry but she resisted:

After I completed class 10 there was no one in my family who would support my
schooling. They said, “What will you do if you study further?” My two older sisters
were married and my family said it was time for me to get married. I said I will not get
married.

When Pooja’s mother was in class 10, she met Pooja’s father and the two fell in love.
Pooja’s father wanted to get married but Pooja’s mother refused saying she was “fighting to
become someone” and would marry him after she had found a “good” job. Opportunities for
professional careers were limited for Pooja’s mother in the village and after she graduated class
12, she applied for a teaching position at a private school in her village. Instead of requiring the
applicants to have a teaching certificate, the school required a monetary deposit. The job was for
sale, and Pooja’s mother was willing to buy the job with the hope that this money would secure
her a permanent job and fulfill her dream of “becoming someone.” Pooja’s mother shares her struggles to secure a job:

After I finished plus 2 there was a private school…where I wanted to teach but they asked for a donation. So I went to the bank and got a loan. They had asked for Rs. 40,000 [approximately $670]. But someone else gave them Rs. 50,000 [approximately $833] and they got the job.

Corruption and malpractice kept Pooja’s mother from getting this job. Not one to give up easily, Pooja’s mother found out that the local doctor was looking for a nursing assistant and was willing to provide training on site. Just when Pooja’s mother was negotiating with the doctor for this job, Pooja’s father declared to her that he would kill himself if she did not marry him. In the two years he had been waiting for Pooja’s mother to finish her education and find a job, Pooja’s father had gotten married to another woman. Pooja’s paternal grandmother had passed away a few years earlier, he was the oldest son and his sisters were much younger than him so Pooja’s father’s family forced him to marry a young Bengali girl from the community since they needed “someone to do the housework.” Pooja’s mother was doubly reluctant to marry someone who was already married but says: “I refused and then I don’t know how it happened suddenly. Her [Pooja’s] dad said he would take his life if I did not marry him and by saying things like that I was forced to marry him.”

Going against tradition, Pooja’s mother says she “got married on my own” at twenty-two, well aware of the fact that she was going to be the second wife, and, despite the Hindu personal law that states polygamy is illegal. Before Pooja’s mother married her father, she made it clear that she wanted to continue studying and looking for a job. At the time of marriage, Pooja’s
father agreed to these conditions, but, as Pooja’s mother shares, he did not honor his promise to her:

He knew me when I was studying and he loved me. So his wish was to marry me…

Before I got married I spoke with him and he said I could study…I got married and my husband did not let me study after the marriage…After I got married his father, uncles, and brother did not let me study. They said, “In our family we don’t let girls go out”…

After marriage he (husband) went to the doctor with whom I applied to become a nurse and said, “She will not do any such dirty work. Her father is a pandit [priest].” By saying such lies he took away my chance at the job…. I have a lot of dukh [sorrow] in my life. It is for this dukh [sorrow] that I have come to the city.

Pooja’s mother believes that her dukh (sorrow) comes from the fact that she could not fulfill her heart’s desire to become “someone.” To ensure that her child would have every opportunity to become “someone,” Pooja’s mother only wanted one child. Since Pooja’s father already had two sons from his first wife he was willing to go along with Pooja’s mother on this. She is glad her only child is a daughter. It was Pooja’s mother who chose to migrate to the city when Pooja was four years old, her class 12 education helped her get a job as an errand girl at the university. Pooja’s mother shares that she enjoyed being a part of a prestigious educational institution but, within a week of accepting the job, she quit because the long hours meant Pooja was by herself for most of the day. New to the city, Pooja’s mother had not developed a community she could rely on for child care, and, at that time, there were no institutionalized day cares available in the city. The need for child care is just beginning to grow in India as more women are entering the work force and as the family structure is slowly changing from the traditional joint family (which afforded built in child care providers) to the newer nuclear family
structure. Eventually Pooja’s mother settled on working as a maid cleaning houses as that afforded her the flexibility to work when Pooja was in school. In spite of her hard-earned class 12 education, Pooja’s mother now cleans other people’s bathrooms, a fact that motivates Pooja to do well in school. She feels obligated to fulfill her mother’s expectations, she feels the weight of her mother’s unfulfilled hopes, and she feels the burden of her mother’s sacrifices. Pooja grapples with the conflict between what she is really interested in and what her mother wants for her:

My first responsibility is towards my parents. They have sacrificed a lot to raise me. I mostly like painting and drawing. It’s because Mummy and Papa tell me that’s why I study. It’s not like I don’t like to study. I like to study but I like drawing the most…I do want to study as much as I can.

Pooja is a class monitor. Students who are doing well academically and command respect and co-operation from fellow classmates are nominated by the class teacher to be monitors. Pooja has near-perfect marks in all subjects except math. Pooja’s mother never misses a single parent-teacher conference. She has Pooja’s class teacher’s cell phone number programmed in her cell phone. She is proud that Pooja is a “good” student and she never hears a “single complaint” about Pooja from her teachers who only have “good things” to say. Pooja has decorated all the empty wall spaces of the room she shares with her parents with drawings of flowers, rainbows, grass, sunshine, and the names of people she loves.

Pooja’s mother wants her to study well and get a “good” job, she is however not clear of what a “good” job is. She assumes being a doctor is a “good” job but does not know what Pooja needs to do to become a doctor. Pooja’s mother asks anyone she can to give her more information about becoming a doctor. She is finding out that the process of becoming a doctor is
a costly one and has begun to expand “good” jobs to include nursing and teaching. Ultimately Pooja’s mother wants Pooja to study so she can “stand on her own two feet” and does not want Pooja to “get caught like I did.” Pooja’s mother is the only parent who has opened a savings account at the local post office to save for Pooja’s education.

Pooja dreams of becoming a doctor and having her own clinic in the future. She shares:

I want to study as much as I can. After plus 2 I want to become a doctor. For that I have to study a lot. I actually do not know what I need to become a doctor. If there was someone older than me who was studying to be a doctor I could have asked them but I do not know anyone who is studying to be a doctor or is a doctor…. I keep asking my friends if they know what classes I need to take to become a doctor…. In ten years I hope I will have my own clinic in which I will have both my Mummy and Papa sitting at the front desk.

Poonam: I Don’t Have That Much Intelligence

Poonam is 16 and in class 10 at Sikhya School, she is classmates with Nashra and Babita. Poonam’s parents are from Haryana, a state that has a lower sex ratio (834) than even Bihar, has a female literacy rate of 56.91%, and 69.3% of the population is identified as being poor based on the multi-dimensional measure of poverty (Government of India, 2012a; UNDP, 2011).

Recalling her marriage, Poonam’s mother says:

I got married in my childhood…I was twelve when I got married …nobody asked girls for their opinion in those days…. I have four sisters and two brothers…all my sisters were married in childhood…none of the girls were allowed to go to school.

Poonam’s mother was denied education simply because she was a girl, not because her parents could not afford it. Her brothers went to school, in fact her youngest brother is currently
studying at a university. Poonam’s father grew up in a very poor family and never had the chance to go to school. Poonam’s parents came to the city when she was only six-months-old in search of a “better life.” Her father works as a street sweeper and her mother works as a part-time maid at three different houses. Together the couple make Rs. 5,000/month (approximately $84). Since Poonam’s mother works part-time in each house she does not get the benefit of a rent-free home, and the family pays more than half of their income on rent for one room in a slum. Poonam’s mother shares the burden of paying rent on a small income:

Here in the cities, the ones who have houses, like the government servants who get houses from the government, are at a great advantage. The private companies pay daily wages to their employees. If you take leave, they cut the salaries. So this is the problem. What can we do?

In spite of all the hardship in her life, Poonam’s mother is grateful because her first born was a son and she says, “God gave her a good life.” Traditional gender roles and expectations are strictly followed in Poonam’s family. Poonam says, “All the work at home I have to do alone, my brother does not help…he is completely focused on playing.” In keeping with concerns of protecting Poonam’s “purity” and safety, her parents have placed strict limits on her mobility. Poonam is not allowed to go anywhere by herself, Poonam shares her unhappiness at the unfair restriction placed on her mobility which leaves her feeling deeply isolated:

I also feel my mother does not trust me. She does not let me come and go anywhere. She does not even let me go outside the house. It is only because I go to school that I can leave the home otherwise if she could she would keep me locked up in the house. Sometimes when I need something from the store I have to tell my brother to get it for me and he never listens to me and my mother will never let me go to the store to buy the...
things I need. So I have to beg my brother to get me my things from the store and only then will he do it. It is nearing seventeen years since we moved to the city and until today I have not been able to make a single friend. On days that school is closed I feel very lonely. My mother should have some trust in me. I should at least have the freedom to go to the store to get my things and do my own work. If I had even this little freedom I would not have to remain dependent on someone. I could also prove to my mother that I would never break her trust in me.

Poonam’s desire to have the freedom to have relationships with others and her desire to have the freedom to meet her basic needs are central capabilities, deprivation of which robs an individual of her dignity and wellbeing. School is the only public activity in which Poonam is sanctioned to participate without family supervision; however, her mobility to and from school is controlled. The family owns two bicycles. Her father rides Poonam and her brother to school on one bicycle while her mother rides the other bicycle to work. Although Poonam’s brother is younger than her, he does not have any limits placed on his mobility since he is a boy, and is allowed to ride his mother’s bicycle home after school. This arrangement forces Poonam to stay after school and help her mother finish her work, as she describes:

After school my brother and I walk over to where my Mummy works and he takes her bicycle and goes home. I have to stay and help Mummy finish sweeping, mopping, doing the dishes—whatever is left to do. Papa comes to get us on his way home…. I prepare tea and dinner at home…Mummy gets tired after working.

Poonam still manages to think of her future. She shares her modest dreams:

I do not have big dreams. I just wish that I pass class 10 with good grades. And I do well in class 12 also. And that I can graduate from college. I wish that I will be able to get a
good job working with computers in a bank so I can lighten my mother and father’s burden. My family and I have faced many difficulties. My hope is that in the future my family and I can live our lives comfortably.

An education, a job, a comfortable life with fewer difficulties—the simple things Poonam wants and she has reason to want. They are essential for having a minimally decent life. Not surprisingly, Poonam is struggling at school. Part of the reason for that is she does not get enough time to study. “I study for an hour…I don’t get much time…if we come home early then I get more time to study.” Household chores and helping her mother finish her work are Poonam’s primary responsibilities. Poonam’s mother’s health is failing, she has lost one kidney to an infection and is not allowed to carry heavy weights. Poonam realizes her mother has no choice but to continue working in spite of her ill health and feels obligated to help her mother in any way she can. As academic demands increase with each year, Poonam struggles to keep up. Her parents are unable to afford for her to get tutoring so Poonam has to manage on her own. She shares the difficulty of not having tutoring:

After I came to this school, from fourth to sixth I used to study well. I used to get good marks in all the subjects, I never failed. Then I came to eight and ninth and I got less marks…I had to study more but I had less time so the marks were less…last year I failed in math…I am a little weak in science but somehow I manage, I learn somewhat…but no one in my home is educated, my Mummy and Papa are not educated…they cannot help me with my studies…I am a little scared to ask teachers for help…I told Mummy I need tuition but she says there is no money…I need tuition or I’ll keep failing.

Poonam is fortunate to be at Sikhya, a school that does more than most schools to meet the needs of children in poverty. Poonam blames her struggles at school on her limited
intelligence rather than on her circumstance. She says she is happy that her mother is supportive of her education:

Mummy says I need to study well so that I can become someone or something otherwise I will be like her sweeping and mopping other peoples’ homes… I want to study….

After class 12 I want to do B.Com. [Bachelor of Commerce]…there is a computer course in that so I can get a good job…but it depends on my intelligence. Now, I don’t have that much intelligence so I can only achieve accordingly…I am not good in studies…I used to be good but now I am not.

Poonam’s parents believe their ultimate responsibility towards their daughter is marriage and, in spite of their low earnings, Poonam’s mother manages to save a little each month to pay for Poonam’s wedding. She is not willing to spend this money on tutoring so Poonam can stay up with school work. Early marriage, Poonam’s mother says is “a tradition in our family….

This is the thing.” For Poonam’s mother, who was married at age 12, waiting until Poonam is 18 is a big adjustment. She knows that marriage before the age of 18 is illegal for girls. She watches the promotions on TV and has been informed by the teachers at Sikhya. Poonam’s mother shares:

We are not in a hurry…we are thinking of marrying her when she is eighteen, still two years left…my husband says he can only let her study till class twelve…the worry is always there—will we get a good husband for her or not—one who is educated, has a job, has his own house…my daughter shouldn’t have to suffer. These days it’s very difficult to get one’s own house…dowry in our [community] depends on the parents’ income but we do have to give some basic things such as a washing machine, bed…at least Rs. 1 or 1.5 lakh [approximately $2,000]…I can’t save anything these days, only very little—Rs.
300 [approximately $5] a month in the post office savings account in Poonam’s name—I have been saving this for the last two years.

Poonam sees how hard her mother works to make ends meet and it does not escape her that in spite of all the hardships her mother is saving for her wedding in the hopes of getting a “good” match for her. Poonam feels she is a “burden” on her parents and hopes she can study, get a good job, and then marry so she would be a “lesser burden.”

It is a credit to Poonam’s spirit that she retains hope for better future. Poonam has modest dreams, but her circumstances have led her to doubt her capability to fulfill even these modest dreams. Poonam has few opportunities to make choices in her life but that does not stop her from hoping she will have some choice on when she gets married, as she tells:

I am thinking I do not want to get married until I am twenty-two or twenty-three so that I don’t have to depend on Mummy and Papa…my Mummy and Papa said they will only arrange my marriage…. I don’t want to marry before I am eighteen, you only become mature after eighteen…my teachers tell me that, they tell that on TV and I have read it in books.

**Poverty and Capability**

Glimpses into the lives of Babita, Durga, Nashra, Pooja, and Poonam show some common threads of poverty. As the girls’ lives show, the impact of poverty is deeper when there are multiple deprivations, as in the case of Babita, Nashra, and Poonam who live in inadequate housing, have families with very low income, parents with no education, and parents who have serious health problems. Benefits from Pooja and Durga’s mothers’ job as maids—free housing and financial and counseling help from the employers—have helped mediate the impact of poverty on Pooja and Durga’s lives. All the girls have modest dreams which they work hard to
realize. The girls adapt to limits they cannot push or break down, as seen in Nashra’s acceptance of her parent’s unwillingness not to allow her to work, Babita’s acceptance of her mother’s expectation that Babita continue her studies in an all-girls school, Durga and Pooja’s acceptance that medical school is beyond their family’s financial reach, and Poonam’s acceptance that her parents will only allow her to study up to class 12. None of these girls are passive about this acceptance, they each continue to make small and significant adaptations to create lives that are significantly different from their mothers.
CHAPTER 6: IMPACT OF POVERTY ON EDUCATIONAL ACCESS

In comparing the lived experiences of even just four of the girls in this study, a significant difference in the real opportunities each girl is obvious. The real educational opportunities available to each girl is dependent on parental education and jobs, family income, place of residence, family values and tradition, resources, and social networks. In his book, The Discovery of India, Jawaharlal Nehru (1946) pointed to lack of opportunities as a source of inequalities. Nehru hoped for equality in free India stating, “It means a faith in humanity and a belief that there is no race or group that cannot advance and make good in its own way, given a chance to do so” (Nehru, 1946, pp. 251-252).

Nehru framed poverty in terms of lack of opportunity which further limits individual agency. Poverty is not a choice but a result of lack of choices arising from persistent discrimination and unequal economic, political, and social practices. Nehru held the state, not the individual, responsible for removing political, economic, and social barriers to equality of opportunity. Over fifty years later, Sen (1999) also framed poverty in terms of lack of opportunity by defining poverty as capability deprivation, where capability is understood in terms of access to opportunity (or choice) and the freedom to exercise choice. In other words, poverty is a combined result of limitations placed on individual opportunities which limit one’s actual functioning in the economic, political, and social sphere. Poverty is not a choice but an “unfreedom” to be or do what a person is capable of becoming or doing (Sen, 1999, p. 29). In framing poverty as lack of opportunity that limits agency, both Nehru and Sen pushed for a broader and more complex understanding of poverty beyond the artificially simple income measure. In India, poverty continues to be measured on the basis of income, and families earning less than Rs. 960 (approximately $16) in urban areas and Rs. 780 (approximately $13) in
rural areas are identified as being Below the Poverty Line (BPL). India’s measure of urban poverty at approximately $0.55 per day is significantly lower than the World Bank and Millennium Development Goal (MDG) measure of poverty at $1.25 per day. The Indian government’s Planning Commission is in the process of expanding the measure of poverty in India to include multidimensional measures of three categories of vulnerability—residential, occupational, and social (Planning Commission, 2012). While there are clear correlations between wealth and an individual’s capability to live as she would like, the relationship is neither “exclusive” nor “uniform” (Sen 1999, p. 14). Gender, caste, class, social values, family and religious beliefs, geographical location, social networks, and individual characteristics are some factors that intersect with income to determine an individual’s ability to live a life she would naturally consider worth living.

In India and in most countries, education is seen as central to equality and opportunity. Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) recognize education as a central capability, essential for expansion of other human capabilities and freedom. Increasing access to education is essential to reducing poverty. Benefits of education extend to the economic, social, and political sphere, and those benefits are perceived by parents of disadvantaged groups to be the most promising vehicle for social and economic mobility (PROBE, 1999). Educational opportunities, however, vary significantly based on gender, class, caste, region, religion, and language. Babita, Durga, Nashra, Pooja, and Poonam’s stories reveal the differential impact these factors directly and indirectly have on their educational access.

All human beings deserve a certain minimum threshold of basic capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000). This minimum threshold protects individuals from harm and respects their dignity. In many instances, poverty deprives individual’s access to even the minimum threshold of basic
capabilities, like safe housing and access to health care. Rights, translated into policy and action, ensure access to at least a minimum threshold of basic needs for all. Effective policy not only guarantees access to a minimum threshold but does so in a way that is dependable (Nussbaum, 2000). Nonetheless, policy cannot by itself create the necessary change. Public discourses, interactions, values, and public policies and institutions interactively shape individual capabilities, including educational capabilities. The focus of this chapter is to reveal the complex and diverse ways in which poverty, policy, and social values interact to constrict or enhance Babita, Durga, Nashra, Pooja, and Poonam’s capabilities. While the primary focus is on educational opportunity, the impact of poverty on other basic capabilities has to be given equal consideration since capabilities are interdependent and indivisible.

**Urban Migration**

Babita, Durga, Nashra, Pooja, and Poonam’s parents, as well as the parents of all the girls in the study, are rural-to-urban migrants. The majority of India’s population continues to reside in villages, although the 2011 census shows that for the first time since independence, the absolute increase in population is greater in urban areas than in rural areas. Urban population increased from 27.81% to 31.16% between 2001 and 2011, while the rural population declined from 72.19% to 68.84% in the same time period (Government of India, 2012a). Rural-to-urban migration is a significant contributor to the changing urban/rural population trend (Sundari, 2007). This migration trend is fueled by market shifts from agriculture to manufacturing and consumption. Agricultural occupations are primarily located in rural areas whereas manufacturing occupations are primarily located in urban areas. Another shifting trend in migration is that, in the past, it was predominantly men who migrated alone, leaving their wives and families in the native village, but recent migration trends show that the highest rates of
migration are among families (Mazumdar, Neetha, & Agnihothri, 2013; Sunadri, 2007). This is the case for all the twenty families in this study.

Besides expanding job opportunities, urban migration also opens up opportunities in other areas. A significant, however unintended, consequence of rural-to-urban migration for the girls in this study is the exposure to *kutch aur sotch* (different kind of thinking). The environment of the city is permeated with more permissive attitudes towards gender roles, particularly the education of girls. Nashra is required to wear the full *niqab* when she visits her paternal village where people have *purane khayal* (old fashioned thinking), which she believes is what kept her from accessing education when she lived in the village. The more liberal atmosphere of the city, Nashra feels, had a positive impact on her parents thinking, “After coming to the city Mummy and Papa changed a lot…Mummy and Papa gained some knowledge that it’s important to educate girls…there has been a lot of difference in their *sotch* [thinking]…they started educating me.” Nashra’s mother shares that in her village, girls are married at an early age—fourteen or fifteen years. She adds, “But now we live here [city]…that’s why the *unpard* [uneducated] are *unpard*…they [village people] do not have much wisdom.” Migration’s impact on increasing opportunities and freedoms for the girls in this study is illustrated Sapna’s (see Chapter 7 for profile) mother’s comment that if her 16 year old daughter was still living in the village, the daughter would have been married by now instead of being in school. Another mother shared that she supports her daughter’s education because it will allow her to “stand on her own feet” and also because she feels that her family in the village has an expectation that they will make the most of the resources the city has to offer, “You know what people [family in the village] will say if we do not educate our children that sitting in the city we still did not give them an education.” Most of the girls in the study show their preference
for life in the city by dichotomizing the rural life as “backward,” “old fashioned,” and “restrictive” with the urban life as “new,” “open,” and more “desirable.”

Besides increasing the girls’ educational opportunities by making it acceptable for girls to go to school, urban migration also increases educational opportunities by the simple fact that there are more schools in cities and because the quality of infrastructure is significantly better in urban areas than it is in rural areas. Shaveta’s mother shares: “Now I wish I had studied more…my schooling was good for nothing…the school in the village only went up to class 8, they made us sit on the floor and we had to bring our chalk boards from home.”

A significant difference can be found in the quality of infrastructure between rural and urban schools. The follow up PROBE report (De, Khera, Samson, & Kumar, 2011) report reveals significant improvement in the quality of infrastructure in rural schools but reports that a significant number of the rural schools continue to lack access to even the most basic needs; 40% of the surveyed schools did not have bathrooms and a quarter of the schools did not have access to drinking water. The report further showed high teacher absenteeism and low teaching activity in rural schools.

Babita, Nashra, and Poonam attend Sikhya, a tuition-free private school, while Durga and Pooja attend separate government model schools in their neighborhoods. All three schools have large, brick buildings with classrooms equipped with fans and windows and have spaces for extra-curricular activities. The schools have sufficient open land for playgrounds, sports fields, and parking. Each school is protected by a boundary wall and has a security guard at the gated entrance for monitoring traffic in and out of the building. The schools have an adequate number of teachers and administrators. Babita, Nashra, and Poonam are fortunate to attend a tuition-free
private school, an almost non-existent option if their families had remained in the village since good quality, tuition-free private schools are extremely rare in North India.

The infrastructure quality of the schools the girls attend is significantly better than what they would have available to them had their parents not migrated; however, the government school infrastructure is far inferior to those of private schools, particularly compared to high-tuition private schools that are able to maintain low student-teacher ratio and offer students air-conditioned buildings, extensive choice of extracurricular activities, transportation, state-of-the-art technology, and cutting-edge learning opportunities (Govinda, 2011; Kingdon, 2007; Little, 2010). There is, however, little doubt that migration has positively impacted the educational opportunities, freedoms, and functioning for the girls in this study.

**Poverty and Access to What Education?**

Rights are often granted to protect citizens from a recognized “wrong.” The “wrong” these rights instruments correct is widely unequal access to education by certain groups of children across India. The critical role of education on individual capability, freedom, and dignity is recognized by the Indian Constitution and the CRC, both of which grant children the right to free and universal education. This right is limited to children between the ages of six and 14 years in India, and many other countries. The RTE categorizes these groups into two: a) the “disadvantaged group,” children belonging to Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe (SC/ST) groups, socially and educationally “backward” class and groups having disadvantage owing to social, cultural, economic, geographical, linguistic, gender or other factors; and b) the “weaker section,” children from low-income families. Their gender puts the girls in this study under the “disadvantaged group” and the fact that they live in poverty puts them under the “weaker section,” recognizing them as being doubly disadvantaged when it comes to accessing education.
Concentrated efforts to increase school enrollment rates across India has been spurred by the ratification of the CRC in 1992, commitment to meeting the MDGs, and the growing awareness of the importance of education for all. While significant regional variations in enrollment rates persist, such efforts have resulted in an impressive increase in enrollment rates making primary school enrollment almost universal in India, reported at 99% for boys and 98% for girls in 2011 (DISE, 2012; UNICEF, 2013). Of course, these rates vary significantly across class, caste, region, and religion. Efforts to increase enrollment have almost exclusively focused on primary education while ignoring enrollment at the secondary level, which continues to be low and relatively unchanged for the past decade. This is particularly the case for girls and, in general, for children living in poverty for whom secondary enrollment rates are reported at 59% for boys and 49% for girls; 82.6% for children from middle- and upper-income which is in stark contrast for children living in poverty at 29.1% (UNICEF, 2013). For the small percent of children in living in poverty who do make it to the secondary level, the graduation rate is dismally low, reported at 0.9% (Barro & Lee, 2012). No disaggregated data is available for enrollment, attendance, or graduation rates for girls living in poverty.

It is important to note that while enrollment rates are a factor in determining educational access, it is not enough that children simply have access to education since access alone does not necessarily lead to regular attendance or graduation. One must consider access to school choice—along with attendance and graduation rates—particularly since social and economic mobility is dependent on the type of school from which a child graduates. Considering that only 29.1% of children in poverty progress to the secondary level and, of those, only 0.9% graduate, it is critical to understand the factors that enable and disable children living in poverty to access and complete secondary education. This is particularly true for girls living in poverty since girls are
the minority of the small percent of students in poverty who graduate from secondary school. Educational data at the secondary data is scare at this point since the focus thus far has been on primary education.

**Poverty and access to early education.** Educational inequality has roots in early childhood. While poverty is harmful at any age, it is particularly harmful in the early years since it critically impacts cognitive, social, emotional, and health outcomes (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011). Access to nutrition, health care, level of parental education, access to resources, and family income interact in a complex and complementary manner to determine the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills in early childhood, which sets the pattern for later school progression and achievement (Helmers & Patnam, 2010; Murray, 2012; Rolleston & James, 2011). For these reasons, poverty intervention is particularly critical in the early years. Access to quality pre-school is one universally accepted, critical intervention (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011). Access to any pre-school, let alone quality pre-school, is determined by family income and location.

By limiting the right to an education to children between the ages of six and 14, the RTE leaves intact the care and education of children from birth to six as a Directive Principle under State Law. According to the 2011 census, there are 159- million children in the zero-to-six age range representing 13% of the total population (Government of India, 2012a). Of these 159 million children, 58 million fall in the three-to-six age group and only 32 million of these children attend either government- or privately-funded preschool programs (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2011). Upon independence from the British, the Indian government created the Five-Year Plan framework to set development goals for each five year period. Starting from the first Five Year Plan, each plan has addressed specific needs of women and
children, and under the fifth Five Year Plan (1974-79), the government launched the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, which is considered to be the largest outreach program for children in the world (Bhakry, 2006). Under this scheme, a network of *anganwadi* (literally translated: courtyard protection) centers were set up in recognition of the importance of pre-school for children in poverty. There are only six hundred thousand *anganwadis* (child care centers) the country compared to the seventeen lakh required for universal coverage (HAQ, 2008) and almost all of these are located in rural areas, leaving children in urban areas with little access to affordable preschool.

Children have the option to begin play school at age two in India. Play schools are all privately run and fee-based which makes access dependent on family income. None of the girls in this study attended play school. Most government schools begin at the pre-primary (preschool and kindergarten) level for children aged four years or older. As with primary schools, the options for private preschools is widespread ranging from high-fee to low-fee. The quality of preschools is highly variable based on government versus private (none of which are regulated), urban/rural location, and fees charged (Murray, 2012).

Nashra spent her early years in the village with her paternal grandparents, and her opportunity to attend preschool was constrained by family and religious values. Babita did not attend play school, her local government school had a preschool program but she did not attend. Since the RTE only makes education between classes 1-8 free, there is a small fee charged by government schools for the preschool program. Additionally, the government school was too far for Babita to walk on her own at a young age as both her parents worked long hours and could not transport her. Families with limited resources usually make allocation decisions based on maximum return, and most of the mothers I interviewed did not consider an investment in
preschool education to be beneficial. Both Durga and Pooja attended preschool at their local government school. Durga walked by herself, Pooja’s mother dropped and picked her up from preschool. Poonam did not attend preschool because her mother was unable to drop and pick her up from school and could not afford to pay for transportation to school. Children entering primary school from middle and upper income have almost universally attended private play school and preschool and begin their primary school experience having had the opportunity to become familiar with the social and academic climate of school (Woodhead, Ames, Vennam, Abebe, & Streuli, 2009).

**Poverty and access to school choice.** Limitation in access and choice of schooling based on family income and location of residence continues into the primary years. Stratification of Indian society is replicated in the school system with vastly contrasting quality school options based on family income. The type of school (government, government model, recognized private, and unrecognized private) a child attends significantly impacts the child’s life-course.

Elite schools with state-of-the-art, air-conditioned, sprawling facilities equipped with state-of-the-art equipment and teaching staff aim at providing every educational and social advantage for its students. On the other hand, government schools are often housed in minimally basic (if any) rundown buildings, with little (if any) access to teachers or teaching-learning resources, and where teaching is done in a way that reinforces existing inequalities and prejudices. The state of government schools is significantly better in urban areas as compared to rural areas. Additionally, the state of government model schools is significantly better than that of government schools. High levels of dissatisfaction (poor infrastructure, medium of instruction, and quality of teaching) has led to a dramatic loss of enrollment in government schools, leaving
mostly first-generation learners from very poor households—those who have no other choice—in attendance (Mooji, 2008).

**Government and government model schools.** “When we first came to the city my Mummy did not know much and she put me in a government school close to where we were staying…it was a Hindi medium school,” Durga stated. Most of the mothers I spoke with shared that when they first migrated to the city they did not know “much about schools” and made the choice based on proximity to residence, affordability, and recommendation by family members. Because of the stability of her parents’ jobs, Durga attended the same government school from preschool through class 10. Durga did well on her Class 10 Boards, which allowed to admission into a “well reputed” school she has “always wanted to attend.” Durga liked the teachers at her old school but notices a “big” difference in the students at the two schools. The Hindi medium school she attended caters mostly to first-generation learners from very poor homes. Durga shared that the children in her “old” school were not “serious” about their studies, and the “environment of the school was not so good.” The school has, in the last year, upgraded to a model school which means it is now English medium and offers more choice of streams for classes 11 and 12. “When I was there it was one way and now it is another way,” says Durga because the bigde hoe [spoiled] kids have left and the acche [good] students are coming to school. Besides having a “good reputation,” her current school also has better discipline and students who are “serious” about their studies. Durga is proud to be attending her current school. Linking deep poverty with Hindi medium instruction, poor school environment, and students’ general lack of character and motivation is not unique to Durga; it is an assumption shared by the majority. It is interesting that Durga sees herself as being very different from the other students at her school, because she “was serious” about her studies and “listened to the teachers.”
Durga and Maya (see Chapter 7 for profile) attended the same Government school from Kindergarten through class 10. Maya did not do as well as Durga on her class 10 exams and she now attends a different model school, one that is more reputable than her previous school but not as well regarded as the school Durga attends. Maya’s school offers a choice for medium of instruction (Hindi, English, or Punjabi) and offers the arts, commerce, hospitality, and fashion design streams. It does not offer the science stream in class 11 and 12. Maya’s grades on her Class 10 Boards allowed her to get admissions into the arts stream, Maya does not like her current school for several reasons which she shares:

I liked the school I went to until class 10 because there the rooms were big and good with proper benches, each room had four fans and lights and windows…I don’t like the atmosphere in this school…the rooms are weird, fewer benches, and more children sitting on them. The teachers stand in front of the lecture box and the children do their own thing, nobody cares. Nobody has the attitude that they have to teach…in one class we have 150 students, fifty benches and the teacher keeps yelling on top of her voice, “students quiet, quiet”…in another section I have fifty-one students.

**Sikhya, a rare type of private school.** Sikhya is a tuition-free private school that a number of the girls in this study attend, including Nashra, Babita, Meenu, Kamalpreet, Poonam, Gulafsha, and Frat. While private schools are in ever-increasing demand in India (Kingdon, 2007; Mooij, 2008; Tooley & Dixon, 2006) free, private-quality schools like Sikhya are rare. This school caters exclusively to children living in the slums. The school is run by a Sikh foundation, and the mission of the school is to provide a “holistic education—education of the body, mind, and soul” while also recognizing and meeting the unique needs of children living in the slums. The founder of Sikhya, Dr. Gurpreet Singh, shared that he is often asked why he built
a school especially for children living in poverty and why he continues to spend so much money to keep the school running when it would be cheaper for him to offer scholarships for these students to attend existing fee-based private schools. His response is consistent, “The needs of children living in poverty are unique and cannot be met in schools that do not recognize or respect these needs.” For these reasons, he built Sikhya on a large open area of land with several play fields and gardens. The gardens and walkways are filled with flowering plants. The building itself is beautifully designed with many open spaces and plenty of windows. Students are able to use the meditation room—if and when they wish. The school is marked by a boundary wall and the guard at the front gate has been trained to greet the parents with respect and allow them unencumbered access to the school. The front lobby of the school is open, one wall decorated with pictures of children in poverty depicting possible career options such as pilot, teacher, lawyer, scientist, artist, and so on. Another wall features photographs taken by students of their homes and neighborhoods as “a way to recognize and respect the students’ reality,” shared the principal of Sikhya. Although the school ends at 3:00 PM, there is always a staff member on duty to watch children whose parents work and cannot come to pick them up until 4:30 PM.

Admission into the school is based solely on the basis of family income and place of residence. Requirement of birth certificates and proof of residence have been identified as roadblocks to school attendance. The RTE states that government schools can no longer deny admission to students who do not have access to these documents. In spite of this change, one significant requirement for private schools to be recognized by the state is student birth certificate and proof of residence. Sikhya is trying to negotiate with the state to allow them the
flexibility to admit students with no documents without the state penalizing the school by withholding its recognition status.

At an Independence Day function where the wife of a central government minister was the chief guest, the principal started the award ceremony by recognizing the cook, handyman, teachers, and the chief guest in sequence and gave them all the same award. This is extraordinary because equal treatment of individuals from different class and caste is still very rare in India. The parents are very happy with Sikhya. Most of the mothers appreciate how “clean” the school is. The school offers shower facilities and private lockers for storage of personal care items for students who need it. Snack and lunch is provided by the school, and teachers, administrators, and students eat the same food in the same dining room sitting on tables and chairs. The mothers shared that they “like” coming to the school, they feel they are “respected” and “listened to” by the principal and teachers alike who “understand” them. One of the mothers shared that she does not miss a single opportunity to come to her daughter’s school, she attends all the parent teacher conferences, plays, and special events open to the parents. The students “like” their teachers and feel they can go to them for help “as many times as we need to.” As Poonam shared, “I like my class teacher…we can tell her if we are having a problem. She says if we have any problems to tell her.”

Teachers at Sikhya are required to make yearly home visits to each student’s home in an effort to bridge the gap between school and home and also to recognize first-hand some of the challenges their students need to negotiate to stay in school. All the mothers have the principal’s cell phone and their daughter’s class teacher’s cell phone programmed into their own cell phones; nonetheless, few say they have ever initiated contact with either the teacher or the principal. Most of their interactions with the teachers happen at parent-teacher conferences or at
the initiation of the teacher or principal. By decreasing the relative distance between school and home, teachers are able to provide more than just academic guidance to the students and their families. As Babita’s mother shares:

The teachers said that Babita is good in her studies but during study time she talks with other girls. She told her not to speak with girls who are not *sahi* [right]. The teacher told me to tell Babita not to speak with girls who are not *sahi*. They told me not to scold her or hit her but to explain to her. So I explained things lovingly to Babita at home.

The school struggles in isolation to meet the heavy government burden of becoming a recognized school while simultaneously meeting the needs of the students and families living in deep poverty. While the girls and their parents recognize the strengths of Sikhya, they also have come to realize with time that it adds to the girls’ educational challenges in that it remains unrecognized, works with the Open Board (see different board affiliations discussed in Chapter 3), and has a high teacher turnover. To meet the educational needs of children living in abject poverty, the school is affiliated with the Open Board, rather than the more “prestigious” and recognized boards, the ICSE and the CBSE. The RTE requires that all private schools be recognized, and it shuts down schools that do not meet the government criteria for recognition. Six years after opening, Sikhya is still waiting to be recognized. The school administration informs me that issues over quality of the brick used for the boundary wall (handmade rather than the required standardized machine made) is the reason the government is giving for their refusal to recognize the school. The principal added that lack of student records, such as birth certificates, is another reason the school is not being recognized by the Education Department. She believes political leverage or a big bribe would solve the problem, but the administration is unwilling to do so on moral grounds. The school has lost a large portion of its student body due
to this issue since the implications are significant, particularly when it comes to transferring to another school. Transferring schools can be a tedious process considering the amount of paperwork needed and the slow pace at which schools make this required paper work available to the student seeking to transfer. The school to which a student is seeking transfer can deny the student’s request on several grounds including the unrecognized status of the attending school and the lack of identification papers. Moreover, when considering transfer requests, the requested school takes into consideration the board affiliation of the attending school. The RTE addresses these difficulties and mandates school cooperation and efficiency with transfer requests, but as with many policies in India, the RTE is rendered relatively ineffective by the fact that many schools are unaware of its mandates, and some schools choose to ignore mandates they do not wish to comply without fear of consequence.

Babita shared that the enrollment in her class fell from 35 students in class 4 to 15 students in class 10. She believes that the students left because the school operates under the Open Board and because the school is unrecognized. Both factors Babita says will add to her challenges when seeking admission into class 11 at a different school. Babita, like Nashra, said they did not know these were critical factors until this year when they overheard conversations between fellow students.

Nashra, Babita, and all their fellow classmates were all moved from class eight to class ten since all the ninth grade students left the school. The students were not told the true reason for the skip in classes, instead they were told they were being “promoted” because of their good performance. According to the school principal, this decision was made because all the students from the previous ninth grade left the school following the very poor performance of the class 10
students on the board exams. The skip in grade affected most of the students’ performance, as Meenu (see Chapter 7 for profile), one of Nashra and Babita’s classmate’s shared:

In seventh class, my marks were good, also in class eight…so what the principal did was those students who achieved good grades were doubly promoted—instead of promoting to class eight we were promoted to ninth…I always used to top my classes in math but in ninth my math was tough because eight class math is related to ninth class math and since I had missed eight class math and the teacher was also new. So to understand math I had to start tuition.

One reason Sikhya chooses to operate under the Open School Board is that it places less rigorous academic demands on students than the other two more “prestigious” boards. In spite of this fact only a small percentage of Sikhya students (less than 20%) manage to pass the Class 10 Board exam. In its six-year history, less than a handful of Sikhya students have placed in the first division in the Class 10 Boards, and none of the Sikhya students have qualified for the science stream. The students who are aware of the different boards, on the other hand, dislike the Open Board for the fact that it is not considered as “good” as the other two boards and have less value, as Meenu shares:

The board here [Sikhya] is open board, so I am tensed. Does this board hold good value or not. CBSE has more value…in ninth we did not know what board is good but in tenth we know…I tried going to a different school for tenth but schools don’t take new students in class 10 so I have to do my tenth from here.

In its attempt to truly understand the needs of children in poverty, Sikhya reduces several significant barriers to education, particularly for girls in poverty. The school provides a “safe” environment in which parents can entrust their daughters, and it provides both after school care
and sibling care. In addition, the school is entirely free and supports the success of all students as best it can. The school is, however, not able to remove all the obstacles to education for children in poverty, expressed in its declining enrollment in higher grades and poor student performance on the board exam. The foundation that keeps Sikhya tuition-free is unable to fund all the extra resources needed to help first-generation learners succeed in school. The school has not received support from the larger community, which views its mission as being “too indulgent of the poor.” A majority of Sikhya’s students enter school with no preschool experience and little to no other academic exposure. As the academic demands increase, Sikhya students have few resources to help them with homework and exam preparation. In an academic setting that depends heavily on students having after-school tutoring, this is a major obstacle to school success. While Sikhya extends a warm welcome to parent participation and involvement, it has been unable to develop the resources or programs that would enable parents to support their children’s education at home. Equally important, while the teachers at Sikhya are respectful and helpful, they are not certified to teach even though most of them had bachelor’s degrees because private schools are exempt from having to hire only certified teachers. The majority of the teachers at Sikhya are women looking to make a little extra money, the average monthly salary of teachers at Sikhya is very low at Rs. 1,500 (approximately $25). In spite of the low pay, the teachers at Sikhya are dedicated to their students learning, but their effectiveness is limited since none of them have received any teacher training. It is a lack of resources that limits Sikhya’s ability to protect its students from the economic and social vulnerabilities imposed upon them by their poverty, as evidenced by Poonam’s increasing academic struggles. Until class 8, Poonam was able to manage the academic demands of school; however, the increasing demands of the upper grades combined with her parents’ poverty and illiteracy are proving to be serious
obstacles to her academic success, and she is failing many of her classes in spite of all the help offered to her by her teachers at Sikhya. Sadly, Poonam believes it is her lack of intelligence that is causing her to fail. Sikhya’s effectiveness could be significantly improved if it were to receive the cooperation of the government and the support of the larger community.

In spite of these challenges, the parents and students appreciate the school, particularly when they compare it with their experience with previous schools. As one of the girls shared, “My previous schools were not very good, not very high quality. I like this school. The teachers are nice, the building is nice, and the studies are nice.” Nashra also shared, “The government school they don’t care about children. They always fight.”

**Poverty and school transitions.** A significant difference between Nashra and Babita (and the other girls living in the slums) and Durga and Shaveta’s (and the other girls living in the city) educational experience is that the former have all changed schools multiple times while the latter have had minimal school transitions. Nashra has made the most number of school changes because of her father’s transferable job, and, as a result of some of the transfers that happened mid-session, Nashra lost out on some years of schooling. Kamalpreet, Nashra’s classmate at Sikhya, moved schools within her neighborhood because her parents were searching for a “good” school they could afford. Kamalpreet’s mother shares:

Before this school, Kamalpreet was attending a school here in the slum that someone had started in their own house. She studied there until class 4. Before that she was in a government school that was not good. We were glad to find a good school for her to go to [Sikhya]…educating children can be very expensive.

In talking about the difference in her school experience Meenu says:
Before coming to this school we were in two schools in the colony…I went to one school until class two…we were not being educated very well and the fees was very high, we could not afford it…so Mummy discontinued us there…Mummy said we should go to the private school my brother was going to. It was a private school and they were teaching better, the children could understand better…I was there from third through fifth class…both the schools in the colony were Hindi medium and my English was very weak so I had to repeat fifth class at Sikhya.

Transitions to other schools are particularly hard for parents and children of Sikhya as they have gotten used to the advantages of a quality private education and to feeling respected at Sikhya, all of which they know they cannot afford on their own. Nashra’s mother says:

When children leave Sikhya, they have a lot of problems. Other schools will not listen to what we have to say. The teachers, principals, madams. You don’t get the same teachers in every school. At Sikhya the principal madam listens to you nicely, she listens to everything we have to say. That’s because she cares. She know how to handle people, she understands, and cares…government schools don’t do that.

Having to transition out of Sikhya is particularly hard since a comparable private school experience is expensive, as Poonam’s mother shares:

Now we are worried where Poonam will go after class 10. Good schools are hard to get into and expensive. We poor people cannot make our kids study more even if we want to. We get scared of the fees.

Besides the issues related to transferring from one school to another discussed earlier, transferring out from Sikhya is harder since parents realize affordable choices for quality
education are limited by their residence and income. As the mother of Gulafsha, a Sikhya student, shares:

The government school in Sector 46 does not take the children from the colony. They send us to Sector 35 and I tell them it is a Hindi medium school…they tell us the colony school is where we should go.

All class 10 students have to apply for admission into their preferred academic stream for class 11 and 12. Most private schools are Kindergarten through grade 12 and accommodate returning students into a particular stream based on their performance on the Class 10 Board, while government school students have to follow a different process. They have to fill out a form listing school and stream preference. For school preference, they have to list at least three Hindi medium schools and three English medium schools in order of preference. The form has to be submitted to the DO’s (District Education Officer) office in Sector 17. Based on merit, the students are assigned school and stream placement. Placement results are announced in what is referred to as a counseling session. Lists with student names and corresponding placements are displayed at the DSO’s office.

There are several counseling sessions that begin soon after board results are declared and extend over several months into the school year. There are significantly fewer secondary schools in India compared with primary schools: 666,041 recognized primary schools; 219,626 recognized upper primary schools; and 133,492 recognized secondary schools (Ramachandran & Saihjee, 2002) which equates to one secondary school for every five primary schools. The merit-based admission criteria combined with the shortage of secondary school space (made more urgent by the rapid increase in the city’s population in the last thirty years as a result of rural-to-urban migration) means that students from poor-quality schools are left out, perhaps by design?
On my visits to the DO’s office in September, 2013 (the new school session began in July), I spoke with a number of students who had not gotten admission into any school and were desperate to get into “any stream” in “any school.” This is also one reason for continued overcrowding in many government secondary schools, with class size ranging from 30-150, a point Maya raised. It is not uncommon for students with low scores to get into reasonably adequate government schools if they are able to offer an acceptable bribe or if someone in a position of authority provides a recommendation. This is another reason low-performing students with no financial resources and no social capital are pushed out of secondary education.

**Poverty and access to English education.** English competency is fast becoming an assumed necessary social and economic capital in India’s new globalized economy and another source of educational and occupational inequality. English, the girls and their mothers believe, is a source of empowerment since it allows one not to be “defeated” in the modern world. Access to English education is based on family income and is becoming another source for educational inequality. Almost all private unaided schools use English as the medium of instruction which makes them far more desirable to parents who equate any education in English as “good” education. Parents make significant sacrifices to give their children an English education because they believe it will afford their children better employment opportunities (Munshi & Rosenzweing, 2006; PROBE, 1999). Schools are cashing in on this belief leading to a burgeoning of private English medium schools, recognized and unrecognized, targeting the urban poor (Miller, 2005). Quality of English instruction varies significantly between high-fee and low-fee private schools. Government schools, free of tuition cost, base instruction on regional language but the importance placed on an English education is one reason more government schools are switching to government model schools. Often, though the switch is in name only
since the schools lack teachers trained to teach in English. Girls living in poverty, particularly those living in the slums, have limited experience with English while some of the girls living in the city have access to cable television and the Internet which increases their exposure to English. The older girls living in the city were more confident in their use of English words and sentences in conversations.

The school Durga and Maya attended from class 1 through 10 recently relented to the demand for English medium instruction. The school is, however, having difficulty finding an English teacher and most other subject teachers continue to teach in Hindi, as they have not been offered any training to teach in English. One of the study participants, Sapna (see Chapter 7 for profile), who was the classmate of Durga and Maya at the government school which she currently attends, shared her thoughts on the school’s shift to becoming a model school: “Now it [school] is an English medium school…now it is like the students here can also do something…first it was totally Hindi…no one could tell they were twelfth pass.”

Discussions on the importance of getting an education in English and being able to converse in English was a universal theme in all the interviews I had with the girls. Meenu shared that, “English has more value. Hindi does not have as much value. Whichever school you go to all teachers speak in English so I think it’s important to learn English.” The value of English and the importance of an English education also came up in several conversations with the mothers. Nasra’s mother shared:

The world has changed. English is everything. No one gives credit to Hindi—no one cares…everything is done through computers and no one teaches computers in Hindi…if the children study in English only then they’ll be able to do something.
Having children attend an English medium school is a source of pride for parents living in poverty who associate an English language education with success, status, and mobility. It is no wonder, then, that an English medium instruction is highly desired. While almost all the high-fee private schools in North India are English medium, government schools vary in the medium of instruction. Students transferring between government schools can be faced with having to learn in a language they are not entirely competent in. For her plus 2, Durga moved from a Hindi medium school to an English medium school. She recounts the challenges she faced transitioning from one medium of instruction to another:

I had a dream to study in this school but in the beginning it was a very different environment from what I was used to…it was unfamiliar…all the subjects—science, math, everything I studied—was in Hindi. Then suddenly all the three science subjects I had to study in English and at a higher level…in the middle I thought “where have I come, why did I do this?”…it took me a while to adjust…. In plus 1, I could not believe I did not exactly pass…I mean I was in such bad shape. I had topped my school in class 10…it was a bad experience for me…I felt trapped…I knew if I had taken the arts stream I would have topped again…but now I am stable and doing well again.

Durga tried to manage the transition from Hindi medium instruction to English medium instruction on her own but was unsuccessful and needed the help of tutors. The cost of tutoring and access to quality tutoring is a significant contributor to educational inequalities in India. In an earlier comment, Durga associated her previous school with a maul (environment) of poverty which she associated with student disinterest, failure, “bad” students, and lack of discipline. In a similar vein, Durga associates English with a maul (environment) which she relates to prestige, success, discipline, and “good” students.
Employment, Housing, Health, and Educational Access

Extreme poverty makes individuals vulnerable to other violations of other freedoms (Sen, 1999). Serious shortcomings of a one-dimensional measure of poverty as either a measure of income or purchasing power is revealed through the lives of Babita, Nashra, and Durga. Babita, Durga, and Nashra’s families live on roughly the same income but the actual impact income deprivation has on their individual and family well-being is significantly different. Glimpses into the girls’ lives reveals the necessity of using a multidimensional measure of poverty, like the MPI (Multiple Poverty Index, discussed in Chapter 1), which takes into consideration access to health care, quality housing, employment, education, and empowerment.

For migrant families, education level and land holdings significantly determine job opportunities (Mazumdar, Neetha, & Agnihothri, 2013; Sunadri, 2007). Lack of education limits employment opportunities to the informal sector for a majority of urban migrants, with most men becoming self-employed or working as daily wage earners and most women working as domestic help (Mazumdar, Neetha, & Agnihothri, 2013; Sunadri, 2007). Domestic work is extremely insecure, defined by low wages, long and hard hours of labor, no health care provisions, and no time off (Gothoskar, 2013; Mazumdar, Neetha, & Agnihothri, 2013). Parental employment has widespread impact on quality of life by determining opportunities for housing, health care, and both direct and indirect impacts on educational access. Educational level, social network, employment, and health uniquely intersect in Babita, Durga, Nashra, Pooja, and Poonam’s lives to shape their capabilities, including their educational capabilities.

The demands of hard labor, long hours, and insufficient nutrition have impacted Nashra’s father’s pulmonary health. He can only work one shift and “works less and earns less” and this has forced the family to move to the slums. Both Nashra and her mother say the mahaul
(environment) of the slum in “not good” and has had a detrimental effect on the family. Nashra says she finds it hard to study amidst the loud noises and fighting that are part of the environment. The stress of having most of her children lose interest in studying has given Nashra’s mother “tension” because of which Nashra says her mother remains unwell. Nashra’s mother needed surgery that cost Rs. 10,000 (approximately $167) and she now needs a second surgery. The family has to pay for health costs out of pocket since the family has no access to health insurance. Along with the increased demand on the family budget, Nashra’s mother’s failing health has further increased Nashra’s household responsibilities, which means she has even less time to study. The only time Nashra gets to study is late at night, between midnight and three in the morning, when all the housework is done and the family is asleep and the neighborhood is relatively quiet.

The generational pattern of poverty can be seen in Babita’s life. Babita’s maternal grandfather died when Babita’s mother was young. With employment opportunities being very limited in the village, Babita’s widowed maternal grandmother migrated to the city and raised her family by selling fruit. Babita’s mother started helping her mother sell fruit at the age of nine. All of Babita’s aunts and most of her cousins are now fruit sellers, working in close proximity to each other. Babita and her two siblings are the only children in the extended family who attend school. Having grown up in abject poverty, Babita’s mother had no opportunity to go to school. She, in turn, is determined to help all her children get an education. Until last year, things were manageable for Babita’s family.

Babita’s father was fortunate to find employment as a driver with a private taxi company. The job did not come with any benefits and required him to keep an unpredictable schedule that included long absences from home, but did provide a reasonable income. A serious auto accident
at work 10 months before this study has been devastating for the family, particularly as Babita’s mother’s health is also declining. She has been told by doctors not to lift heavy items, a necessary part of her job. While the taxi company paid for hospital costs related to Babita’s father’s accident, the family has to bear the cost of continued health care and there is no insurance to cover loss of income. Babita’s mother’s health care is also paid by the family. Babita’s father has serious health issues following his accident and he can no longer work full-time. This is why Babita’s mother says, “The poor remain poor.” Babita and her family have also been forced to move to the slums.

The combination of declining health and mounting medical bills has Babita’s mother wondering how long they will be able to pay rent on their house. Babita’s mother strongly hopes her children will not end up selling fruit, like she does, her mother did, and her sisters, nieces, and nephews do.

Durga’s parents migrated to the city from Nepal. Lack of education left few employment options for both of Durga’s parents, both of whom found work in the informal sector as a cook in a small restaurant (her father) and as a maid (her mother). A significant benefit to Durga’s mother’s employment as a maid is free housing in an upper middle class neighborhood of the city. This means Durga has access to more educational choice than Nashra and Babita because there are more schools in the city within walking distance from which to choose. Durga is also in closer proximity to her friends, parks, and sports facilities, and the safety of the neighborhood means she has greater freedom for mobility. Another significant benefit to Durga’s mother’s job is the financial and counseling support the elderly couple (and their grown children who live overseas) have offered Durga and her family. It is this support and, Durga’s hard work, that have allowed Durga the chance to study in the science stream.
Pooja’s mother has the highest level of education among all the mothers in this study but circumstances have limited her career options to working as a part-time maid. Pooja’s mother’s current job gives the family access to free housing in one of the city’s upscale neighborhoods; additionally, Pooja’s mother has access to free healthcare and free medicine at the volunteer-run clinic at the neighborhood Sikh temple.

Poonam’s parents are both illiterate. Her father works as a street sweeper and her mother works as a part-time maid. Since Poonam’s mother was able to find only part-time work, the family does not get the benefit of rent-free housing, and they pay over 60% of their monthly income to rent a shack in a slum. Poonam’s mother has had a kidney removed and suffers from pain in the remaining kidney.

Both of Durga’s parents are in good health which allows them to work long hours. Durga’s mother’s job comes with increased access to opportunities to which Babita, Nashra, and Poonam do not have access. It also means that Durga and Pooja live every day with the realization that their parents are “servants” and they experience daily the stark contrast in income-based opportunities and capabilities. Durga’s mother wonders how different her life would have been if her own father had supported her education along with that of her step-siblings.

Babita, Nashra, and Poonam’s lives have multiple and considerable deprivations (health, housing, employment, and empowerment) which impact their quality of life and their direct and indirect access to education. Durga and Pooja’s lives are impacted by fewer and less severe deprivations (housing and employment) which afford them a better quality of life and improved access to education as compared with Babita, Nashra, and Poonam’s.
Social security, urban poverty, and the informal sector in India. Access to adequate housing, health care, education and employment is recognized as a basic right of all citizens by the Indian constitution and by all human rights and children’s rights instruments ratified by India.

Issues of social security (which in India refers to housing, health, nutrition, and employment benefits) remain neglected for all, but particularly for those in the informal sector and those living in the slums (Majumdar & Borbora, 2013). It is important to note that in the limited calculation of poverty in India, the cost of housing is not considered. Cost of housing, particularly for urban migrants, is a major determinant on quality of life (Chandrashekhar & Montgomery, 2010). Some of the families pay up to 70% of their income on rent, and even this expenditure affords them poor-quality housing. This is evident when comparing the housing conditions for Durga and Nashra and the impact it is having on each girl’s life.

The poor also have no access to health insurance so health care costs, as in the case of both of Babita’s parents and Nashra’s mother, have to be borne by the family already struggling to make ends meet. The relatively high cost of health care means that the poor have two options: a) seek care at over-crowded, poorly sanitized, and thinly staffed government hospitals that are free of cost; or b) seek care at low-priced private hospitals that are unregulated and also very poorly staffed and equipped.

Gothoskar (2013) reports that lack of education, skill, and female contacts in other professions leaves domestic work as the only option for many migrant women. Because domestic work continues to be highly gendered and viewed as belonging to the “private sphere” it is devoid of legal protection and regulation. For all the mothers working as domestic workers, the job is highly insecure, vulnerable to loss of job for any reason, and defined by low wages, long and hard hours of labor, no health care provisions, and no time off (Gothoskar, 2013;
Mazumdar, Neetha, & Agnihothri, 2013). Some states, like Maharashtra which adopted the Maharashtra Domestic Workers Welfare Board Act (2008), attempt to regulate work conditions and offer legal protection for domestic workers; in most other Indian states, however, domestic workers remain invisible. Lack of laws are an issue as well as a lack of awareness and effective implementation of existing laws. Mazumdar, Neetha, and Agnihothri, (2013) report that 91% of migrant women do not avail themselves of any available housing schemes, a trend reflected in this study where none of the families were even aware of any available housing scheme.

To address the particular needs of the urban poor, the Government of India set up the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation (2005), and the Ministry launched the Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojna (SJSRY) program (2010). SJSRY has five components: Urban Self Employment Programme (USEP), Urban Women Self-help Programme (UWSP), Skill Training for Employment Promotion amongst Urban Poor (STEP-UP), Urban Wage Employment Programme (UWEP), and Urban Community Development Network (UCDN).

SJSRY enveloped three previously-launched employment enhancement programs by the Ministry: the Urban Basic Services for the Poor (UBSP), Nehru Rozgar Yojana (NRY), and Prime Minister’s Integrated Urban Poverty Eradication Programme (PMIUPEP). Each SJSRY component outlines clear employment issues faced by the urban poor including identifying the particular needs of women living in poverty, outlines steps needed to improve employment opportunities for urban poor, and outlines financial resources allocated for each component of the program. The Ministry has similar programs for housing and health care. The Government of India recently passed the Right to Food Act (2013) under which subsidized food staples will be provided to 75% of the rural and 50% of the urban population through the Public Distribution System.
Each of the programs, on paper at least, show a good understanding of the needs of the urban poor and pay attention to the particular needs of women living in poverty. However, the implementation of the programs varies significantly across India, with states like Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu reported as having the most effective system of social security and states like Chhattisgarh and Bihar having the poorest record of providing social security (Chatterjee, 2013). The rate of state poverty has been shown to not be a factor limiting implementation of policy, rather it is a matter of government will and levels of corruption (Chatterjee, 2013). Funding also plays a role given that India only spends 1.7% of its GDP on funding social security programs as compared to an average spending of 3.4% of GDP by other middle-income Asian countries or China’s allocation of 5.4% of their GDP (Alkire, 2013).

**Child labor.** A majority of the students in all four government schools I visited lived in poverty. Students in two of the schools were from the poorest families, students in one of the schools were from a mix of poor families, while the fourth school drew students of families from the upper-end of the poverty scale; it was also the most “well reputed” of the four schools. The principals of the two schools that drew students from the poorest neighborhoods shared that student absence was high in their schools and that school absence increased significantly at the secondary level. The principals and the teachers believe that one reason for the high rate of absence is that the students from the poorest families have significant family problems like parental unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse by parents, death of a parent from health issues or violence, and so on. These circumstance require students to take up employment for the sake of family and self-survival. It is common to see children of poverty working menial jobs or begging. None of the girls in this study are working for paid employment though Poonam works besides her mother as an un-paid maid after school. It is a widely held assumption that high
dropout or low attendance of children in poverty is because they need to work thereby placing the blame on families rather than schools, conversely, Reddy and Sinha (2010) believe that high dropout and low attendance of children in poverty is because they are pushed out of school. The movement to label all out of school children as child laborers is gaining strength with the dual intent of making much needed constitutional changes to child labor laws and increasing access to education for poor children (MV Foundation, 2011). Until these changes are implemented, advocates against child labor and in support of schooling suggest that area schools understand the needs of child workers and make the necessary accommodations to meet these needs. Sikhya does this by making provisions for students to stay until their parents can pick them up and by allowing students to bring younger siblings to school if that is what is keeping them from attending school. The PROBE report found that none of the girls who dropped out of school did so voluntarily but because their help at home was needed. It is unsurprising that child labor, in the form of unpaid domestic work, is a greater barrier to schooling for girls than boys (PROBE, 1999).

**Poverty and the Practice of Schooling**

Access to education, particularly secondary education, and educational choice is significantly impacted by poverty. For children living in poverty who are able to access education, the practice of schooling creates multiple obstacles since the school system does not effectively understand, acknowledge, or remedy the needs of children living in poverty (Benson, 2005). In fact, it adds barriers to educational achievement by holding children living in poverty to standards that only the elite can hope to meet. Bourdieu (1973) points out that social, cultural, symbolic, and economic forms of capital (which he defines as a combination of resources and networks) are differently accessible by “agents” based on their class, gender, and race. Access to
opportunity and well-being is dependent on access to social (aggregate term for social, cultural, symbolic, and economic) capital. Bourdieu (1973) further states that social capital is reproduced through a simultaneous process of exclusion and inclusion into distinct social groups such that only members of a particular group are allowed access to the groups’ collectively owned capital. Schools are one mechanism by which social capital is reproduced because schools implicitly demand from students what they do not explicitly give: “linguistic and cultural competency and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing” (Bourdieu, 1973 p. 80). Social capital is necessary for success in school, its implicit demand for certain habits, assumptions, networks, and taken-for-granted knowledge is accessible to students from non-poor families. Students from poor families, in particular first-generation learners, are excluded from access to this social capital, so while an increasing number of students living in poverty are now attending school, a majority of them struggle to succeed in school. Teacher quality, teaching practices, assumptions, exams, and high need for tutoring are some factors that need to be identified in educational reform discussions and reform as reasons for why children in poverty are “pushed out” of school (Reddy & Sinha, 2010).

**Teachers and teaching.** In a society shaped by respect for age- and position-based authority, teachers traditionally are given high authority over the students and parents. This is particularly true for teachers of students living in poverty, mostly government teachers. It is common practice for students and their parents to refer to teachers as “Sir” and “Madam.” Students stand every time a teacher enters the room and are not expected to sit until told to do so by the teacher. Students are taught from an early age to greet all adults in the school with a formal greeting.
Teachers are central to the practice of teaching. Significant difference among private school and government school teachers is noted, both in research and in the comments of the girls and their mothers. Research indicates that government teachers are better trained and receive a higher salary as compared to private school teachers (Govinda, 2011). All government teachers are required to be certified, while private school teachers are not required. Government school teachers make significantly more money (average of Rs. 4,479.47 [approximately $75] per month) as compared to private school teachers (average salary of Rs. 1,725.36 [approximately $29] per month; Tooley, Dixon, & Gomathi, 2007). The median monthly income of a government school teacher is Rs. 4,200 (approximately $70) while the median monthly income for engineers is Rs. 58,781 (approximately $980), for doctors it is Rs. 96,000 (approximately $1,133) and the median monthly income for college professors is around Rs. 20,000 (approximately $333; Muralidharan & Sundaraman, 2011). Government teachers have job security while teachers in private schools are not unionized nor do they have permanent contracts. In spite of this, government teachers lack motivation to teach, have high rates of absenteeism, and do not care for the students while the opposite is true for private school teachers (De, Khera, Samson, & Kumar, 2011; Govinda, 2011; Kingdon, 2007).

Gulafsha, Babita and Maya speak to this. Gulafsha shares the following about the teachers at her school:

I like how the teachers teach [at Sikhya]. The way they explain is very nice. So it’s nice to learn. And they are very friendly. They do not scold or hit. Other schools they used to hit the children, so the children get stubborn and don’t study.

Babita had similarly nice things to say about the teachers at Sikhya:
English is my favorite because Madam teaches really well and when you make a mistake she also scolds you. She explains things to us…so we do not write anything useless and stupid…. If I don’t understand something I ask madam and she explains. I can ask as many times as I wish.

Teachers can play a significant role to help students and families living in poverty gain access to some of the implicit demands school places on students, demands students living in poverty are often not able to meet. To fulfill this role, teachers have to care for their students. The girls attending Sikhya all shared that they feel their teachers care for them, and the girls are comfortable asking their teachers for help. Teachers at Sikhya also reach out and work with parents. For parents like Nashra’s who are receiving pressure from extended family and kinship members to get Nashra married, teachers have been instrumental in helping them choose education over marriage. Nashra describes how her teachers helped convince her mother she was too young to wed:

My bhua [paternal aunt] bought a lot of marriage proposals for me…I said I did not want to get married, I will run away from home. My Mummy was laughing and telling this to my teacher. Then the teacher explained to her that I am very young and I am not fit for marriage. The teacher told my Mummy, “She doesn’t even know the meaning of marriage and you want to marry her off?” The teachers explained and Mummy and Papa agreed and since then my bhua is angry with me.

The teachers at Sikhya also explained to Babita’s mother how to effectively discipline her.

On the other hand, teachers can act in a manner that reproduces educational inequalities by limiting the academic success of children living in poverty, as in the case of Promila, a class 8
student from one of the poorest families in the study, and she attends one of the lowest performing government schools in the city. Promila shared that her teachers regularly hit her for not completing her work (which she says she can’t do because she does not understand it). Promila shared that her teachers get upset with her if she approaches them for help. Moreover, a teacher told Promila’s older sister who was struggling in school that if the sister did not want to study she should drop out and work as a maid like her mother does.

Maya is critical of some of the teachers at her government school:

Then we have this teacher who tortures so much. She teaches in such a way that you will forget whatever you know…. She says, you listen to what I say but don't write what I say. What does this mean?… What she did was she gave a unit test…what she did was she lost my paper…. How can you be such a careless teacher? And the students are such fools, at least you are educated enough that you can ask, how can you lose the papers?

Nobody questioned, everyone started giving the paper again.

Pooja who is at the same government model school as Maya, spoke often of teacher absenteeism. She is particularly upset at the poor teaching of her math teacher and feels she is not doing well in math this year because of the teacher. Last year, she topped her math class, this year she is considering math tutoring to make up for the poor teaching. About her teachers, Pooja shared:

Today our science teacher did not come so our class teacher took our science class. Our math teacher did not come. Our social science teacher also did not come. We were having fun. Today our fourth period started before midday meal but that teacher also did not come…. Our math teacher does not explain things properly. He just writes things on
the board and tells us to write them down and leaves…sometimes he tells the girl who is best in math to teach while he sits and drinks tea.

The poor teaching practices adds barriers to student success in how knowledge and learning is constructed. Contemporary Indian education, in both government and private schools, promotes a behaviorist model as a set of attainable and measurable skills that can be reduced to a “series of scientific facts to be learned and regurgitated in exams” (Dyer & Choksi, 2002, p. 344). Such a conceptualization of knowledge allows for little to no focus on developing critical questioning, reflection, or autonomy. Under this assumption of knowledge, a textbook is viewed as “icon of sacred knowledge” (Dyer, 2008, p. 239). This textbook culture (Antal, 2008) has led to a read-recall-recite teacher-directed pedagogy where teacher training is focused on helping teachers learn the content of textbooks. Critics of the textbook culture cite the highly biased (religious, class, gender, and caste) content of textbooks as a significant contributor to the continuing class-gender divide. The continuation of the colonial model of teaching and learning, which values compliance and loyalty rather than critical analysis, adds to the perpetuation of the class divide. Such an education fails to prepare students to lead an examined life, which Nussbaum (2000) argues is a necessary function of education for capability development.

Textbooks have come under heavy criticism for their open and heavy caste, class, gender, and religious bias (Govinda, 2011). In skimming through the various class 8-12 textbooks, I noticed the English language books predominantly reference middle-class British culture—names of characters, types of houses and communities, foods, activities, and so on. These references are in stark contrast to the reality of the students’ lives. Gender bias, in the form of use of pronouns, and gender roles and class bias, in the form of non-representation of children in poverty or lack of reference to their lives was quite obvious.
Through observing teachers teach various subjects in government, government model schools, and at Sikhya, I noticed a heavy emphasis on teaching from the book. While spending time with the girls in their schools, individually and in groups, it was evident that learning was based mostly on memorization, often without any level of understanding. In September, all the schools were holding the first quarterly exams. Many of the classes I observed during this time were focused on helping the students review the syllabus covered to date. For each subject, the students have an assigned textbook (provided by the school) and a school work copy (notebook) in which they take notes during class, and a homework copy in which they do the assigned homework which is reviewed and graded by the teacher. The week before the exams were scheduled to begin, students were given time in school to study. Students spent review time looking through homework and school work copies. At several different occasions, I was asked by individual and small groups of students to explain an answer they had written in their homework copy. While the girls could recite the question and the answer they had written by rote, they had no understanding of the concepts they had written. In each case, the student had received full credit for their answer. When asked how they answer questions in their homework, the girls said that each question is linked to specific information in the chapter and the teacher usually gives them the page number they need to consult. Homework questions are covered in class before they are assigned and the answers are repeated by the teacher several times. For exams, they memorize the questions and the corresponding answers. As I helped the grade 10 girls at Sikhya prepare for their English grammar test, I was impressed with the breadth of grammar rules and exceptions they had covered and memorized by rote. They could not, however, apply any of these rules to examples that were not covered in class. Heavy reliance on
rote memorization and textbooks, particularly in schools for children in poverty, gives students little practice with critical thinking or analysis.

As the students get older and the curriculum naturally demands at least some higher level thinking, the students are unprepared. Heavy emphasis on compliance often leaves them unprepared to think for themselves in subject matters they do not fully understand. The culture of silence and compliance was obvious in all the classrooms I observed. In a traditional hierarchical society, children who do as they are told without questioning are labeled “good” children. Reproduction of tradition to a large extent is dependent on unquestioning compliance. For girls in North India, this culture of silence and compliance is even more strictly imposed so as to maintain their order in the social structure.

**Assumptions.** The practice of teaching and the effectiveness of education are influenced by expectations—expectations teachers have of students and parents, expectations students have of their teachers and themselves, and the parents’ expectations of their children, teachers, and the school. These expectations are shaped by societal values and practices, and they are expressed in the form of assumptions.

**Parental indifference.** In conversations with government school teachers and overhearing conversation between them, I often heard this statement: “these [poor] parents don’t care about their children’s education.” I did not hear any of the teachers at Sikhya express a similar sentiment. One of the many successes of the PROBE (1999) report was its challenge to commonly held assumptions about students and parents. Parental indifference of poor parents towards their children’s education has long been assumed to be the reason for low schooling levels; the PROBE (1999) report found otherwise. Most parents, according to the report, believe that education is indispensable in modern society and have high educational aspirations for their
Hunger for education was found to be high both among students and their parents. Employment reservation policies enforced by the government have had a strong impact on the educational aspirations of parents from disadvantaged castes (PROBE, 1999). For many parents who value education, however, the sum total of school failings (poor infrastructure, poor or no teaching, social isolation, etc.) leads to a “discouragement effect” that then understandably influences their motivation to send their child to school and results in a “last straw” experience for parents leading them withdraw their children from school (PROBE, 1999). Challenges faced by uneducated parents such as lack of time, unfamiliarity with the school system, and disrespect from all levels of school employees, continue to be misunderstood, on purpose perhaps, as lack of parental interest or support of their children’s education.

**Perception of students.** “These” students are so “dirty,” “lazy,” “stupid,” “they don’t care,” “it’s because they come from ‘that kind of family’ that they do not know how to behave properly or speak properly.” These are comments made by teachers in conversations with each other and with me in all five schools I visited. Surprisingly, these comments even came from some of the teachers at Sikhya. Labeling of students by teachers, Dyer (2008) states, is a common practice in Indian schools. Teachers, especially since the majority of them are from upper-caste, she states, are strongly embedded in the “deficit model” when perceiving their students. Poverty and illiteracy are viewed as inherent deficits to learning. Children from literate, middle-income, upper-caste families are viewed as the “cream” of society (they are even labeled as such in government policies such as the education reservation policy), while children from illiterate, poor, lower-caste families are seen as uncivilized, backward children with an inherent inability to learn (Dyer, 2008).
Weekly, monthly, quarterly, half-yearly, annual, and board exams. Heavy reliance on exams and testing begins at an early age in Indian schools. Entrance exams are a common prerequisite for admissions in schools beginning at the play school level. All government and most private schools are set up so students beginning in class one have weekly tests for each subject along with monthly, quarterly, and a cumulative exam at the end of the school term. Final grades for each subject are averaged from scores on all exams. A majority of schools require the parents to come and meet with the class teacher and sign for their child’s report. The day before the parents were scheduled to pick up report cards at Sikhya, the girls shared their anxiety about the process. Babita said her father asked her if unki besti hogi (he would be embarrassed) by her performance or would he be “proud.” The first of the quarterly exams were scheduled for all four schools in late August through September. The exam schedule was given to the students a week before the start of the first exam, and the schedule alternated between an exam scheduled for a single subject and a day off to prepare for the next exam, spread over two weeks. Teachers spent the week before the exams preparing students. The girls informed me that they would not be able to spend any time with me before and during their exams as they needed to focus on studying for the exams. Stress and anxiety levels were high while the girls were preparing for the exams, taking the exams, and waiting for results. The girls who had tuitions had scheduled time with their tutors to review for exams; those without tutoring had to prepare on their own.

I observed several unexpected and unexplained changes in the students’ schedule. The teachers or principal would inform the students of the change and there was an expectation of compliance. A few students complained among themselves but never to anyone in authority.
Most students accepted the changes without any obvious reaction and all students complied with the changes, as Meenu shared:

When I reached school today I got very big news. Our art exam had been cancelled but madam told us that we were going to have the art exam after all. I got very scared. But my paper went alright…today when I reached school we were told that we had to go meet with our science madam. I was feeling very scared because madam was going to show us our science papers. But then she told us that two children had failed and the rest had passed. I felt a little less scared. Then madam gave me my paper. I had passed but my marks were not so good.

Academic demands increase considerably beyond the primary level and are particularly high in class 10 and 12 where students take high-stakes board exams which directly impact career choices. Class 10 Boards determine which academic stream into which a child will be admitted. The science stream is the most competitive. Students need high overall percentage on the Class 10 Boards along with high marks in the science subjects on the Boards to be eligible for the science stream in class 11. Marks on the Class 12 Boards are the single consideration for college admissions for students in the arts and commerce stream. Most students from the science stream have to take highly competitive entrance exams for their respective fields—medicine, nursing, engineering, and more. The exams—board and entrance exams—are the same for all students, whether they studied in one of India’s elite private schools or in a rural government school. Performance on these high-stakes exams is significantly impacted by issues related to poverty such as quality of schools, quality of teaching, performance in previous grades, and ability to afford tuition. Limited government attention to improving access to and quality of secondary education along with the actual practice of schooling that reinforces and rewards the
dominant culture, results in low secondary graduation rates for children in poverty. For girls in poverty, this rate is even lower since gender expectations add to issues of poverty which, in turn, impacts school performance.

The girls in class 10 (Meenu, Gulafsha, Nashra, Kamalpreet, Frat, Poonam, and Babita) and those in class 12 (Maya, Durga, Sonu, Sapna, and Shaveta) felt under tremendous pressure waiting and preparing for the upcoming boards. The boards were mentioned in many of our conversations in August and September. The boards for class 10 and 12 are scheduled for the same time across the nation, depending on which board—national (ICSE, CBSE, or Open Board) or state—with which schools are affiliated. The girls and their teachers shared that for both classes the syllabus for the year was covered by end August and the rest of the year would be spent on preparing for the boards—reviewing materials and taking practice tests. I understood from the girls that “good” tutors had access to board exam formats and review questions that would help them get familiar with the exams. Heavy reliance on exams is significant contributor to schools “pushing out” students living in poverty as they do not have anyone at home who can help them prepare for these exams, and they lack the resources to seek outside help (Reddy & Sinha, 2010).

**Streams.** In government schools, admission into class 11 is not automatic. School placement for class 11 is made by the District Education Officer (DO) based on merit on the Grade 10 Board, student choice, and availability of seats. Government model schools with a good reputation are the hardest to gain admission. Placement counseling, which consists of a list of placement posted outside the DO’s office, occurs in four stages. Students with the highest marks are placed in the first counseling and available places are filled with each consecutive
counseling stage. Students are allowed the option to apply for transfer within the counseling period.

Grade 11 students in both private and government schools must choose from available streams. Which stream a student chooses, or is forced to choose, depends on available choice, merit, and interest. Private school offers three choices: science (medical or non-medical), commerce, or arts. In recent years, government schools around the country are introducing the option of vocational course such as fashion designing, information technology, and hospitality among others for class 11 students. Vocational streams are chosen mostly by students who score low marks on the Grade 10 Board. Choice of vocational courses varies but all suffer from poor availability of infrastructure and equipment and unqualified teachers. Maya’s brother is a year younger than she, and he is a low performer. Because of his low performance, he was forced to choose a stream in class 11 for which he has neither skill nor interest in as Maya’s mother shares:

He did not get good enough marks in class 10 to go to Maya’s school…his marks were very low so he is doing fashion design stream…embroidery and stitching…it was the only option available to him. He does not even know how to hold a needle…he did not get into any other place or course so he had to do this. He can’t sit at home now can he?

Competition for the science stream is the toughest because jobs associated with a science degree are desirable for the earning potential they offer. Keeping up with the course work for the science stream is financially challenging and time consuming as Durga reveals when she shares her schedule in Chapter 5. Schools expect all class 11 and 12 science stream students to be attending tutoring institutions and turn a blind eye to student absence from school, as long as they show up for exams and somehow fulfill the 70% attendance requirement.
The high demands on time and financial resources needed for pursuing a science stream is discouraging for some students whose academic performance allow them access into the science stream, but the demands of the program prove to be too much. As Sonu, Durga’s classmate, shared:

I left science…it was a lot of burden with the tuition and all. First school and then three tuitions at the same time. First the cost and then by the time I used to come home I was very tired…now I am doing commerce.

**Tutoring.** Tutoring, referred to as tuition in India, has become a parallel industry. Teachers, families, and students of all income levels buy into the idea that tutoring is essential to do well in school and on boards. Tutoring is most commonly given by an older student or a professional in their residence, although middle- and upper-class families have the option of having a tutor come to their home. Performance on board exams in class 10 and 12 are high-stakes since they directly and almost solely determine career options for the girls.

Tutoring for upper grades, particularly in science subjects, is offered by institutions that charge a high fee, and institutions offering tutoring for competitive entrance exams are a flourishing business in India. The cost of tutoring, as well as the variable quality of tutoring available, are a significant source of educational inequality. The way schools and exams are structured, tutoring has become a necessity for students who want to do well. This is particularly true for first-generation learners like Meenu who have no other source to turn to for academic help outside of school. Meenu shares her reasons for choosing tutoring:

In ninth class my math was tough…and the teacher was new so to understand math I started tuition…. Now I am in tenth class so I thought this year I will take tuition for all the subjects so that I will be able to manage the boards.
Almost all the girls, with the exception of Poonam, Nashra, and Frat, spend approximately two hours after school in tutoring. The tutors either help the girls with specific subjects or help with all school work and help with preparing for exams. Poonam’s family is unable to pay for tutoring and this is why she feels is not able to do well at school, “In math I cannot understand and I need tuition. When I tell Mummy she says there is not that much money. So because of this I cannot practice and I am not doing well.”

It is because of the perceived importance of tutoring that families like Babita’s make extra sacrifices to pay for tutoring as Babita’s mother shares, “It gets expensive. I want to stop tutoring but Babita says, “Mummy I have board exams this year.” …Easily or with difficulty the time will pass…but after class 10 there are only expenses.”

For students like Sapna, Shaveta, and Prerna who have educated elder sisters willing to help with school work, the need for tutoring is less pressing. For Durga, who is the only one in the medical science stream, the cost and necessity of tutoring is not negotiable. The increasing need to rely on tutoring to succeed in school or pass admissions tests for various careers is a large factor leading to educational inequality and another factor that “pushes” children in poverty out of school (Govinda, 2011; Reddy & Sinha, 2010).

Access to Information

Both Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) acknowledge that access to information is critical for capability development and that access to useful information has the potential to improve functioning. Access to information, however, is dependent on family income and gender. Article 17 of the CRC grants children the right to access information that is important for their health and wellbeing and encourages states to make use of mass media to spread necessary information in a manner and in a language the children can understand. All the girls with whom I spoke
knew that marriage for girls under the age of eighteen is now illegal in India, “it’s all over the TV, on that show we know.” Advertisements informing the public of the wrongs of child marriage and sex-selective abortions are wide-spread; however, access to information about educational structure, requirements, and choices is not. In my conversations with the girls, I realized that most of them had very limited understanding of the school structure, career choices, and other academic requirements. Most relied on teachers and some, like Shaveta, Sonu, Meenu, and Sapna, have older siblings to guide them. Most depend on bits of information they gather through different interactions. Lacking access to sufficient, reliable information combined with limited-to-no guidance, the girls struggle to make successful choices. Nashra’s experience enrolling in a computer course is a good example. She heard from “people” that “doing computers” is a “good” thing, it would allow her to make “good money.” She found a private institution that offered a computer course. In spite of already carrying the burden of the majority of household and sibling care while attending school, Nashra decided to start giving tuitions in order to pay the fee for the computer course. When she started the course, there was no contract clarifying the fee schedule nor a syllabus, and the institution raised the fee six-fold, six months into the course, telling students that if they wanted to finish the course and get computer jobs they would have to pay the higher fee. Nashra could not pay the mid-course increase in fee, lost the hard-earned money she had already paid in tuition, and lost the chance to earn a computer programming certificate. Because she did not know what to do, she felt she had no one she could turn to for help. Nashra, like many of the other girls in the study, is motivated, ambitious, hard-working, and resourceful; however, a lack of familiarity with the system, lack of access to information, lack of decision making experience, lack of mentors, and lack of experience in advocating for themselves all close off many opportunities for them.
Most of the parents in the city have limited first-hand experience with any school system. Being migrants, none of the parents have first-hand experience with the urban school system or urban society. When it comes to making educational decisions, the girls and their parents rely heavily on teachers and their social network, which can often lead to incorrect information, contradictory information, or false hope. None of the schools have school counselors or college counselors. Students in poverty, particularly first-generation learners, have limited awareness of career opportunities (partly because of limited social capital) and limited knowledge on how best to pursue careers available to them. This lack of access to important information seriously limits the chances that students will be able to translate their capability into actual functioning. Also, the environment of compliance in which the girls are raised teaches them to accept information from authority figures without much questioning. Pooja, for instance, has limited access to important information for making a career choice. She wants to be a doctor but has no information about the cost involved, the competitive exams, or the courses she will need to take.

**Extra-Curricular**

Sikhya and the government schools offer a wide range of extra-curricular activities the girls may pursue. Sikhya offers cost-free, before-school classes in martial arts and boxing. For many of the girls at Sikhya who have few opportunities for leisure or to pursue interests, this opportunity is precious. For the most part, Poonam quietly accepts her life but, she says she insisted that her father bring her to school early so she could participate in boxing and martial arts—sports she says she had not heard of until they began offering them at Sikhya. Babita also makes the extra effort needed to some early to school to participate, saying she enjoys the martial arts competitions and preparing for these competitions. Martial arts and boxing are both non-traditional sports for girls and access to these sports is very limited to them in India. Getting
training in these sports has empowered the girls who feel disempowered in many areas of their lives. The girls who participate in these sports requested their principal to hold a martial arts exhibition in the colonies so the residents could see what the girls were capable of. Nashra proudly states that:

No one can tease us in the neighborhood now we know boxing a lot. We learn it in school and we got medals and we keep shouting that we got medals in boxing…my family and people in the neighborhood call me “Hitler.”

Gulafsha is not interested in the martial arts or boxing but participates in the music lessons. Meenu tried keeping up with the yoga classes but “the pressure of studies” and helping her mother in the mornings made her “discontinue.”

Baseball, softball, and fencing are sports in which the older girls (Sapna, Maya, and Shaveta) are seriously involved. Participation in sports provides the girls not only with a sense of community, opportunity for leadership, and chance to relax and socialize, but it also offers them the opportunity for free travel—an opportunity none of their families can provide. Travel for baseball competitions is sponsored by the club for which the girls play so it is free of cost for the girls. The baseball coach, who is also the owner of the team, visits the girls at their homes often so the parents know and trust him enough to allow their daughters to travel under his supervision. Sapna is the one who is most committed to sports. She wants to pursue a career as a physical education teacher and hopes her involvement in baseball will allow her the chance to get a scholarship to college. Sapna shares:

Everyone knows no work gets done on Sundays but for us sports players there is no rest day…I don’t know why but I really enjoy being there [baseball practice]. Maybe because I feel very good there…I also have to teach the boys and girls’ junior and sub-junior
baseball and softball teams since I am their second coach. Today our coach did not come, he sent me a text saying he had some important work so I did the practice.… I have been to six nationals: Maharashtra, Indore, Jammu, Kolkata, Chhattisgarh, and Amritsar…we get to do sightseeing when we go for national…it is a lot of fun.

Durga and Sonu, who are seeking to pursue academically competitive careers and attending the most “prestigious” school, had to sacrifice sports for studies. Durga explains:

I have played baseball for a few years…but this year I am not being allowed to play baseball. They say I should concentrate on my studies. Mummy, Papa, and my coach who is like a family member. They say, “You should study you should not play.” I have played at the national level.

**Impact of the Environment of Poverty on Educational Access and Achievement**

All the girls in this study are enrolled in school. Access to school is not a major obstacle for them. Most of the girls attend schools in their neighborhood so they either walk or ride their bicycles to school. Babita and Kamalpreet’s families have chosen to send them to a school (Sikhya) outside the neighborhood, so getting to school is costly in terms of time and money. Babita has to negotiate the crowded and sometimes unpredictable public bus system in order to get herself and her younger siblings to school. Kamalpreet’s parents find a way to pay for an autorickshaw to take her and her siblings to school. Attendance is also not an issue for most of the girls in this study (except Promila), most of whom are managing to attend school on a regular basis. While the RTE limits provision of free schooling to class 1 through 8, all the government schools in this study were charging a very nominal fee for class 9 through 12. The state government is subsidizing the cost of secondary education in these government schools.
The girls, however, face significant poverty-related challenges in school. These challenges are mediated for some by the social networks they have, as in the case of Durga whose network has given her access to information and financial resources which, in turn, have increased her educational opportunities and functioning. For many, the cost of tutoring is a significant cost. Girls with access to tutoring like Babita, Meenu, and Kamalpreet are managing to be successful in school. Others, like Nashra, Poonam, and Promila, whose parents simply cannot afford to pay for tutoring, are struggling academically. The RTE makes an indirect attempt to address the issue of tutoring by requiring that the teachers be responsible for ensuring that the full syllabus be covered each year, requiring that it is the teachers’ and schools’ responsibility to make sure every student is successful, and by prohibiting teachers from giving after-school tutoring for their own financial gain. If implemented effectively, these measures would reduce the need for tutoring thereby eliminating a significant source of educational inequality.

Teaching in the schools the girls attend is almost entirely based on memorization with little attention paid to ensuring student understanding or development of critical or creative thinking. Additionally, minimal attention is given to making learning relevant to the students’ lives. Schools reinforce and reproduce the traditional environment of silence and compliance by discouraging student questioning. Heavy reliance on weekly, monthly, quarterly, half-yearly, and annual exams, all of which test for memorization rather than application, is a cause of significant stress for the girls in the study. The girls realize the high stake nature of the Class 10 and Class 12 Board exams in determining their educational opportunities though they have few resources at their disposal (besides their hard work) to ensure their success on these exams. None of the school the girls attend offer career or academic counseling, leaving access to information very
limited for the girls, most of whom are first-generation learners, and this limited access to reliable and necessary information is a significant factor in limiting the girls’ real academic opportunities and their actual functioning. Teacher absenteeism, large class sizes in government schools, limited access to educational resources (neither of the schools had a library, the government schools did not have access to computers) add to the girls educational difficulties. While the government school teachers had been informed about the RTE by the school administration, the teachers at Sikhya were only vaguely aware of it. The government school teachers were upset at the fact that they were once again being told to implement changes they had no input in generating and had been excluded from all discussions, particularly at the school level. Lack of any teacher in-service training combined with a lack of teacher training to deal with the particular needs of children living in poverty continues to limit the role of government teachers in helping the girls succeed in school.

The RTE does address issues related to school transfers, but the reality is that school transfers continue to be stressful for the girls and their families, not because of lack of documentation but because of discriminatory admission practices (refusing to admit children from the slums or determining admission into English medium schools on the basis of merit) and shortage of seats at the secondary level. Limited access to social security services, including basic access to adequate housing, health care, and living wages add to the academic difficulties for many of the girls.
While gathering data for this study, I had the opportunity to watch a play performed by a group of grade 9 students at Sikhya. The play was based on the real-life story of a 13 year old girl, Kanwar, who wished to continue with her studies but her parents were forcing her to get married. At one point in the play, Kanwar tells her mother she does not want to get married, she wants to study. Her mother replies, “What does it matter what a woman wants or does not want?”

Limited access to choice (what Sen [1999] and Nussbaum [2000] refer to as “real opportunities”) and limited freedom to make choice both shape the lives of many of the world’s women including the lives of many of the girls in this study. Traditional practices shaped by the long-standing patrifocal family structure have led to women’s dependence on men in India and resulted in deep gender disparities in the economic, political, and social contexts. It is important to note that the impact of gender on access to choice and freedom is highly variable based on class, caste, region, and religion. Every individual, irrespective of their class, caste, gender, or religion, must be allowed access to some basic choices and must have the freedom to make basic choices which allow her or him to lead a life they value, and have reason to value (Nussbaum, 2000). Many factors impact individual capability and freedom, important among them is education. Education has the potential to not only increase available choice for individuals, it also enhances capacity to exercise these choices (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). However, access to education continues to remain unequal based on class, gender, caste, region, and religion. In other words, educational access and availability of choice and freedom to exercise choice are cyclically related. For individuals belonging to several disadvantaged groups, such as a Dalit girl living in poverty, this cyclical relationship can become a vicious one. Creating access to
education, which has the potential to change the vicious cycle into a virtuous one, then, takes on particular urgency for individuals from multi-disadvantaged groups. This chapter presents the profiles of five girls—Meenu, Sapna, Gulafsha, Maya, and Promila—to reveal the varying impact of gender on their educational capabilities.

**Meenu: By Getting Educated, I Don’t Have to Depend on Anyone**

Meenu is a petite 15 year old with bright, sparkling eyes. She speaks softly but with clarity of purpose. Meenu lives in the same “poorer” part of the slum as Nashra, and they are also classmates at Sikhya. Until recently, Meenu lived in a joint family of ten members, her father’s drinking and quarrelling drove her uncle and paternal grandmother to move out. This move has been difficult for Meenu who feels the loss of security and companionship:

Ours is a large family…my *dadi* [paternal grandmother] and *chachu* [paternal younger brother] and his family lived with us for sixteen years…a month ago they moved out of the colony…my *chachu* has two daughters and a son. One daughter is a year younger than me and one is my age. They also go to the same school…for 15 years I used to go to school with my cousins, from childhood I used to go with them. Now I go alone…. My father drinks…a lot of money is wasted in that, it’s so difficult…he quarrels with my mother.

During the time I spent with Meenu, her parents bought her a bicycle and Meenu’s brother taught her to ride it in the neighborhood. It only took Meenu two days before she was ready to go to school on her new bicycle. Meenu shared, “Getting ready for school today I was very happy because today was my first day going to school on my bicycle. Today I went to school on my bicycle with my friend Nashra.”
Besides making her commute to school easier and giving her the chance to go to school with her friend Nashra, the bicycle represents hope for Meenu—hope that her life might be different from her sister’s. Meenu’s sister is twenty-one years old, married with a child. Meenu wants to continue her studies past class 12:

My parents think I should study until plus 2 and then get married…my sister is married off…she also wanted to study but she was married off…but now my parents say I can study to plus 2…times have changed so accordingly parents views will also change.

Meenu’s sister was doing well in school and wanted to continue with her studies but was married against her will at the age of seventeen. Having access to something her sister did not have access to gives Meenu hope that her life might be different from her sister’s:

My sister never had a bicycle…she never learnt to ride a bicycle. But I have one and I know how to ride it. I can go places, the DO’s [District Education Officer] office, when my roll number for the exam did not come I went to the DO’s office in Sector 17 and got it myself…my sister could only go to school, that’s all, she couldn’t do anything on her own.

Even though her mother does not work outside the house, Meenu is expected to do a majority of the housework since she is the only girl child left in the family. Her older sister is married and her brother is not yet married, so there is no daughter-in-law to take over the household responsibilities. Demands of household chores and studies leave Meenu no time to take advantage of the extracurricular activities her school has to offer:

I do not participate in martial arts or boxing…there is a lot of pressure for studies….

Mummy is left alone and there is a lot of work at home, so I have to do some work. I used to come a bit late so I discontinued that [martial arts and boxing].
Meenu is very good in math and has always topped her class in math. She has modest hopes for her education and career, but they are dependent on her family’s income and traditions, as Meenu shares:

I was hoping to do the commerce stream in plus 1 but my parents do not want me to take commerce because commerce is tough and the tuition is expensive. It is tough to cover the studies without tuition…so my parents tell me to take arts with math…now I am thinking I can go further in the math field—B.A., M.A., everything in math…. I want to do a job, study well and get a good job…I would like to be a teacher. By getting educated we get independent, we don’t have to be dependent on anyone. We can do anything in life in the future.

Meenu is willing to adapt her educational aspirations around the limits placed by her family. She is willing to work to pay for her fees and is even willing to give up her dream of going to college and is willing to stay home and continue her studies through correspondence. She just wants to study for now, and not get married. Meenu has support to continue her studies from her family and friends:

My sister supports my studies and also my brother…there are many to support me…my cousin keeps telling my father “Uncle, don’t get her married, let her study”…other cousins who are studying also support me…I have a friend in the colony who is doing her medical in plus 1…I discuss my schooling with her and make decisions from her advice.

Meenu is resourceful and determined, with the help of friends and her brother, who is eighteen years old, works for a call center, and is trying to start a B.A. through correspondence at a private institution. Meenu has gathered information about different boards, the process for applying for class 11, and how to make up from being forced to skip the ninth grade.
In keeping with her family’s tradition, Meenu’s mother does not work outside the house and her father works as a daily wage painter and the family income varies on how many days Meenu’s father is sober enough to go to work. Child marriages are more common among the poor for several reasons, one among them is the protection of the girl’s chastity, the protection of which is considered to be the parents’ primary responsibility. The rates of sexual abuse and harassment are higher in the environment of poverty which makes early marriage an attractive choice for parents looking to fulfill this responsibility. Her husband’s drinking, which makes him incapable of being the family protector, combined with the unsafe environment of the slum in which they live, are the reasons Meenu’s mother gives for getting her older daughter married after she completed class 12:

Yes my older daughter was interested in studying further. I could not help her as I was helpless…her father drinks and our world here is not so rosy…the surrounding environment is also not good…after plus 2 we got her married…she is safe now…I got her married to a good family.

Meenu’s mother added that early marriage is also the tradition in her family:

It is not in our culture…we never let our daughters work outside the house…we can educate her at home…but we will not send her to college…she can work from her in-law’s home but I’ll not allow her to do a job here…my elder daughter’s in-laws told her she could continue her studies after her marriage and they would allow her to do a job…but they are not doing that and it’s up to them. We can’t do anything about that.

Meenu wants to study, get a “good” job so she can be economically independent. She is willing to make compromises and study from home to achieve this goal; however, Meenu has
been raised to be a “good” girl and this places limits on her determination and willingness to fight for what she has reason to want:

If I have to, I will do B.A. and M.A. through correspondence and learn from home…I will earn my fees by giving tuition…but then I say whatever I am destined for in life…. It is my duty as a girl to respect my mother and father, to not do anything that makes them feel dishonored because of their daughter…. I should always listen to my parents, shouldn’t say anything…I should know my limits and stay within the limits.

**Sapna: Instead of Getting Married, We Should Concentrate on Becoming Someone**

Sapna is the youngest in a family of six, she has two older sisters (23 and 21 years old) and an older brother (19 years old). Sapna is 17 years old and is a class 12 student at the same government school that Shaveta, Durga, Maya, and she attended until class 10. Speaking of her family, Sapna says:

My Mummy is a house wife and Papa works as a cook in a canteen. My oldest sister is studying privately for her M.A. and is also working. My second oldest sister just graduated from college and she is doing a computer course and also does tailoring work to earn pocket money, mostly to pay for her phone, everyone has a phone these days…she did fashion design in plus 2 and Papa got her a sewing machine. My brother is studying for his B.A. privately.

Sapna’s mother has worked as a maid for the same family for over 15 years. Soon after she started working for the family, the lady of the house passed away making Sapna’s mother the only female in the house, her employer’s adult children all live overseas. The master of the house passed away four years ago and ever since then Sapna’s mother’s responsibilities have reduced tremendously. She is required to clean the large house once a month and take care of the
adult children when they come for a rare visit. Sapna and her family live in the servants’ quarter built as a separate unit at the back of the now-empty house. The servants’ quarter has two rooms, a gallery kitchen, and its own bathroom. The quarters are made to resemble the main house, made of brick and concrete, and meets all the MPI requirements for adequate housing except overcrowding. Accommodation in the middle-class neighborhood is free for the family.

Sapna’s low grades on the Class 10 Board exam meant she did not have a choice to move to a different school like Maya, Durga, and Shaveta did, since class 11 government school and stream placement is merit based. In the last year, her school switched from a government to a government model school. Sapna echoes Durga’s assumptions about non-model government schools and validates assumption about the need for an English education. The fact that a year after her school converted to a model school, they do not have an English teacher to teach English and that most of the teachers continue to teach in Hindi validates the point that often the switch to model schools is in name only:

I like my school very much…previously it was a non-model school…no one had heard of the school…since last year it is a Model school…now people know about the school…now it is like the students here can also do something…we don’t have an English teacher and we worry a lot on who will teach us English…we are in plus 2, it is important to have a English teacher, if we don’t get good marks we will not be able to get admission into college.

Sapna’s two older sisters, similar to Shaveta’s older sisters, are fighting to gain access to choice and freedom to exercise these choices:

My older sister works somewhere where the ministers letters are typed…it’s a government job. She earns Rs. 5,000 [approximately $83/month] and pays for her own
expenses…she takes care of herself…she is saving for when she gets married…if any of us are ever in need she likes to give.

My Mummy and Papa agreed to let my sister wait to get married. She said to them, “Give me two years to finish my studies then I’ll get married”…first they did not agree with my sister and told her she was getting older…all the relatives also told Mummy and Papa to get her married because she was getting older…but now they have told her, “It’s alright, we won’t say anything to you about marriage for two years. You study and do what you want and let us know when you want to get married.”

Besides paving a path of increased freedom for Sapna, her older sister also assists her in her homework which reduces the need for tutoring.

If I have difficulty in my studies, I ask my oldest sister…I don’t have any tuition…I don’t think it’s necessary…if we do well in school, concentrate on our studies, listen to the teachers and come home and revise that’s more than enough…we should be self-confident that we don’t need tuition, we can study on our own.

Sapna enjoys playing sports and sees herself as an athlete. She loves the discipline and the sense of accomplishment and camaraderie playing sports gives her. Sapna has a natural ability to lead in sports settings and often steps in to be the substitute coach. Sapna is a competent athlete and her coach often relies on her to substitute in his absence. Playing baseball has given Sapna the opportunity to travel across India and she hopes it will afford her a scholarship to college. Sapna takes on the authority and responsibility of leading the teams in practice. During the practices, I noticed that younger students easily and naturally accept the authority of the older students. This was also evident on my visits to other schools. In situations, such as dance practice, recess, or time between classes, where there was no teacher
present because the older students naturally took charge and the younger students accepted this. As Sapna describes her day, it is obvious that being an athlete gives Sapna a sense of purpose and empowerment. Being able to play softball has allowed Sapna the opportunity to travel to places she probably would not have been able to go to. It has also given her experiences that she now cherishes as happy memories:

I started to feel sleepy so I went to bed but I could not fall asleep. I did not have practice tomorrow because of the inter-college matches so I started to think of my time with my friends and how we had gone to the nationals. I liked remembering how much time we had spent together. You know how they say that time gone by never comes back but remains with us always as a memory in our heart that we can from time to time savor?

Many nights I go to sleep thinking of the memories from the different national.

Sapna wants to be a physical education teacher and says she has her parents support to “study as much as she wants.” When Sapna has spare time between school and sports, she goes to movies with her siblings or goes with her sisters to the market. Sapna’s life at 17 is very different from that of her mother, who grew up in the village and was married and a mother by the time she was 17 years old.

Sapna’s father followed the traditional rural/urban migration pattern by migrating alone to the city and leaving his wife to care for his parents in his native village. Sapna’s mother says that her in-laws kicked her out of their house because her first born was a girl, but would not say that directly to her. As in most traditional families, Sapna’s mother was completely financially dependent on her husband and in-laws:
My husband did not send me any money...then I had a daughter and my in-laws told me I
had to go to the city to be with my husband because they could feed one mouth but not
two...my sister-in-law also lived in the city and she bought me a ticket to come here.
The early years in the city were very difficult for Sapna’s mother:
By then I had two daughters and my husband started drinking, blaming me for having
two daughters...he drank a lot and said, “I should have a son, why do I have daughters?”
And I used to say to him, “What will your son give you that your daughters can’t? Yes
they’ll get married but if we educate them they can work and earn money too.” There is
no way to guarantee a boy and since we barely had enough food to eat why would I want
to have more children?
While her husband added to her burdens, it was the kindness of strangers that helped
Sapna’s mother survive the first few years in the city:
Some people took pity on me and offered to get me a job working in homes, but I thought
to myself, “How will I work?” In the village we had two rooms and you sit on your
haunches and take the dirt from one end to the other. But you see how many rooms the
houses here have? Where will I start sweeping from and where will I sweep the dirt
towards? The person who helped me find a job also taught me how to sweep, she took
pity on me worrying about how I would pay rent and take care of my daughters while my
husband drank and did not give me money.
After changing jobs a few times, Sapna’s mother found work with the family she has
worked for since before Sapna was born:
The master was a big officer, an IAS [Indian Administrative Services] officer...I did
everything for the couple...cooking, cleaning, taking care of the guests...then the
mistress died many years ago…. Babuji [master] was very nice…he tried to get a job for my husband but he failed eight class, you need to have passed twelfth to get a government job…a government job would have made things more comfortable, we would have the security of the government.

Some years ago the babuji died while visiting his daughter in America. Since then the house has been empty, Sapna’s mother has to open the rooms and clean them only occasionally. Until the children decide to sell the home, Sapna and her family live rent-free, but Sapna’s mother is not receiving a salary. This means that Sapna’s mother is no longer earning money and is once again financially dependent on her husband who, she says, “gets paid once a month and gives me very little money for food and cooking gas, nothing else.” Lack of education, Sapna’s mother believes, is the root of her difficulties:

When I was young, I was very fond of studying. I am the oldest and the only daughter and have three younger brothers. My parents were afraid to send me to school. They worried I would be harmed. I really wanted to study but they did not let me study. All my brothers went to school and now all three of them have government jobs.

Strong gender bias and lack of education have shaped a significant portion of Sapna’s mother’s life. To her credit, Sapna’s mother has turned that around for her daughters, allowing them access to education and supporting their choice to wait to get married:

My oldest daughter and Sapna are good in studies…. Sapna plays baseball…she insists on playing the game…she says she’ll go to college on a baseball scholarship…she says her coach says he’ll get her admission to college where she can play the game…. Sapna is the youngest and the older two want her to do most of the housework…they say, “When we were Sapna’s age we used to do all the house work. You were inside the
house helping *dadaji* [grandfather]…now it’s Sapna’s turn.” …Sapna helps when she can…. Whatever the children desire. If they are happy then I am happy. My girls are sensible. Things have changed. We were not allowed to say anything. In the old times, we had to stay behind the veil, we were not allowed to show our hands or face…they still keep the veil in the village…we were taught too that if we were to speak to anyone we must speak politely.

Sapna herself places greater value on education and being independent than she does on marriage:

I think there is no point in getting married. Instead of getting married we should concentrate on becoming someone, earn for ourselves, and live by ourselves. Life is better that way…. In the future, I have to make my parents proud, I have to do something…I want to become a physical education teacher.

**Gulafsha: As Long As I Can, I Want to Study**

Gulafsha writes a wonderful introduction to herself and her family in the first entry of her journal:

I am a 14 year old girl. My name is Gulafsha. In my home there are seven people…. We all live with a lot of love. My older sister studied up to class 10. And in every class she scored the highest marks in the entire class. And now she is married.

I study in class 10. I want to continue studying after class 10 and my Mummy is on my side saying I will let you study more. And my *Pitaji* [father] is also on my side. Mummy says to put my heart in studying and do something good so your family name will shine.
I want to grow up and be a teacher. I really enjoy teaching children. I want to be an English teacher. My wish is to help poor children by teaching them. Poor children have the complete right to education and they too should get the opportunity to study. It is not as if poor children are not capable, they too want to study and become someone. They too have a desire to read and write. My desire is to teach children like them.

Like Nashra’s family, Gulafsha’s family are practicing Muslims. Gulafsha lives in the same slum as Nashra and Meenu, but she lives in the “better” end. Her father runs his own painting company and her mother is proud to not have to be working outside the home since “in her family the tradition is for women to stay home.” Gulafsha’s large family live in a single room which is one of six rooms at the end of a narrow mud lane. The four families living in these rooms have developed a sense of community and make the most of the open courtyard as a shared common space. The families also share a common room for cooking and eating, though each family cooks separately. The families also share a common bathroom. Gulafsha’s parents rented an additional room hoping their daughter and son-in-law would live there after their marriage, but instead the son-in-law uses the room to run his embroidery business. Gulafsha’s mother has put obvious care into decorating the room with family pictures and planting and tending flowers around the entrance of the room. The room is dominated by a bed; the wall space is very efficiently used for storage. Prominently posted on the wall are each of the children’s school schedules. The family sleep, pray, relax, and study in this one room.

Gulafsha is a class 10 student at Sikhya, she is classmates with Nashra and Meenu. Since her older sister’s marriage, Gulafsha is the only daughter of the family so sibling care and household help have become her responsibility. Gulafsha gives her youngest brother a ride to school on her bicycle, she does not go to school with Nashra or Meenu even though they live in
the same neighborhood. Meenu and Nashra are good friends, yet Gulafsha does not interact with them much. On our walk from school to her home, Gulafsha pointed to the “poorer” section of the slum and informed me that was where Nashra and Meenu lived. Speaking of her day and her school Gulafsha says:

I wake up at 5:00 AM and study because that time it is very peaceful on all sides, so I can study well….if Mummy is not well I do household chores before I go to school.

My school is good. What the teachers teach, the way they explain is very nice. So it’s nice to learn. And they are very friendly, they do not scold or hit. Other schools they used to hit the children so the children get stubborn and do not study…. This school’s daily routine is very good, they don’t let any fashion for girls nor do they let anything bad happen.

Like her older sister, Gulafsha is an excellent student. She enjoys studying and hopes to become a teacher so she can teach students living in poverty because she believes they too “have a right to an education.” Gulafsha is uncertain of her mother’s support of her career dream:

As long as I can study I want to….. I want to study after class 10…Mummy tells me I can get admission for plus 1 and plus 2….I want to be a teacher, but they [the Muslim community] don’t let girls do any job…so I don’t know if Mummy will allow me to become a teacher…I just want to study and become a teacher and teach children who are poor…. I want to make them understand so well that they don’t forget.

Gulafsha is uncertain of how long she will be allowed to study, particularly since her sister was forcibly engaged before she even finished class 10:

My sister was very interested in studies, very interested….she didn’t know she was getting married. When we told her on the day of the engagement, that time only she
knew. We also didn’t know. Only Mummy and Papa knew…only the elders knew…Mummy told her to get ready people have come, then we got her engaged…Mummy used to tell her to study and she would say she wants to study. Then Mummy was not sure if they would let her study or get her married.

Gulafsha’s mother never went to school but is happy as “all her children are doing well in school.” Gulafsha’s mother is mixed in her support of Gulafsha’s education and says the ultimate decider is Gulafsha’s own *kismet* (destiny):

I do not ask my children to do any work at home when they are doing school….

Gulafsha is doing well in school…we will educate her. And then whatever is in her *kismet* [destiny] will be her future. I want her to study as much as she wants. Now she is in tenth class and she will leave this school and I want her to study after that…after Gulafsha finishes her tenth we’ll put her in a school for plus 1 and 2. And who knows maybe she will study for her B.A. You can do anything sitting at home. You just have to go somewhere to give exams…. It depends on her *kismet*. They say it’s pointless to think and worry, whatever will be will be.

“It’s a good thing to study,” says Gulafsha’s mother, but her decision to get her older daughter married against her will, puts her actions to the contrary:

Every mother and father has a desire that their children study. Become something. Their future is dependent on their destiny as to what they will get…my older daughter was getting a job as a teacher somewhere. But we did not let her take it. I told her, her husband wouldn’t let her work. After marriage we don’t let our girls work. Women don’t work in our community…my older daughter was very good in her studies.
When the teachers at Sikhya found out that Gulafsha’s sister was going to get married, they tried talking to her parents. The principal came to the house on several occasions to convince the parents to change their mind or even delay the wedding until Gulafsha’s sister had completed at least class 12. The teachers and principal refused to attend the wedding on principle, as Gulafsha’s mother shares:

No teachers came. I went and gave cards to everyone. I gave the cards in the hand of the principal madam. But no one came from school. I told my daughter if the teachers cared for you at least one of them would have come… I told her she could not go visit the school. My daughter bought a lot of glory to the school. Look at all these trophies that I have in my house. All these medals my children have won…but still no one came. That’s okay. The wedding happened. It’s not like the wedding was going to stop if they did not come…now that my daughter is married she has a room close by. In the daytime she stays with me.

Though her future husband had told Gulafsha’s sister and the family that it would be his bride’s choice to continue her education, there is always a reason given to her for delaying the process. Gulafsha’s mother shares:

Now admissions for plus 1 are going on but she [older daughter] is not feeling well and we did not get the admissions done…even my son-in-law said I should get admissions for my daughter and he would let her study. But then she got sick and we were running day and night trying to get her better. I told her to go to the village…she had stomach ache…her room is on top she has to climb the stairs. Not like our simple room I told her to go home to the village to rest for a while. And now she says, “Mummy my stomach
does not hurt”…it is her first *Eid* so she has gone to the village to celebrate with the family.

Gulafsha accepts as natural the limits placed on her and her sister and does not hold her parents responsible. For now she is not willing to disrupt the harmony and love in her family and says she is very proud of the fact that she “was born into a family that lives together happily.” In her journal, Gulafsha provides a description:

> After dinner I spoke with my sister. From the newspaper I cut pictures of the Olympics because my cousin wanted them. I cut them and gave them to her. Then I played *ludo* [Parcheesi] with Papa and after washing dishes I went to sleep.

**Maya: We Have a Right to an Education**

Maya is sixteen years old and is a class 12 student at the same government model school as Pooja, and she is the youngest of four siblings. Like Sapna, her parents are migrants from Gadwhal. Speaking of her family, Maya says:

> In my family there is my Papa, Mummy, brother, sister-in-law, sister, brother-in-law, another brother, cute and naughty nephew, and then there is me…mostly what happens is that I don’t get much importance at home maybe because my thinking is different.

Maya desires freedom to dress as she wishes and go where she wants. She has mixed support at home from various members of her family and questions the assumption that the way a girl dresses is reflective of her character:

> Mummy thinks children should be allowed to be the way they want to be…she says that because she has lived her life and she does not know the new generation, because times are different, so Mummy gives me full freedom. She says, “However you live, you should know your limits.” There is no restrictions for what to wear but Mummy and
Papa fight over this…my sister also says I can do whatever I want but to be in my limits—to study as much as I can…my brothers also have the same thinking…only my father and sister-in-law think differently.

Life at Maya’s home is not easy. Within her traditional patrifocal family, Maya’s father makes all family decisions and is supposed to act as the protector, although that reality is far different for Maya:

I have some problems in my family…my Papa is a type of person who does not fulfill his responsibilities. He has always thought of himself first only, never thought of his children. Actually he says that, “I have no daughters. I am just living with you for the sake of it; I don’t have any attachment with you.” He says things like that…my Papa drinks mostly…there are quarrels in the house and on top of that the family atmosphere is very strained…there is a lot of nagging…even from relatives…if your own home is not strong, then such things happen.

Within the traditional patrifocal family structure, women are socialized to remain silent. As a young woman, Maya understands her mother’s silence and compliance:

My brother feels that if my mother would have spoken up for him and us maybe our condition would have been better. But where my mother comes from the culture is that women don’t speak in front of their husbands…Mummy feels that her parents did not educate her and what choice does she have without an education…where will she go…I see school as a place where you can have a fresh start…but when you don’t see the support at school you feel like you see this at home and you see it school then where is the hope?
Maya understands reasons for her mother’s silence but chooses a different path for herself. She describes how:

From the beginning, I have not hesitated to speak up…if I don’t like anything I will just tell the person to their face…if I feel a teacher’s behavior is inappropriate or if I don’t understand something I speak up…I have been in government schools so I know what happens…teachers expect that whatever they teach the students will blindly follow that…not all teachers but the majority expect the students to say, “Yes Madam, yes Madam, yes Madam.” They expect that no student should question them. “Why is it like this?” …If we ask for clarification more than one time they get irritated…some teachers have the attitude that mine is a government job what can anyone do?

Until grade 10, Maya went to the same Hindi medium school as Durga and Shaveta. She moved to a school that offers three mediums of instruction:

There is this teacher, she has her Ph.D. in political science and she strikes anything I write in Hindi…I am from a Hindi medium school so I write in Hindi and she strikes it off and marks it 0…she spoiled my plus 1 results so much I could feel the earth just vanish under my feet…in all my subjects I do well except hers…in this school they have three mediums—English, Hindi, and Punjabi…. English is taught in English and you have a choice in all other subjects to learn in English, Hindi, or Punjabi…but a majority of the teaching is in Hindi. So they first teach in English and then in Hindi. I argue with the teachers because I am not used to English and I will not tolerate not understanding because we have a right to education…it is my responsibility to ask teachers for help when I need it.

Maya might be outspoken at school, but at home she remains silent like her mother:
I want to be a police inspector but we will see if that happens because I don’t think that will happen…my family will not support because circumstances are like that…my Papa is a bit narrow minded…he does not see the need to educate girls…he is only educating me because of the formality of living in a society, otherwise he would have gotten me married off early…he drinks a lot and it’s very difficult to study. The whole day it’s like this then how can I study…if I do a B.A. it would be a big struggle for me…there is no one to support me and on top of that all the arguing and nagging…maybe I will become a nursery school teacher…I like small children very much and my friend’s sister is a nursery school teacher and she will tell me what I need to do.

Maya’s father keeps close tabs on Maya’s whereabouts she says and cites concerns for her safety as a reason for doing so:

He [Papa] says times are changing there are so many cases of young girls getting raped, girls getting kidnapped, acid being thrown on girls…so my family keeps saying I have to be very careful, boys are like this…but you know what? When you show others that you are weak then they will push you more.

Like Sapna’s father, Maya’s father migrated to the city on his own, leaving his wife and children in the village. Maya’s father studied up to class 8 in his village and was fortunate enough to find a job as a government driver. He is a class IV government employee and his job comes with the benefit of free government housing, smaller than the one Shaveta and her family get from being a class III government employee. Maya’s mother first came to the city for medical reasons. Like Shaveta’s mother, Maya’s mother does not need to work outside the house. Explaining the reasons for her move to the city she says:
My health is also not very good…. I started getting sick when I had children. That’s why we came to the city. I got sick and came here for treatment. I put the children in school here. When I went back to the village the children noticed the difference in education between here and there. They could not adjust. So I came back and put the children in school here. The older children were in class 5 by then. I’ve been here since then.

Maya’s mother feels that her father’s unwillingness to let her study has severely deprived her capabilities, as she tells:

I did not go to school…. My father said, “I finally have a daughter. If she goes to school someone might hit her or tease her.” His thinking was old fashioned…merra galla ghot dea [his thinking strangled my life]…I am making my life work. I do house work, wash clothes, what else is there for me to do? I don’t have much understanding so I cannot guide my children.

It follows, then, that she is supportive of Maya’s education:

Maya is very interested in studying further. She says she wants to study so she can become somebody. I tell her she can study as much as she wants and as much as we can afford…. But God is the provider…it does not matter what a person wants, it depends on their kismet [destiny]. I tell her she can study but we’ll see what’s in her kismet [destiny].

While Maya’s sister wanted to continue her studies past class 12, limited family income was cited as a reason for not allowing her to do so. Being denied access to higher education, Maya’s sister chose marriage. Maya’s mother shares:

My older daughter studied up to class 12…. She was interested in studying further but we did not have the resources to let her…she got married on her own…. I don’t know where she lives…we have to respect our children’s thinking…things have changed….
The children are older. They will live according to their own wishes. That’s good. Their thinking is different. Ours is different. Everyone should live their own life.

Maya sees marriage as a way of escaping the conflict and oppression at home. She wants the capability to choose her own spouse but is aware of her parents’ expectation and limits of her father’s authority:

I would like to have a love marriage with a boy who is well settled. Then I will study after marriage and I will do a job…that only if I get support in my way of thinking…my friends and people I meet say I am a straight talker and think big but my family doesn’t value this, they just say we should get her married…my Mummy and Papa have an understanding between them that I will have an arranged marriage…they are very strong about this…I know people from Gadwhal are drunkards and they smoke…I will not be able to breathe…how will I spend my life with a smoker and drinker?

Maya is aware of the cost of going against her parents’ wishes. Her older sister is no longer welcome in the house since she went against her parents’ wishes and married someone of her own choosing, “My sister had a love marriage…there was a big problem at home…her engagement broke then she was thrown out of the house…she stayed somewhere as a paying guest and got married anyway.”

Promila: I Don’t Think of My Future

Promila is 15 years old and irregularly attends class 8 at the government school in Sector 8. She is the second oldest of six girls. Her oldest sister (17 years old) dropped out of school in class 7. Her youngest sister is two years old and stays home. The others attend different schools irregularly. Promila’s father is from Uttar Pradesh and her mother is from Bihar. The parents married when Promila’s mother was 19 or 20 years old and moved to the city 18 or 20 years ago.
Promila’s mother works as a part-time maid in three houses. He father used to be a gardener but has been without a job for some time now. The family of eight lives in one room located on the first floor of a corridor with eight rooms on either side in a mixed-income slum at the outskirts of the city. The building has two stories. All the families living in the corridor share a single water tap and share a single bathroom. Neither of Promila’s parents attended school, and they both grew up in abject poverty. Promila’s mother shares:

My father died when I was very young, so I could not study. What could Mummy do? She could not earn much and we had very little money. Compared to that I have a lot of money now. Now I get Rs. 2,000-3,000 per month [approximately $33-50]. Back then after a day of farming you were paid Rs. 15 [approximately 25-cents] for laboring for the full day. My mother raised my brother and me on her own. She would make sweet pooris and sathu, and pakoris…selling these is how she raised us. She got me married. She was not able to give a dowry.

No dowry meant that Promila’s mother was unable to marry up, it also meant that she received no gold or other goods from her mother as security. After marriage, Promila’s parents moved to the city. Her father made clay utensils and sold them on sidewalks but was not able to make any money. After living a few years in the city, Promila’s mother went to work as a maid. She changed jobs a few times and eventually found a job as a maid in one of the big houses in the wealthier neighborhood of the city. The family also hired Promila’s father as a gardener. As with Pooja and Durga’s mother, Promila’s mother was offered a rent-free room in the servants’ quarter of the house where she worked. By this time, Promila’s mother had three daughters. In keeping with tradition Promila’s mother does not refer to her husband by his name but refers to him as “mere gharwalla,” which literally translated means “my man of the house.” She
concedes all decision making power to her husband, including reproductive decisions. Promila’s father believes it is necessary to have a son as Promila’s mother tells:

My gharwala kept saying it will be a boy, it will be a boy. And I kept having girls. He kept saying, “We have no one in our family, how will our home function? The girls will get married and go to their sasural [in-laws]. So how will our home function? We should have at least one who stays home. At least one chirag [lamp] to light our house”…. He said after the fourth or fifth daughter we will have a son. He had a wish for at least one son. But I never had a son. All my children are girls. Now he doesn’t say anything.

Promila’s mother is 35 years old and now has six daughters, her youngest daughter is two-years old. By traditional standards she is too old to be bearing children. Promila’s mother’s income is a necessity the family cannot do without. As a maid, she gets no paid time off which meant that Promila’s mother worked until the moment she went into labor, as she shares:

All my girls were born here in the city…. I had no difficulties in my pregnancies. I ate and worked. That day [the day she delivered her youngest daughter] I worked all day, rode my bike, all day and stayed till 7 PM to complete the kitchen work. I could not clean that day only cook. There was blood in my urine. Then I thought, “I will have to go to the hospital. How will I go home? What about the children at home?” I couldn’t go to the government hospital. They have told me I cannot be admitted there because I have a big family. You can go there if you have two children or even three, but no more. They will refuse to admit you if you have too many children. So I had to go to a private hospital.
Healthcare is subsidized in government hospitals but, in effort to control population growth, the government has put a limit on how many deliveries per family they will allow at the hospital. The private hospitals, like private schools, vary significantly in quality based on the fees charged. The private hospital to which Promila’s mother is a low-fee hospital. Since Promila’s mother has worked for the same family for over 15 years, they paid for her transportation and hospital fee. The woman for whom Promila’s mother works has tried to support Promila’s mother’s wish to keep her family small, but Promila’s mother has constantly bent to her husband’s will. She shares:

I did not want so many children…but the gharwalla [the man of the house, meaning her husband] wanted a son…. I kept refusing, saying, “Why try for a son? The big people who are rich also have girls. We are poor what choice do we have? Whatever children we have is enough.” After my fifth daughter was born, Madam [the woman for whom she works] told me she would pay all the costs of having an operation [tubal ligation] and would take me to the hospital herself…but my husband was not in agreement. My Madam was very angry and asked me, “Why did you tell your husband? You should have come to me and I would have helped you with everything.” She told me I should leave my husband…she said “What’s the purpose of having a husband, he has made you have so many girls?”…but I could not bring myself to leave my husband.

Patrifocal family practices make it very difficult for women to leave their husbands. Women raised traditionally have little practice (or encouragement) to act in their self-interest, having been raised to protect and preserve the family unit. So, even though Promila’s mother earns the majority of the money, she would not consider leaving her husband. Within the patrifocal family structure, having a husband, even a “bad” husband, is far more preferable than
having no husband. Promila’s mother does not have any other family, she says, “I only had my husband for support no one else.” As her family grew, the owners of the house for whom Promila’s mother worked asked them to vacate their room in the servants’ quarter, as Promila’s mother tells:

At first I had a room in the home I worked in Sector 9. There I did not pay rent. I worked in the house in exchange for rent. I had to move out when they were reconstructing and then they never let me come back to stay. I still work there but they said they did not have space for my big family.

Cost of housing is high in the city, the only place the family of eight could afford was a small room in one of the slums. The entire family live, sleep, cook, eat, and study in one room. The room is one of 20 rooms in a two-storey concrete building. All 20 rooms share a water tap and have access to only one bathroom. The room in which Promila and her family live falls far below the MPI standards for adequate housing. Moving to the outskirts of the city has had a broad impact on the children’s lives. Promila shares how she feels about her move from living in the city to living in the slums:

I used to have tutoring but now I can’t go. I used to get tutoring in all the subjects. It was free...didi [sister] used to teach us and she lives in sector 9...Mummy used to work in a house in sector 9 and that’s where we used to stay. Then the owners tore down the house to rebuild it and we shifted here. When they rebuilt the house, they made the rooms in the servants’ quarters very small. Mummy still works there but we don’t live there anymore. I liked living there in sector 9...but now that we live far away we cannot go for tuition in the evening so we had to leave it. It is harder to do school work without tutoring.
Since the family moved to the slums, Promila shares that her father has stopped working, “Papa used to work as a gardener…and now he does not work anymore. He just sits at home…he does not say anything, he is always silent…whatever little money he used to earn is now lost.”

Promila’s mother is left to provide for the large family her husband forced her to have: Now I am on my own with all the responsibility for educating the girls, feeding them, earning a living, if someone is sick, the cost of schooling. Rent. I have to take care of all of it. I earn Rs. 2,500 [approximately $42] from working in one home and the rent for this room is Rs. 2,500 [approximately $42]. I have to take care of everything on my own…. It is so expensive. How can I raise so many children on my own? I am one soul, alone.

As with most jobs in the informal sector, Promila’s mother works long hours seven days a week with no benefits or security. Promila’s mother is not aware of any social security benefits offered by the government.

When Promila and her family lived in the city, the girls attended the local government school, one of the lowest-performing schools in the city. The school is a Hindi medium school and caters mostly to the children of daily wage workers in the city. The school building is large with open grounds and big classrooms. Four rooms of the school are reserved for a non-profit organization that is attempting to provide education for child beggars. Even though most of the students at the school come from BPL (Below Poverty Line) families, the school does little to understand or meet the needs of children in poverty. Teacher absenteeism is high and attitudes towards students is disrespectful and authoritarian. Student absence is also high. After much
persistence the principal revealed that the secondary graduation rate is very low, less than 5%. In speaking of her school, Promila says:

All the teaching is from the books. One madam leaves and the next one comes and they all make us work in our books…. I like Hindi. I do not like math or English…. I know it is important to study in English since everything happens in English…. I like my English teacher the most because she does not scold or beat us…other teachers hit a lot…my Hindi teacher hit me because I had not done my homework. She caught my hair and pulled on it and hit me in front of everyone…also my Punjabi sir [Punjabi teacher] hit me because I had not done my work. I had not done my work because I had missed school for a few days since I was sick. I told sir I was sick…if I do not understand something I do not do my work. Madam asks why I did not do the work. I tell her I did not understand. She says asks someone else to explain…children who do not do their work get hit. You get hit really hard. It hurts.

Having lost access to tutoring, Promila has no one to turn to for help with homework. Promila’s notebooks have beautiful and colorful drawings but little writing, she has little understanding of the content of the textbooks she carries in her schoolbag. Promila says she feels “stupid” a lot at school. Promila’s mother shares that her oldest daughter, a 17 years old, dropped out of school in class 8 because she “failed”:

In school when it was time for exams she [oldest daughter] would get sick…Madam got angry at her. She said, “You do not study, you keep giving excuses. If you are not going to study you should start working in the houses.” Madam said this. And my daughter started saying to me, “Mummy they get angry at me. I do not want to work as a maid. I do not want to go to school. I will stay at home. I do not want to study.”
Promila’s sister now spends her days at home listlessly. She does not help with housework but remains silent and withdrawn, much like her father. Promila’s mother says her daughters’ school is “alright” and the teachers are “alright.” She faults her daughters for their lack of interest in studies, she does not recognize how the school is failing her daughters:

I would like my children to study. It would be very nice if they would study up to class 10. I work so hard cleaning other people’s houses so they can go to school. But they do not have a commitment to school. Sometimes they go for a day or two and then they don’t go, they take a holiday from school. I wake them on time to get ready for school and they get angry with me and say, “I am sleepy and you are waking me up. You don’t let me sleep.”

Being illiterate and never having attended school, Promila’s mother does not know how to help her daughters cope with school demands. While the teachers tell Promila’s mother what she can do to help her daughters with their school work, Promila’s mother has neither time, energy, nor skill to put the advice into practice. Promila’s mother is in despair as she sees the cycle of poverty repeat itself in her daughters’ lives. She knows education is their only vehicle out of poverty, as she shares:

I tell the girls they should study. Books, notebooks, uniforms, pencils—whatever they need I give them. So what’s the problem in studying? I want them to study so they can get good jobs…my mother and father were not able to provide schooling for us so I stayed uneducated…it is in their control to study, to become nice…but now they do not study and they will not get nice jobs and they will go to their other family and they will get beaten or turned away…my children do not wish to do anything. That is my greatest sorrow.
Promila’s mother is heartbroken that like her, her oldest daughter has few real opportunities. She is placing her hope in a “good” marriage, but realizes the chances for that are slim:

I will look for a good boy and think of getting her [oldest daughter] married. What else can I do? I wish she will find a good home…. I wish the boy I find for her will be resourceful and will be able to take good care of his house and family… I have to get the girls married, find good houses and families who will not give our daughters any troubles or sadness…. I will see how I manage to get six girls married…. If I find a good boy I will have to get the wedding done nicely because a good boy can become a support for the family and home.

Promila’s mother knows that finding a “good” match requires money for dowry, and she has six daughters for whom she hopes to find “good” matches. Promila’s mother also knows that in the “new world” an educated bride is necessary to finding a “good” match, as she shares:

From my side, I think that if they study they will be able to get good jobs and then will be able to find good homes and families. But now they do not study they will not get good jobs and they will go to their other family and they will be beaten or turned away.

The sense of waste and tragedy when a “human being is given a life that blights powers of human action and expression” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 83) are easily conjured up hearing Promila and her mother’s life story. The severe limits placed on Promila’s capabilities, freedoms, and functioning have made her quiet, withdrawn, and without thought towards a future, as she shares:
Mummy says we should go to school. She says if I go to school it will help me fill forms...Papa does not say anything, he stays quiet...I want to finish class 12...I don’t know what I want to do after that. I don’t think about my future.

**Gender and Capability**

Glimpses into the lives of Meenu, Sapna, Gulafsha, Maya and Promila, reveal the differential impact gender has on the girls’ access to choice and freedom. This is particularly evident in the contrasting lives of Nashra and Sapna, whose families differ significantly based on income and religion. Nashra’s access to choice and her freedom to make choice result from multiple deprivations (income, gender, and religion), while Sapna’s access to choice and her freedom are only minimally limited. The fact that Sapna has two older sisters who are both willing to offer her financial, emotional, and academic support increases her access to choice and her freedom. Considerable intra-group variability exists as seen in the lives of Meenu and Durga, whose families have similar income and belong to the same religion. The differential impact of gender on access to choice for them is based on family values and traditions. Durga’s family does not limit her mobility, access to education, or opportunity to work outside the home. Meenu’s family on the other hand is willing to break family tradition only to a limit by allowing Meenu to go to school until class 12, they will not allow her to work outside the home and have strict restrictions on her mobility outside of school.

It is clear that both poverty and gender create a distinct, though diverse, gap between the girls’ “realized functioning” (what they are actually able to do) and their actual capability (Sen, 1999, p. 75). The gap between realized functioning and actual capability is even wider for girls whose lives are shaped by multiple and extreme deprivations, as in the case of Promila and Poonam. Nussbaum (2000) states that a good life is one which provides an individual freedom
to choose and the capability to exercise choice. Shaped by the double disadvantage of poverty and gender, Promila and Poonam’s lives are far from being a “good life.”
CHAPTER 8: GENDER AND EDUCATIONAL ACCESS

Only 40.7% of Indian children in poverty enroll in secondary schools, and of this low number, only 0.9% graduate which makes it obvious that poverty creates significant barriers to educational access and success (Barro & Lee, 2012). The net enrollment for girls across all socio-economic levels at the secondary level is 48.7% (UNICEF, 2008). Increasing awareness of the complex and interdependent relationship between poverty and education has resulted in concentrated efforts to identify and rectify poverty-related barriers to educational access at all levels. It has also resulted in demands for disaggregated educational data in order to better understand the impact of poverty on educational access and achievement.

Gender, particularly in traditionally patriarchal societies, also creates significant barriers to educational access and success. Both Sunil (from the story in the National Geographic Magazine) and Kanwar (the main character in the play about child marriage) wanted to stay in school and not marry, but the choice was not theirs to make. The impact of family and marriage on educational access for girls, particularly girls in poverty, is only minimally recognized (Banerji, Martin, & Desai, 2008; Verma, Sinha, & Khanna, 2013). In traditional patrifocal families, decisions are made by primarily by fathers in favor of what they perceive to be beneficial for the family unit; within this structure, children have very limited opportunities to choose and limited freedom to act. Gender roles and expectations are clearly prescribed in the patrifocal family structure which confines women to the private world of the home with limited power to make decisions, even decisions concerning their own lives. Additionally, the patrifocal family structure places clear limits on women’s mobility, behavior, and character stressing a link between these and family honor and status. Women, therefore, are socialized to be pure, silent,
and obedient in order to keep the traditional family structure intact (Sinha & Chauhan, 2013). Women, like children, then have limited real opportunities and limited freedom to act.

The dismally low female literacy rate of 8.86% (Government of India, 2012a) at the time of India’s independence and the persistent gender gap make visible the impact of gender on educational access. Low female literacy rates combined with increased international attention on the importance of education for girls has resulted in concentrated efforts to increase educational access for girls across India. As a result, the female literacy rate has significantly increased to 65.4% in 2011 (Government of India, 2012a); however, these efforts fail to recognize the role of family and marriage on educational access for girls (Banerji, Martin, & Desai, 2008; Mukhopadyay & Seymour, 1994; Verma, Sinha, & Khannna, 2013). When poverty and gender intersect, as they do in the lives of the girls in this study, barriers to educational access and success are doubled. While disaggregated data on poverty and gender is starting to emerge, at least for primary education, there is no disaggregated data for enrollment or graduation rates for girls in poverty. Disaggregated data, at the primary and secondary level, on enrollment and graduation rates for girls in poverty is essential for highlighting the crisis of educational access for girls in poverty in India.

It is important to note that, like poverty, the impact of gender on individual educational capability is both diverse and relative. Like all other social indicators in India, female literacy rates vary considerably across different regions, with the highest rates reported in the state of Kerala (91.8%) and the lowest in Rajasthan (52.6%). There is also a significant urban/rural difference in female literacy rates reported at 79.2% and 58.75% respectively (Government of India, 2012a). The impact of gender on educational capability can not be generalized in a
diverse country such as India, and it must be understood within the context of class, religion, and region.

Both Meenu and Gulafsha are competent students who wish to continue their studies past class 12 and both girls have older sisters who were denied the same wish in keeping with family and kinship traditions. On the other hand, Sapna’s two older sister’s, like Shaveta’s two older sisters, have fought for their right to study as long as they wish, delay their marriage until they are ready, and refuse to marry someone who demands a dowry. Thanks to their sisters’ courage and determination, both Sapna and Shaveta have increased access to education and greater freedom to act. Kamalpreet knows that her access to education is dependent on remaining compliant with her parents’ expectations for good behavior, so she chooses compliance in the hope that education will be her vehicle to increased access to opportunity and freedom.

The Patrifocal Family Structure and Educational Access

The patrifocal family structure continues to be the dominant family structure in India (Seymour, 2010). It emphasizes importance of family, extended family, kinship, and jati (subcaste) affiliation, in addition to the subordination of individual goals and welfare for the larger interest of the family (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994). Within this framework, then, it is understandable why the girls and their mothers instinctively use the communal word “we” over the individualistic “I” when speaking about their lives and hopes. The impact of India’s patrifocal family structure on the girls’ access to education is well summed up by Mukhopadhay and Seymour (1994):

…there is in India an ongoing tension between macro-structurally generated pressures that increase the desirability of education of women and micro-structurally generated
pressures that constrain women’s education in order to preserve a set of social institutions and associated beliefs (p. 3).

The emphasis on family is maintained through the nurturance of interdependence among family and kinship members, and through the socialization of a sense of responsibility towards family and kinship members (Karlekar, 1994). Decisions are made by elders, often the male elders of the family, for the supposed benefit of the family rather than the individual. Under the patrifocal family structure, both education and marriage are family decisions in which the individual child has little say in the matter (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994). Both education and marriage decisions are made with the benefit of the family unit in mind and towards maintaining gender and age hierarchies, gender segregation, and gender role differentiation that are integral to the patrifocal family ideology (Seymour, 2010). Subordination of personal desires to family goals is expected (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994). Family, then, as the seat of social reproduction and family support, is a critical factor in determining a girl’s access to education. While a growing number of families are perceiving education as a major vehicle for “economic security of the collective family” (p. 11) actual support of the girls’ education shows considerable inter and intra class, religious, and regional variation (Seymour, 2010).

Being good and educational access. “Appropriate” female behavior is clearly defined within the patrifocal ideology as obedience, self-sacrifice, modesty, chastity, and domesticity (Karlekar, 1994; Sinha & Chauhan, 2013). Being and remaining “appropriate” or “good” is considered to be the primary responsibility of the girls towards the family. Within the patrifocal family structure, girls and women are designated carriers and protectors of family “purity” and honor (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994). The importance of being and remaining “good” in order to protect family honor is a responsibility of which most girls in the study are aware.
Babita shares that she has received the message clearly from her parents that she bears the burden of maintaining the family honor:

Papa says, “Ghar ki izat ladkeo ke haath me” [the honor of the family is in the hands of girls]. Maintain the family honor responsibly. I give you freedom but that does not mean you dishonor my name. Papa says honor only comes once not again and again. And once it’s gone it never comes back…Papa says stay happy in what I give you… Mummy and Papa both have this thinking—you will get what you want but, “hamarra nam mitti meh na millana” [don’t dishonor our name, do good deeds].

Appropriate behavior is expressed through dress, social demeanor, and religiosity (Sinha & Chauhan, 2013). Kamalpreet, like Gulafsha, Meenu, Nashra, and Babita, are allowed to wear only the traditional “salwar kameez” (traditional Punjabi dress). Their families do not permit them to wear “western” clothes as they are assumed to be immodest and representative of “bad” girls. This assumption is widely held among different classes of people. Several officials in positions of prominence came under heavy criticism following comments such as “girls who wear jeans and skirts are asking to be raped.” Maya, who is the most openly questioning participant in the study, challenges the assumption that clothes express values:

My sister-in-law says I should dress like a good girl…her mentality is like that, she is from the village…now if you are wearing a salwar kameez doesn’t mean that you are a proper woman, a person who is bad will be bad even in a salwar kameez. I mean someone’s dress sense cannot show that this girl is good…but people judge that if she is wearing a salwar kameez, she is a good girl…

Education is seen as a threat to desirable behavior by girls, and that perceived threat has historically been the reason for limiting girls’ access to education (Chanana, 1994). Nashra
shares that this is one of the main reasons why her community members are upset with Nashra’s parents for sending her to school:

They [neighbors and extended family] say I am now grown up and should not be going to school…in my neighborhood only two of us girls go to school…the rest of the girls in our neighborhood—few are engaged, few are getting married, and some have already been married…they don’t have a choice…the adults think if the girls go to school these days [and] are educated become more mature and become very smart…they will start taking their own decisions…because of this, they don’t educate the girls.

Silence and compliance. Babita and Kamalpreet wish for greater freedom in their lives but remain silent and compliant, and they sacrifice their wishes in favor of family co-operation. Sen (2005) points to the fact that while family members benefit from cooperation rather than non-cooperation, it is important to recognize and address that there are conflicting reasons for, and conflicting outcomes for, this cooperation, particularly for women and girls. Babita shares:

I used to think when I was young when Papa used to say to behave properly, “What is it Papa I’m not doing anything, you’re scolding me for no reason.” Papa used to say, “You are young you don’t understand anything.” Now I understand. If I make a mistake I shouldn’t have done it. So that’s it. I have to be good.

Sacrifice of personal desires for the sake of family cooperation is reflected in Kamalpreet’s struggle between what she wants for herself and what her father wants for her:

Whatever my Papa says is also right but I think he should allow us to wear all that [western clothes]…mostly when Papa says something and I don’t agree with it I become silent thinking what would happen. Then, after some time, when I think about it then I
feel like Papa is right and then everything gets all right…the only duty I want to fulfill is that I be a good girl and study well.

“We have to listen to whatever our parents say,” expressed by Meenu, was a commonly shared sentiment among the girls in this study. Obedience, which does not mean agreement but means silence and compliance, is an integral part of being “good.” Obedience and silence for the sake of family cooperation is one of the heavy cost girls pay for family cooperation, Sen (2005) says. Promila’s comment illustrates how both silence and compliance have become an accepted part of her functioning, “I ask Mummy for permission before I do anything. If she says no, I don’t do it. I become quiet. I do not argue with Mummy.” Part of being “good” is knowing the limits of girlhood and staying within these limits. As Meenu explains, “We should know our limits and we have to stay within those limits.”

Gendered socialization to remain silent and obedient is strong, and it permeates to the public space of school where most girls choose silence over speaking up. Some like Prerna, Pooja, and Maya, however, are braver about speaking up, more so at school than home, while realizing that speaking up will most likely make little difference because theirs is one voice among many silent voices. Prerna and Pooja are in the same class at the same school, and they are both serious students. Neither girl likes their current math teacher because he “does not explain anything,” “he keeps talking to himself, that’s all, and keeps on writing on the blackboard,” and “has other students teach the class.” Individual motivation to speak up in public spaces such as the school can sometimes be minimized when the public chooses to remain silent, as in the case of Prerna:

Even if we talk to the principal ma’am, I will be the only one. As it is, all of them [students] are scared of her, nobody talks to her. If I go and talk alone, teacher will say,
“You are the only one who doesn’t understand, the whole class can understand” and usually others say, “we don’t understand” and sir says everyone understands.

Pooja had similar comments on the fruitlessness of being the only one to speak up. She is persistent and creative in solving problems and has created a group, the “Star Angel.” The group has four other girls as members, meets during lunch recess, and focuses on helping each member solve any academic difficulties they might have. There are some girls like Maya who are willing to be the lone person to speak up, to question, and to protect what they rightfully deserve:

From beginning, I have been very…like if I don’t like anything I will just tell on the face. I never hesitate. If I feel some teacher’s behavior is different, or if I don’t understand, it has never been like, any student tells them that, “Ma’am, you are wrong” or “What you are teaching, I can’t understand.”

It is unclear whether Maya’s will to speak up comes from years of watching her mother remain silent in the face of abuse from her drunk husband, although Maya understands that her mother remained silent because that’s what women in her generation did, but not all girls have the same oppressive silence imposed on them. Sapna, Prema, and Shaveta’s families are supportive of the girls speaking up, resisting some traditions, and making choices about their education and marriage.

**Mobility and safety.** Protection of girls and women’s “purity” and concern for their safety are traditional reasons given for justifying the exclusion of girls and women from public spaces. It was concerns for her safety that prevented Sapna’s mother’s parents from sending her to school, as she tells:

When I was young I was very fond of studying. I am the oldest and the only daughter and have three younger brothers. My parents were afraid to send me to school. They
worried I would be harmed. I really wanted to study but they did not let me study. All my brothers went to school and now all three of them have government jobs.

Issues related to girls’ and women’s safety remain a reason for concern because crimes against women are high and continue to rise. 24,000 rape cases were reported in 2011, a 9.2% increase over the previous year; however, a majority of rapes go unreported in India. Since female chastity, particularly for unmarried girls, is an essential component of being “good,” families are reluctant to publically acknowledge rape in order to protect their and their daughter’s reputation (and marriageability in case she is unmarried). Serious underreporting of rape also results from the very poor treatment of the victim by the police, from blaming the victim by the public at large, and because of the inefficiency with which rape cases are dealt by the police and the courts (Dreze & Sen, 2013). Advancement in technology and increased access to cell phones and television have made people more aware of the crimes against girls and women which increases parents’ fear and subsequent control of their daughter’s mobility, as Babita’s mother shares:

These are not good times for girls. The other day, it was one of the colony boy’s birthday. He treated 10 children, including mine, to Campa Cola [soda]. My daughter drank it. My son came home and told his Papa and he scolded Babita. She said it was the boy’s birthday and he was treating. Her Papa said, “It does not matter you do not take things from strangers.” I scolded her about that too. And the next day the same thing was on TV and I told Babita come and see. I cried a lot when I saw that on TV. I told her you felt so badly when your Papa scolded you yesterday and now the consequence is in front of you. On TV they showed how a friend bought another friend a cold drink and the friend got a stomachache. The other friend said come to my house it is close by and
when they go there she put a drug in her water so she passed out. You know what they did to her—raped her! This is why I told Babita her Papa was scolding her. If you feel like drinking a Campa come home and we’ll get you one. It is important to scold her.

Babita, Gulafsha, and Kamalpreet are not allowed to go anywhere alone. Coming and going from school and tutoring are the only family-sanctioned mobility they are allowed. Kamalpreet’s mother shared that, “Once the children come home from school they only leave to go for tuition. They do not go out for any reason.” Outside of coming and going from school and tutoring, the girls have to receive parental permission and must be accompanied by someone. Nashra and Meenu have similar limits placed on their mobility, though their access to bicycles has increased the permitted boundaries for mobility. They still have to have parental permission to venture outside the safety of the home. However, most of the girls living in the city (Maya, Durga, and Sapna) have greater freedom to move around. Speaking of the freedom she has to go where she wants, Maya says, “If I want to go out somewhere alone my family lets me because they know that I know the difference between good and bad and they know that I will manage.” Sapna’s mother explains her reason for allowing her girls freedom to roam:

I told my girls that trust is a big thing…they go to college, ride the buses and I never follow them. I tell them I trust them. Whatever they do they will do the right thing…I tell them not to break my trust.

Amongst all the girls in this study, Shaveta, whose family has the highest income and parental education levels, has the greatest amount of freedom to make choices about what she wears and where she goes. Shaveta’s mother describes:

Shaveta’s Papa has never stopped them from doing anything, they can eat what they want, wear what they want, everything. He’s never denied them anything…people ask
him why he lets his girls wear what they want, go where they want, and he says he will not stop his daughters from doing what they want…last night Shaveta went to a party and the sleeves on her blouse were short and her bhua [paternal aunt] said to my husband and me, “Why don’t you say something to your daughter?” I told her the children will wear what is in trend and it does not matter to me what they wear. I tell my children that I am not educated but they can be. I tell them they should study. Become someone.

While Pooja lives in the relative safety of the city, she is not allowed to leave the house on her own. Pooja appreciates most of the benefits of living in the city but misses the freedom she has in her village to roam as she wishes:

I like my village. In the city, it is like I live in a house and watch TV—nothing else. But in the village I have a lot of friends and relatives that I can visit and roam around. That’s why I like my village. And there we celebrate the festivals with a lot of pomp and circumstance. Here I do not even know if there is a festival or not. Just stay at home and watch TV and nothing else.

Nashra, Babita, Meenu, Kamalpreet, and Gulafsha have brothers with few, if any, limits placed on their mobility. Gender-based differences on mobility are another reflection of gender bias that limit the real opportunities and actual functioning of girls. Nussbaum (2011a) lists bodily integrity—the freedom to move from place to place and being secure from sexual assault—as one of the ten central capabilities. She argues in favor of creating a list of capabilities by saying that while all basic capabilities are essential, deprivation of some central capabilities is more damaging to human functioning and being than deprivation of other basic capabilities. It is essential to identify and protect central capabilities such as bodily integrity, as removal of these central freedoms “makes a life not worthy of human dignity” (Nussbaum,
Lack of reproductive control (as in the case of many of the mothers in this study), the real threat of rape and sexual harassment (given the high rate of sex crimes against girls and women in India), along with the confinement of women to the private sphere, all place serious limits on female mobility thereby limiting their real opportunities for participation in the public contexts, including school.

**Bicycles: Wheels of Freedom**

Many of the girls in this study own bicycles which contribute significantly towards their self-reliance. Pooja’s parents bought her a new pink bicycle this year which means that her parents do not have to pay for a rickshaw to take her to school. It also means Pooja now owns something that is hers, and that adds to her sense of self-worth. It also gives her the experience to negotiate a small part of her life on her own, as she shares:

> I go to school on a cycle. Before I used to go on the rickshaw. I like going on my cycle. A friend rides to school with me. It takes us fifteen minutes to get to school. The traffic is very heavy. It is not so bad in the morning when we’re going to school but it’s very heavy when we are coming home. I ride carefully and wait if the traffic is very heavy until there is an opening.

For Maya, Shaveta, Durga, Sonu, and Sapna bicycles are a social lifeline. Bicycles get them to school and to extracurricular activities all around town. It makes them self-reliant for transportation, thereby opening up possibilities, particularly for extra-curricular participation. For Meenu, her new bicycle is also a symbol of hope:

> Getting ready for school today I was really happy because today was my first day going to school on my bicycle…. My sister never had a bicycle…she never learnt to ride a
bicycle. But I have one and I know how to ride it. My sister never went anywhere just school and back.

Meenu hopes that the fact that she owns a cycle and knows how to ride and can go places, things her sister did not have or could not do, means that perhaps Meenu will be allowed to study past class 12 instead of being married off like her sister.

Poonam, whose family is one of the poorest in the study, does not have access to a bicycle of her own. She shares a bicycle with her mother and brother, her mother rides it to work and her younger brother rides it back after school. Left without transportation, Poonam has to help her mother finish her work at which time Poonam’s father comes to take Poonam and her mother home. Because Poonam has to stay and help her mother at work, she has less time at home to devote to school work. In their study investigating the effectiveness of bicycle incentives to increase secondary school enrollment for girls in India, Murlidharan and Prakash (2013) found that secondary enrollment rate increased by 30% for girls in Bihar after they received bicycles from the government. Access to bicycles reduces the cost of transportation to and from school and increases safety as girls often ride in groups. The study concluded that the bicycle incentive program is more effective than cash transfer incentive program in increasing girls’ secondary enrollment rate, it is also more cost effective than most other incentive programs and surprisingly least vulnerable to corruption since it is a very visible, one-time incentive. In the same study, Murlidharan and Prakash, however, caution that while access to bicycles increased the girls’ capability to attend school, bicycles did little to help them succeed once they got to school. Interestingly, the study also found that giving girls access to bicycles weakened the patriarchal social norms that limit female mobility.

**Gender Roles and Educational Access**
**Gender roles.** Gender roles and expectations are clearly defined within the patrifocal family structure and ideology. Girls and women are limited to the private sphere of family and home. Most of the girls in this study, with the exception of Shaveta and Prerna, are competently trained in household chores and naturally assume responsibility for the care of younger siblings. For many girls like Frat, who is Nashra and Meenu’s classmate and lives in the same slum, household responsibilities outweigh responsibility towards studies:

> My heart used to be mostly in my school work that is why I used to mostly do school work at home…it used come first because at that time I had no responsibility for housework but now I have to do both—housework and school work…. My Mummy says to me not to worry and do my school work but sometimes even my Mummy scolds me…. Papa thinks house work and school work are equally important…. I do not feel good when there is work at home and I sit and study…when I do not have exams, Mummy says finish your housework and then study as long as you want.

The continuing tradition of viewing household responsibility as a girl’s primary responsibility is identified as one of the biggest obstacles to educational access for them (Deaton & Dreze, 2002; Govinda, 2011; Kingdon, 2007). As for Frat, household responsibilities increase with age and are the primary reason for girls dropping out of upper primary and secondary education (Tilak, 2007).

For the girls in this study, the extent of household responsibilities varies depending on their mother’s occupation, mother’s dedication to their education, and sibling order. Babita, whose mother works long hours and who is the oldest daughter, has the heaviest household responsibility. She accepts these responsibilities with grace and without question. Babita has, through hard work and determination, learned to balance household responsibilities with school
responsibilities. In meeting these two high-demand responsibilities, she is left with little to no
time for leisure. She shares her daily routine:

I wake up at 5:30 in the morning…I wake up before my Mummy…she wakes up at six
and leaves for work by six thirty…there is no fixed time Mummy returns from
work…she only returns when all the fruit is sold otherwise it will spoil…. Papa has no
regular time…sometimes he stays out for two days sometimes for three days and
sometimes he returns after a long time…. First I wash my face and hands then I wake up
my sister and send her to have a bath. Then I clean the room and after that I pack food
for my Mummy…my younger sister wakes up my younger brother and sends him to have
a bath. Then they both go to get milk from the shop. I wash the dirty dishes from the
previous night and put chai on the stove. I cook fresh food for dinner and save the
leftovers for next day’s breakfast and lunch because I do not have as much time in the
morning…. I make fresh rotis every morning. I have been taking care of the house since
I was nine or ten…. After school I wash all the clothes, sweep and mop the rooms…. I
make dinner by myself…

Babita’s younger sister is spared the burden of household responsibilities simply because
she is younger, as Babita tells:

My younger sister does not even know how to cook, she can make chai…. My younger
sister is not interested in housework. If you tell her to do help she says, “It’s your
responsibility you do it.” I tell her, “What will you do when you get married?” And she
says, “I’ll take you in my dowry.”
Nashra, like Babita, carries tremendous responsibility for the house and family. Her mother’s illness has added to her responsibilities, and this leaves Nashra with little time to study, adding to the anxiety of passing exams:

I get up at 5, I get my brother and sisters ready, make breakfast and send them to school. So then coming back from school, I do all the household chores, prepare lunch, then all the noon work and evening work and do all the laundry, and we have to stand in queue for one hour to fetch water, sometimes we have to stand in queue for two hours to fetch water…. Then after that I sleep for one hour, then I would study at night for three or four hours I study then I sleep for one hour…. Today in school we were shown our science papers. Before we could see our papers, madam told us that two of the students had failed. In my heart, I thought I was one of the students who had failed. But thankfully I did not fail. Today I was very happy because I had not been able to study at all because Mummy was admitted in the hospital and all the household responsibility was on me. That’s why I couldn’t study. But I still passed. I was very, very happy.

Prerna, whose mother does not work outside the house and who is the youngest daughter is required to do very little to help around the house. Pooja, whose mother does work and who is the only child, is free from any household responsibility because of her mother’s determination to help Pooja “become someone” by getting a “good job.” Durga’s mother works two jobs, seven days a week, Durga is the only daughter but her mother and father take on the major burden of running the house leaving Durga to help in her “free time,” of which she has very little. Shaveta, Sapna, and Prerna have little or no household responsibilities because they have older sisters and also because their mothers do not work outside the home. Sibling order, family
income, and family values are significant factors in determining the share of household responsibilities a girl has to carry.

**Sibling effect.** Within the patrifocal family structure, care of siblings is assumed to be the responsibility of the oldest daughter of the family. Having to provide sibling care is a primary reason for girls dropping out of school (Govinda, 2011). For the girls in this study, sibling order is significant in determining whether the girls are supported by their siblings or if they are responsible for them. Sapna, Shaveta, Sonu, Prerna, Meenu, Gulaafsha, Maya, and Promila all have older siblings. Except for Maya and Promila, whose older siblings did not do well in school, all the others are supported by their older siblings with school work and with access to information. Shaveta shares that, “My sister helps me everything.” Sapna says the same of her older sister, “My elder sister helps with my studies…if I have difficulty in studies I ask her.”

Durga, Babita, Nashra, Poonam, Frat, and Kamalpreet are the oldest in their families and each naturally feels a strong sense of responsibility towards the care and wellbeing of their younger siblings. Durga feels responsible for her younger brother’s future:

Though my brother does not focus on his studies, I will help in every way to clear his plus 2 and get him in to some useful program like the army or the police…that’s what I am going to do.

As the oldest sister, Babita is responsible for the daily wellbeing of her younger siblings:

We take the bus to school…the bus drops us off at the lights from there we walk…sometimes the bus is really crowded and we have to wait at the bus stop for a while and we are late for school because how do I get my younger brother and sister on to
a crowded bus? That’s a problem. Falling is a fear. So we get up early to take the early bus so it’s not so crowded.

**Persistence of gender roles.** As education has become more accessible to girls, it retains its purpose of reinforcing rather than challenging traditional gender roles (Srivastava, 2005). To varying degrees, the girls in the study accept the limits placed on their educational capabilities as a natural order; moreover, when discussing gender roles and expectations, they do not sway far from the traditional roles and expectations of the patrifocal family ideology. The Right to Education act (RTE) makes no provisions for shifting the focus of education to encourage critical thinking.

Durga is raised in a family that does not value boys more than girls, her parents are working hard to help her meet the demands of the science stream in class 12, there is no pressure for Durga to marry, and she is spared from carrying the household responsibilities. When discussing gender expectations, Durga does not challenge tradition:

Girls have all the responsibilities. Boys don’t have any responsibilities. Girls have a lot to do. First they have to take care of their parents and then they have to take care of the house. And when they get married they have a whole new family and home to take care of.

In ten years, Babita hopes she has a “nice” job at a “nice” mall, hopefully selling children’s clothing. She says she will “get up early to do work at home and come back from work and do housework—like I do now.” Babita says her parents do not treat her any differently than they do her brother, but she does not question why her brother receives twice the allowance she gets or has more freedom to roam than she does.
Marriage and Educational Access

In the play about child marriage performed by class 9 students of Sikhya, Kanwar the 13 year old protagonist is told by her mother to put away her books and help her with housework. Kanwar tells her mother she would like time to study so she can do well at school. Kanwar’s mother replies, “What good is schooling for girls? You will get married soon and you will spend your time cleaning and taking care of children. What use is education for that?” Kanwar’s mother’s reply is reflective of a common perception that education serves no purpose for girls (Srivastava, 2005). Within the patrifocal family structure, marriage is seen as both the ultimate goal for girls and as the primary responsibility parents have towards their daughters and towards maintaining family honor and status (Grover, 2011). It is no wonder that issues surrounding marriageability have impacted, and continue to impact, access to education for girls (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994; Seymour, 2010; Uberoi, 1993, 2006).

The families in this study have varying levels of income, parental education, religious beliefs, and family beliefs, but the importance of marriage is a consistently shared value. For the girls in this study, marriage is inevitable but the impact of marriage on their education is far-reaching and greatly depends on the families’ reasons for supporting their daughters’ education—improving chances of getting a good match, societal pressure, economic mobility, or support of their daughter’s desire for greater autonomy and to “become someone.” Some families, like those of Gulafsha, Babita, and Meenu, provide limited support towards their daughter’s education citing early marriage as a family tradition; others, like those of Nashra and Kamalpreet, are conflicted between supporting tradition and supporting their daughters’ education. On the other hand, Sapna, Durga, Maya, and Shaveta’s families support their daughter’s education and are willing to bend tradition (and even break tradition as in Shaveta’s
family when they allowed their middle daughter to marry before their oldest was married) and wait until their daughter’s decide they are ready for marriage.

**Suitable brides and education.** Marriage, like education, is a family decision and is made to benefit the family rather than the individual. Marrying daughters “well” means marrying them into a family that is either of the same or higher status, it is what parents hope for and work for (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994). In order to increase the likelihood of securing a “good” match for their daughters, parents focus on socializing their daughters to be “desirable” brides, which means they know how to behave appropriately and are trained to run households. Meenu, Gulafsha, Kamalpreet, Nashra, Babita, and Durga are all competent housekeepers. They have been taught to cook, clean, wash, and take care of others from an early age. They know their “limits” and the importance of staying within these “limits.”

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the argument for women’s education focused on education’s value in increasing the girl’s potential as a desirable bride. With the spread of Western education, the demand for educated brides by educated grooms rose. As the economy has shifted towards becoming a consumer economy, grooms and their families are looking for brides who can work, thereby increasing parents’ motivation to educate their daughters in order to increase their marriage desirability (Froerer, 2012; Grover 2011). Desire for upward mobility and the rising cost of urban housing is correspondingly increasing the desirability of earning daughter-in-laws (Ulrich, 1994). Prerna’s mother agrees with this saying, “Good prospective grooms are now looking for girls who have a good education and who are willing to work so they can both have a good life.” Nashra’s mother adds that two incomes in the face of the rising cost of living helps improve quality of life, “If the husband and wife both work, they can make their life better and give their children a good life.”
Frat, a class 10 student at Sikhya and classmate of Meenu, Babita, Gulafsha, and Kamalpreet, pursues her education not for personal reasons but to be prepared to be a “good” wife and fulfill her husband’s wishes, “I would like to study so that way if my husband wants his wife to earn then it is our duty to listen what he says. And if he doesn’t wish us to work then it’s his duty.” Co-operation, compliance, and service to the family continue to be virtues for a good bride as Sonu’s mother reveals when describing the kind of girl she will choose for her son, Sahil, to marry:

I will find my son a wife from our community because they are taught to be good from childhood…. When I find someone for Sahil, I will tell them from the start that we only want a girl who is willing to serve the family and community and who is good hearted and respectful of others.

With these shifts in the relationship between girls’ education and their marriage prospects, finding a good groom becomes harder for girls who do not study. Promila’s mother shares this concern for her daughters who are not doing well at school:

I think that if they study, they will be able to get good jobs and then will be able to find good homes and families. But now they do not study, they will not get good jobs, and they will go to their other family and they will be beaten or turned away.

**Limiting educational access up to class 12.** While enrollment for girls living in poverty at the primary level are at record highs, it drops significantly as the girls get older and it is still very low at the secondary level and beyond. For many parents who allow their girls to go to school in order to enhance their chances of getting a good match, education up to class 12 is desirable. Education past class 12 is perceived to have a negative impact on marriageability since it increases boy-girl interaction and the subsequent likelihood of a “love marriage,”
increases threats to girls’ safety, and is more likely to make girls independent thinkers and therefore less desirable brides (Dasgupta & Lal, 2007; Froerer, 2012; Grover, 2011; Seymour, 2010). Several girls shared that they have parental support to study up to class 12, but not beyond that. Frat accepts this limit placed on her educational access by her father, “Papa says he wants his three daughters to study only up to class 12…it’s okay, whatever my parents want.”

Correspondence courses, increasingly offered through “private” institutions, are gaining in popularity across India. Tilak (2012) estimates there are over three million students enrolled in correspondence courses across India. These programs allow students, particularly those living in poverty, to earn “degrees” in spite of poor grades and while working or sitting at home. These “private” institutions charge very high tuition and have little-to-no quality control. The growth of these private for-profit institutions is being encouraged by the government which has failed to provide an effective framework for regulating private educational institutions (Tilak, 2012). Sethi, Ghuman, and Ukpere (2012) critique the extensive malpractice of the private for-profit institutions which, they state, are widening educational inequalities in India. There is an urgent need to regulate the rapidly-growing private educational industry and an equally urgent need to critique their effectiveness. Students who enroll in these private institutions, like Shaveta and Sapna’s older sisters, work to pay for the high fees. There is no data showing what percent of students are able to “graduate” from these courses and how many actually get jobs.

Faced with the choice of allowing their daughters to pursue their interest in education against the family tradition of early marriage, both Meenu and Gulafsha’s mothers are considering letting their daughters continue their education from the safety of the home since Gulafsha’s mother says “you can do anything sitting at home.” Meenu’s mother has told Meenu that, “It is not in our culture and outer atmosphere is also not good. We can educate her at home
and can complete her course but we will not send her college.” Meenu wants to study and if the only choice she has is to stay home and continue her education through correspondence she is willing to make the compromise, “If I have to I will do my B.A. and M.A. through correspondence and learn from home.”

Some girls, like Sapna, have parents who are willing to support (and some parents even expect) their daughter’s higher education. As Sapna shares, “My Mummy and Papa say they will educate me until M.A. Their aim is to make me a teacher.” Shaveta, Prerna, Durga, and Pooja also have the full support of their mothers to pursue their studies for as long as they wish. Gulafsha, Frat, Nashra, and Meenu would like to pursue professional degrees but do not have support from their families. While an education up to class 12 enhances the marriageability of girls, a post-secondary education is required to obtain a “good” job or become “someone.”

**Tradition of early marriage.** Early marriage of girls is a long-standing tradition in India because early marriage ensures the girl’s “purity,” and the younger the bride, the lower the dowry (Drene, 1994). Patrilocal residence requires the bride to reside with the groom’s family. Early marriage allows the in-laws to mold the bride to their family values and behaviors (Seymour, 2010). Gulafsha’s mother was married at an early age, she had her first child when she was only 13 years old. Sapna’s mother and Poonam’s mother were also married very young. Sharing her memories of her marriage, Sapna’s mother tells:

I was married at a young age…I don’t remember anything of my marriage…what can you remember about your marriage at the age of fifteen? I was younger than Sapna is now. I remember having to take care of my in-laws. I did not even know how to wear a sari so the *pallu* [end] would cover my head and face.
The expected age of marriage is lower in rural areas, and Sapna’s mother jokes with her that if they had stayed in the village and not migrated, Sapna would be married by now. Since India ratified the CRC in 1992, the government has intensified its focus on spreading awareness that the legal age at marriage for girls is 18. Interestingly, the legal marriage age for boys is 21 years. Awareness that the legal marriage age is 18 years is fast spreading among young girls, particularly in urban areas. The Child Marriage Restraint Act was enacted in 1929 and, for the first time, made marriage before age 12 illegal in India. The act was amended in 1978 to increase the legal marriageable age to 18 for girls and 21 for boys. In 2006, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) was passed. The PCMA kept the legal age of marriage unchanged but increased the severity of punishment for violating the law to enforcement with sanctions of a fine of one lakh rupees, and the punishment is extended to anyone who performs, assists, or abets child marriage. PCMA also provided for the appointment of Child Marriage Prohibition Officers by state governments and gives those officers the powers to prosecute violations of the Act along with the duty to spread awareness of child marriage issues (Law Commission of India, 2008). Despite national laws prohibiting child marriage, it remains the norm in many states, and mass marriages of children in public functions, such as Akha Teej in Rajasthan, continue to be performed in the presence of public officials (Grewal & Singh, 2011; IACR, 2005).

While the move to urban areas does expose the families to a nae sotch (new thinking), it also creates a conflict for parents between “tradition” (that which is familiar and known to them) and “modern” (that which is unfamiliar and unknown to them but desired by their daughters and is a part of this nae duniyaa (new world)). As Poonam remarks:

I don’t want to get married until I am 22 or 23 years old so that I don’t have to be dependent on Mummy and Papa. Also, after 18, you are mature. It is also the law.
Teachers tell us and they tell you on TV. And I have read it in books…my mother and father will arrange my marriage.

**Choosing between marriage and education.** Meenu and Gulafsha are good students who wish to continue their education, but their families plan on getting them married after they finish class 12. Meenu and Gulafsha have little say in matters concerning their marriage, and it really does not matter to their families what they want. Meenu is a dedicated class 10 student. She excels in math and wishes to do her higher studies in math, maybe even a Ph.D. she hopes. Her mother, however, wants to get Meenu married after she completes class 12, as she did with her older daughter. Meenu’s mother justifies choosing marriage over education for Meenu and her sister as honoring family tradition and also as a way of protecting the girls from perceived or real sexual threats.

“It is not our culture,” Meenu’s mother says, “to let our daughters work outside the house.” Meenu and her mother have conflicting ideas for the purpose of her education. While Meenu wants to study so she can get a “good” job and take care of herself, her mother is educating her so she will become a more “desirable” bride. To this end, an education past class 12 is seen as counterproductive, therefore, Meenu does not have her mother’s support to study past class 12. Studying privately through a correspondence course could be a possible compromise between Meenu and her mother.

Within the patrifocal family structure, in-laws occupy a higher place in the hierarchy of power and control than the girl’s own parents. Girls are viewed as temporary residents at their natal home, destined to be the wealth of their husband’s family who have complete authority over the girls’ life decisions. Between Meenu’s mother and future in-laws, it does not matter for what Meenu wishes. The same is true for Gulafsha and her older sister, as Gulafsha points out,
“My older sister was very good in her studies. She was very interested in studies, very interested in studies. Mummy used to tell her to study. But then they got her married.”

Gulafsha’s sister was given no choice in the matter of her marriage. Gulafsha’s sister’s teachers tried to intervene on her behalf and had many conversations with Gulafsha’s parents trying to reason with them to let her sister continue her studies, particularly since Gulafsha’s sister was a very bright student. Consequently, none of the teachers attended Gulafsha’s sister’s wedding to protest the parents’ decision.

For parents with limited resources who have to choose between investing in their daughter’s education or their daughter’s marriage, many choose marriage for the assumed security it will provide their daughters and because marriage has traditionally been seen as their primary responsibility. Many of the mothers have opened up saving accounts in local post offices where they deposit money monthly to save up for the high costs associated with getting a “good” husband for their daughters. Except for Pooja’s mother, none of the families have saving accounts for the education of their daughters. In spite of the difficulty of feeding and caring for a large family on a small budget, Nashra says her mother has opened an account for each of the girls and has so far saved Rs. 10,000 (approximately $167) in each account. Nashra’s mother cites the cost of getting five daughters married as one reason for her starting to work even though it is against her culture. Babita’s mother also shares that she is saving for Babita’s marriage:

We save for Babita’s wedding every month…we have to think of her marriage and then her education…I remain sick and so does her father. What if something happens to us then what? If she is married at least she will be someone’s responsibility. She will have someone to take care of her.
Change is Happening

Education has thus far focused on providing girls access to education without openly challenging patrifocal values. The increased access to education has, however, sown seeds of change for girls and women. Banerji, Martin, and Desai (2008) point out that the impact of education on the lives of girls is largely unanticipated. In her research on women’s role expectation and identity development, Dhawan (2005) concluded that increased education results in increased age at marriage along with increased experience and confidence. She states that girls with higher education are less likely to be malleable, more likely to question their father’s control over mate selection, have an increased desire to choose their own mate, and have an increased desire and ability to work. Education has the potential to change girl’s aspirations for their adult life along with increasing their sense of autonomy (Froerer, 2012; Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994; Seymour, 2010).

Sapna, Shaveta, and Prerna’s older sisters all fought for their right to an education. The older sisters of all three girls worked to earn money towards their college education and to save for their marriages and future. All of their older sisters have delayed their marriages and speak of a desire to choose their own partners. Shaveta’s middle sister did choose her own husband in what is increasingly being known as “I choose, parents arrange” marriages (Grover, 2011). Besides delaying the age of marriage, these girls also have increased autonomy, are economically independent, and are excellent sources of support and role models for their younger sisters.

One reason Shaveta’s sisters have been able to break marriage traditions, besides their own determination and courage, is that they have their families’ support. Shaveta’s parents support their older daughter’s choice to wait to marry until she is economically independent. Shaveta’s mother shares:
My oldest daughter said to me, “Mummy I will not get married yet.” She wants to study...she is waiting to get a permanent job...she says she will not feel settled until she gets a permanent job...she does not want to depend on anyone, like a husband. She does not want to ask him for things, ask the mother-in-law for things.... She wants her own money.

Shaveta’s parents have also supported their middle daughter’s decision to marry someone of her own choosing:

My middle daughter finished her B.A....she chose a boy herself.... It was a love marriage...she was in a hurry to get married so we got her married... It’s a very nice family...they let my daughter wear anything she wants...they encourage her to study...they have a lot of money, they are very wealthy...they took no dowry. Nothing. It is a little bit of luck and a little bit of kismet [destiny].

Like Shaveta, Sapna’s older sisters have also rebelled against marriage traditions:

I have two older sisters...one is 23 and the other is 21.... My parents are looking for a boy for my older sister but she asked for two more years and says, “If I want to marry then I will search for myself. I don’t want to get married now.”

With increased education, autonomy, and economic independence, the girls are less tolerant of the dowry practice and feel enabled to take a stand against the practice as Sapna’s mother tells, “My daughters say they will not marry anyone who demands a dowry. They say, ‘You have helped educate us, we can get married in a court but you will not give a dowry.’”

Like Shaveta and Sapna’s older sisters, Prerna’s older sisters are also defying marriage traditions, with the support of their parents. Prerna’s mother remarks:
I have an elder daughter…. I agreed to let her study and…she will be 20 soon and told me she does not want to marry before she is 26…. I say girls have their own destiny…my husband supports my daughters in their choice to study…he has stopped me from talking about marriage in front of my daughters.

With increased education comes increased confidence to change tradition, and it seems some parents take comfort in their daughter’s confidence when it comes to breaking tradition. Traditional marriage practices dictate that the oldest daughter be married first, a tradition Shaveta’s parents supported their middle daughter to break, as Shaveta’s mother remarks:

People say I have gotten my middle daughter married before the older one and now it’s going to be harder to get the older one married…people think there must be some fault with the older one that she did not get married first…my oldest daughter says it’s the 21st century and people think like that…she says people will talk but I will live my life the way I want to.

Maya’s older sister also chose a “love marriage” (self-selection of mate). She chose marriage when her parents told her they could not support her studies past class 12. In her case, however, her parents did not approve of her choosing her own partner. Maya’s sister no longer has her natal family’s support, a cost for her non-cooperation. Maya shares:

I want to find someone on my own but my parents have a thing between them that I will have an arranged marriage…. I know people from Garwhal, they are drunkards…and they smoke, I will not be able to breathe…how will I spend my life with a smoker and a drinker?

The critical and complicated role marriage plays in girls lives, particularly for girls living in poverty, is played out in Nashra’s life. Nashra is very determined to become a nurse, to study
hard so she can find a “good” job and enjoy some level of independence. Her parents swing between supporting her education, partially because they realize doing so would be beneficial to the whole family and might be their ticket to move out of the slum. On the other hand, the pressure from the community to marry Nashra sways them to put a stop to her education. So far, Nashra has the support of her parents to decline the offers of marriage her extended family has bought for her. The latest offer of marriage has thrown Nashra into a dilemma, however. Her future potential father-in-law has promised to pay for her studies and to support her working after the marriage. Of course, if he changes his mind after the marriage, Nashra is left with no recourse and is the only one who will suffer. The potential groom is an ex-drug user and does not show much dedication to his studies. The potential father-in-law is interested in Nashra for her expertise in handling the household. Nashra expresses her dilemma:

I don’t know what he [prospective father in-law whom she also refers to as uncle] has seen in me, he keep saying, “Only you can manage the house, only you can manage the house.” I keep refusing him. I don’t know what is there in me, let me manage my life, that’s more than enough. How will I manage your house? So when this proposal came from this boy...he was a troublemaker, he used to do drugs, stealing, he would earn but wouldn’t give that at home. Then, after his proposal came for me, he corrected quite a bit, he left everything. Then this father said, “if you can correct that boy then you can manage our home”...my Mummy was saying that we will get Nashra to do a nursing course but we won’t let her do a job...so then my uncle asked, “if you are letting her take the course, then what is the problem in taking up a job.” Then he says, “If you get married to my house, I will let you go for a job.”... I try not to think of my marriage.
This proposal is a dilemma for Nashra because it presumes to lift two limits placed on her: limits to her freedom to study and work due to her parent’s poverty, and the simple fact that she is a girl. For now, Nashra is concentrating on one thing she has control over: her education.

**It Depends on her Kismet: Destiny as an Excuse and a Solace**

Meenu is hopeful she will be able to fulfill her educational aspirations even though her sister was not able. Meenu is determined and flexible. She is willing to give tuitions to earn money towards her fees to minimize the economic obstacle and she is flexible about staying at home to continue her studies instead of going to college in order to minimize the social obstacle. Meenu is hopeful but also resigned to the possibility that she might have to get married after class 12, “Then I would say, whatever I am destined in life for.” For many of the mothers who have had little autonomy over their lives and have had to negotiate limits set by poverty and patriarchy a belief in *kismet* (destiny) as the final determinant of life course is an excuse to reinforce traditions they feel compelled to continue. As Gulafsha’s mother, who wants Gulafsha to stop her studies and get married after she completes class 12, shares, “Every mother and father has a desire that their children study. But the children’s future is dependent on their *kismet* as to what they will get.”

For people who have little control over their own life course, believing in *kismet* as the ultimate determiner of life course can be a source of comfort. As Maya’s mother shares, “God is the provider…it does not matter what a person wants, it depends on their *kismet*. I tell her [Maya] she can study but we’ll see what’s in her *kismet*.”

When poverty and gender intersect, they create double barriers for both individual freedoms and individual opportunities. Increasing educational access, by building more schools or by offering incentives for parents to send their daughters to school, is a step in the right
direction for increasing the real opportunities for girls living in poverty. Recognizing and eliminating the economic, social, and political processes that are the root barriers is essential. Doing so requires challenging and changing harmful traditions and practices such as those that limit girls in poverty to be silent and compliant, the practice of child marriage, and providing reliable access to social security benefits for the poor.

Article 12 of the CRC is hailed as revolutionary since it gives unprecedented recognition to the emerging capabilities of children by granting them the right to exercise their voice and participate in making decisions about their lives, in accordance to their age and capability. Article 12 is in direct contradiction of the patrifocal family ideology that defines silence and compliance as “appropriate” female behavior and excludes female participation in decision making. Efforts made towards empowering women and girls must address and correct the normalization of silence and compliance for women. Child marriage is a serious violation of children’s rights, human rights, and women’s rights. It is also one of the most prevalent violations of children’s rights in South Asian countries where 46% of children are married before the age of 18 years, the overwhelming majority of whom are girls. Of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 years, 30% are married, as compared to only 5% of boys in the same age bracket (Verma, Sinha, & Khanna, 2013. The continued practice of child marriage and even early marriage, must be effectively addressed. In order to improve educational access for girls living in poverty, it is imperative that education focus on preparing students to challenge, rather than reinforce, traditional roles and expectations. Education must go beyond preparing students to meet their economic needs, it should prepare them to challenge harmful traditions such as the practice of sex-selective abortions. Education must focus on helping both boys and girls redefine
the status of girls and women in India. It is time to empower girls and women and allow them to contribute towards shaping the economic, social, and political future of India.
CHAPTER 9: EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND OUTCOMES

In tracing the history of education of women in India, Agrawal and Aggarwal (1992) report that the low rates of female literacy until the time of Independence resulted from strict social and cultural norms prohibiting female participation in education—not from a lack of educational desire on the part of women. Exploring the history of educational access for women in Bengal, Karlekar (1994) points to cultural norms defining women’s nature and role to be the primary obstacle to their educational participation. Karlekar (1994) states that from the earliest times, women have had to fight to gain access to education, and that, interestingly, many of these women were supported by their mothers in their fight. Historical analysis of female participation in education has been almost exclusively limited to women from middle- and upper-income families residing in big cities (Agrawal & Aggarwal, 1992; Chanana, 1994; Karelkar, 1994).

In only one generation, much has changed in terms of educational access for the girls. While most of the mothers in this study wished for an education, only one mother was able to study through class 12. Some were able to go to school for a few years while most never went to school—either because they were not allowed to or because they did not want to. Nussbaum (2011a) posits that the phenomena of “adaptive preferences,” (p. 54) whereby people learn to not want things that they know they cannot have, can in part explain why some of the mothers did not want an education. Another reason for the limited desire for education by some of the mothers can be explained by the perceived lack of usefulness of education in the lives of women, a point illustrated by Meenu’s mother, “What would I do with an education? I was going to cook, clean, wash, and raise children?” A majority of the mothers in this study, nonetheless, regretted the fact that they were not educated.
Froerer (2012) states that the desire for education increases with increases in available chances for realizing educational aspirations. It is, therefore, understandable that as social and economic conditions and constraints have changed to improve available educational chances for girls in poverty, their desire and determination for education has become stronger. This chapter discusses the girls’ educational aspirations. It is important to note that while some research on education of girls in India focuses on parental desire or reluctance to educate their daughters (De, Khera, Samson, & Kumar, 2011; Froerer, 2012), there is little research that focuses on the girls’ own desire for their education.

**Economic Independence and Educational Aspirations**

In a rapidly changing world in which patriarchal forces are blending with changing economic forces, a girl’s desire for education is significantly shaped by a need to be economically independent because girls are becoming increasingly aware of how poverty and patriarchy are limiting their social and economic opportunities (Froerer, 2012). In a society economically and socially stratified by relatively impenetrable boundaries of caste and gender, members of disadvantaged groups believe that education is the most promising vehicle for upward mobility (Dreze & Sen, 2013). It is clear from speaking with the girls themselves that they believe in education’s potential to break down economic boundaries. A majority of the girls unquestioningly and completely trust that if they work hard and do “good” in their studies they will be ensured a “good job.” In turn, they believe that a “good” job will provide them with economic independence and increased autonomy. In the minds of the girls and their mothers, there is a direct link between going to school and earning potential, which they further link with “empowerment” and “independence.” The assumption that formal education is a necessary “social and economic” good is both widely accepted and is the foundation of educational reform
in India, and it is the reason why parents, particularly those living in poverty, have strong educational aspirations for their children.

The real potential for education to provide economic mobility to girls living in poverty is rather complicated and limited by economic and social barriers. Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2008) caution that while the “potential” of education is undeniable, it is important to recognize that the potential of education is significantly dependent on the gender and caste of the student, the family’s income, social resources, and the cultural capital available to the student and her family. They believe it is important to recognize education as a “contradictory resource” (p. 210) that opens certain opportunities for marginalized youth while also maintaining a system of power. A discussion of the social and economic barriers to the potential of education follows later in the chapter.

Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2008) say it is the “paradox of contemporary globalization” (p. 9), that just as the large out-of-school population is realizing the empowering possibilities of education, the opportunities for the same group to benefit from education are disappearing. In sharing her reasons for wanting an education, Meenu shares:

By getting educated, we get independent, we don't have to be dependent on anyone. We can do anything in life in the future. We don’t have to adjust with what money we get from someone. If we are educated then we will have the freedom to do what we want.

Sen (1999) suggests that pursuit of wealth is often not for the sake of accumulating wealth but because it increases access to other things an individual values and has reason to value, such as in the case of Meenu who equates wealth to increased freedom, opportunity, and agency. Many of the girls, including Sapna, Kamalpreet, Nashra, and Maya, shared similar
Reasons for wanting an education. Owning a home and a vehicle along with being independent are what Durga shares she hopes for from her education:

My biggest dream is admission into college…. And then get whatever job I can get. Then I will have money. And then when I have money I will fulfill my desires. I want to buy my own house or flat. Now we live in someone else’s house. My own house. And I want to own my own vehicle. Even if it’s a small vehicle it should be mine.

Mothers and Their Daughters’ Educational Aspirations

Besides economic independence, the girls’ educational aspirations are driven by their sense of responsibility towards their parents and their wish to care for their parents, particularly their mothers. Within India’s dominant patrifocal family structure, sons rather than daughters are expected to assume primary responsibility for parents; daughters-in-laws, not daughters, assist with these responsibilities (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994; Seymour, 2010). In a badalti duneeya (changing world), increased educational access combined with increased employment opportunities allows girls to challenge the central role sons have played in the “economic and structural well-being” of their families (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994, p. 11).

Providing support to her parents is one factor influencing Poonam’s educational aspirations:

I want to work so that I can help Mummy and Papa. Now we do not have a house, we live on rent, so if I can buy our own house and we do not have to rent, money will not be so tight…and Mummy can get some rest, she can also leave her job, she is sick most of the time…. I help her so she that she does not have any pressure.

Within in the traditional family structure, the girls are taught that taking care of their husband’s family is their primary responsibility. As the number of women accessing education
and working increases, this attitude is slowly shifting. Increasingly, girls are choosing to take on the responsibility for their own parents care, as Pooja shares:

My first responsibility is towards my parents. They have sacrificed a lot to raise me. Even after marriage I will take care of them. I will settle them and then I will think of myself. I have noticed these days that it is the daughters who take care of their parents.

Within the patrifocal family structure, educational decision-making is a family matter typically made by the male head of household (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994). There is, however, abundant evidence throughout the history of women’s education in India of cases where the mother, even in the face of the father’s indifference or opposition, was instrumental in creating access to education for their daughters (Karlekar, 1994; Vatuk, 1994). Every mother I interviewed expressed commitment to their daughter’s education, at least until class 12. Regret for their own lack of educational opportunity which they believe has deprived them of critical life choices is a primary reason for the mothers’ hope and support of their daughters’ education. The mothers identify money, safety, and traditional gender roles and expectations as barriers to their own educational access. Shaveta’s mother shared:

My family got me married when I was seventeen. Now I wish I had studied more…no one encouraged us to study. At that time the thinking was that girls have to get married but the boys have to earn a living. So they educated my brother up to B.A.

“Old fashioned thinking,” poverty, sibling care, and household responsibilities were the major obstacles for the mothers to access education for themselves. Many of these obstacles, the mothers feel, have been reduced for their daughters which makes education a real choice for them. As Promila’s mother says, “my Mummy and Papa were not able to provide schooling for us so we stayed uneducated…it is in my daughter’s control to study, to become nice.” The
mothers believe that an education will broaden their daughters’ career choices so they will not be forced, like they were, to “sell fruit” or “clean other people’s toilets.” They hope education will give their daughters a “different life,” a life with less suffering, more choice, and more dignity.

Many of the mothers shared their regret at not having an education, as Prerna’s mother shares, “We are doing household work because our parents got us married when we were very young. If they had let us study we might have been able to work somewhere.” Durga’s mother has similar regrets, “Maybe if my parents had educated me, I would be the one living in the sectors instead of cleaning their homes.”

The girls realize that during their “mother’s time, there was not much value for education, they wouldn’t educate girls” (Nashra) but that their mother’s “world was different, our world is different” (Shaveta). Most of the girls in this study shared that their own desire for education is intertwined with their mother’s hopes for them, as in the case of Pooja and her mother. In sharing her mother’s expectations of her, Babita says, “I really like that Mummy wants to educate us so much. I want to fulfill my mother’s dreams for me. My dreams are the ones my mother has for me and nothing more than that.” Similarly Durga shares, “Mummy has a lot of expectations of me. A lot of expectations. My desire is also to do something for her. To do a lot for her.”

Most of the girls in this study are very aware of the sacrifices and hardships their mothers make to support their education. This awareness adds to the girls’ desire to both lighten their mothers’ burdens and to make their mothers “proud.” As Babita shares, It’s very nice that Mummy has been working for so long and she works so hard to send us to school. Unke armano pe paani nahi pherna chahti [I do not want to destroy her hopes].”
The mothers work hard, often at multiple jobs sacrificing health and leisure to support their daughter’s education. Liddle and Joshi (1989) suggest that sacrifice can be a means of resistance. It would be worth considering whether the mothers are willing to make personal sacrifices to support their daughters’ education in an effort to challenge the limits that were placed on their own educational access. Pooja’s mother sacrificed her chance to work at the university, choosing instead to clean other people’s toilets in order to keep Pooja “safe” and have time to help Pooja with her school work. Durga’s mother sacrifices her daily rest time to secretly work a second job in order to pay for Durga’s expensive tutoring.

While the mothers of all the girls support their daughter’s education, at least up to class 12, there was a range of support from the fathers. Kamalpreet, Prerna, and Pooja’s fathers strongly support their education; however, most of the other fathers were either “too busy earning a living” or indifferent toward their daughters’ education. Maya believes her father allows her to go to school only because of societal pressure:

Father is a bit narrow minded. His thoughts differ from mine. He does not think girls need an education, it’s a formality. It’s because he lives in a society that people will talk, that’s why he is educating me, or else he could he would have married me off early.

Most of the girls with whom I spoke are deeply committed to their education. In spite of the many limits placed on them by poverty and their gender, the girls remain remarkably hopeful of fulfilling their educational aspirations.

**Capabilities, Freedom, and Education**

Aspirations are plans that are laced with hope and uncertainty (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013). All the girls in this study have educational aspirations. Their educational aspirations are modest and laced with hope that education will give them a “good” life. Aspirations are dynamic
and contextual, in that they adapt with experience, valuable encounters, and achievements (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013); as in the case of Pooja who, at one time, aspired to become a doctor. Her aspiration shifted to wanting to become a nurse or teacher, two careers she is beginning to realize might be more achievable given her family’s economic resources. Aspirations are also shaped through encounters with people an individual admires, as with Shaveta who wants to be a police officer like her brother-in-law’s father, who she says is a “big” police officer. Poonam’s educational aspirations fluctuate between wanting to complete class 12 and wanting to go to college for a bachelor’s degree. The fluctuation is partly due to the fact that Poonam knows her parents want her to marry after class 12 and partly from the fact that she is now failing several subjects in school. Conradie and Robeyns (2013) state that when individuals come to understand that they might not be able to realize their aspirations, they adapt by lowering their aspirations. At one level, Promila aspires to graduate from class 12, however, since she is failing most of her classes in class 8, she is letting go of her minimal educational aspirations and hopes she can at least pass class 8. Besides Promila, all the other girls in this study have managed to hold on to their educational aspirations (though most have lowered their educational aspirations) in spite of the many poverty- and gender-based obstacles placed in their path. Having to daily renegotiate the many limits placed on them by their family, society, and poverty, the girls are well aware of the uncertainty of their educational aspirations ever being realized.

**Poverty, gender, and capability.** Sen (1999) asks a strikingly simple and very relevant question: What is an individual capable of doing and becoming? Observing how the girls conduct themselves in the various contexts of their lives, it is easy to conclude that they have the capability to achieve what they so modestly aspire to access: a “good” education so they can
have a “good” life. The “good” in this context can be deconstructed to mean a life in which they have autonomy, choice, and dignity. Also included in this “good” life is a desire for fewer struggles than their mothers have had. The girls aspire for access to education which they hope will lead them to become “someone.” The “someone” they aspire to be is a person who is visible, recognized, respected, and has power.

The Indian Constitution grants all citizens the right to life, which, in the numerous Supreme Court rulings (including the one discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, Unni Krishnan, J. P. v State of Andhra Pradesh) have made clear, does not simply mean the right to basic survival, but rather a right to a life that is human, a life that has dignity. The “good” life the girls in this study want is a life they have good reason to want. Nussbaum (2000, 2011a) categorically declares that every individual, irrespective of their class, caste, gender, religion, or geography, has the right to at least the minimum threshold of all central capabilities. Such access is critical for an individual to have a minimally decent life. There is no argument to these two points: girls living in poverty deserve at least a minimally decent life, and the girls in this study are capable of achieving a “good” life. They have the capability to be “someone.”

**Poverty, gender, freedoms, and functioning.** Nussbaum (2000) asks a second equally simple and relevant question: What is an individual “actually able to do or be?” (p. 12). The difference in the answers to the two questions posed by Sen and Nussbaum is the measure of an individual’s wellbeing and her quality of life. There is little doubt that there exists a significant gap between what the girls in this study are capable of being and doing and what they are actually being and doing. The gap is created by factors well out of the girls control; it is created not by the choices they make, but their lack of choice. The gap exposes the unfortunate limits placed on their freedoms by family, poverty, societal values, and institutions.
There is no doubt that the educational access available to the girls in this study has significantly improved in one generation when compared to the educational access available to their mothers. There is also little doubt that living in the city offers the girls in this study far more educational access and choice than they would have if their families had remained in their villages. While it is important to recognize the progress achieved, it is equally important to recognize the unacceptable limits that poverty and gender continue to place on educational access for girls living in poverty in North India.

It is evident from this study that societal norms defining women’s nature and role continue to be significant obstacles to educational access. Most of the girls in this study aspire to careers in teaching or medicine, both of which have traditionally been careers open to girls so that the next generation of girls could be taught and receive health care from professionals of the same gender (Liddle & Joshi, 1989). Meenu wants to be a math teacher, and she is very capable of becoming a math teacher, but her family has the tradition of early marriage. Nashra’s parents will support her finishing her education, but have made it clear that they will not allow her to work outside the home. It is the tradition in their family and kinship. Neither of the girls is given a choice.

It is doubtful whether the girls in this study will be able to fulfill even these modest educational aspirations and career hopes since issues of marriage, safety, family honor, safeguarding of the girls “desirable” nature, and tradition place limits on their access to education. The culture of silence, compliance, and sacrifice of personal goals in which the girls are socialized limits not only their aspirations but also their freedom to achieve these aspirations. The cost of non-compliance can be high in terms of the loss of much needed support of the
family and kinship. It is easier for girls to resist or redefine tradition when they have their family’s support, as with Shaveta, Prerna, and Sapna’s families.

The possibility of the girls realizing their modest educational aspirations and career hopes is further constrained by poverty. Access to schooling has improved but access to quality schooling for children in poverty remains severely limited. The various issues related to the practice of teaching, primary among them are the poor quality of teaching, cost and availability of tutoring, performance on board exams, and lack of access to essential information, severely limit the academic performance of students living in poverty.

There is no doubt that both the Right to Education (RTE) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) provide legal freedoms to girls living in poverty. The problem is that these freedoms and legal rights, for the most part, are available to them only on paper. There are widespread issues of ineffective implementation and lack of accountability that render these very valuable legal freedoms relatively useless to the girls in this study, none of whom have even heard of the CRC or the RTE. Government apathy to the needs of the children in poverty is exemplified in its handling of the one institution that was working to effectively meet the needs of children living in poverty; corruption and red tape eventually forced Sikhya to close down in April 2013.

**Resilience, poverty, and life outcomes.** Stressors associated with poverty shape the lives of a large number of children in India. Researchers are beginning to recognize that many children not only survive, but manage to thrive in spite of being exposed to acute and chronic stressors (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Increasingly, professionals from various fields are focusing on identifying factors that mitigate children’s exposure to risk. Among these, resilience has emerged as a major protective factor. Focus on resilience rather than vulnerability has
resulted in a paradigm shift from a focus on deficiencies to a focus on strengths (Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013). Boyden and Cooper (2007) caution against attempts aimed at creating a singular functional definition of resilience by emphasizing that resilience is “a multivariate phenomenon that is subject to highly complex moderating forces which in each individual combine uniquely to influence the outcomes and impact of adversity in countless distinct ways” (p. 12). With this caution in mind, focus on resilience is necessary to develop a theoretical understanding of resilience with the hope that it would better guide interventions in children’s lives. The combination and interaction of individual characteristics (e.g., intelligence, motivation, self-esteem, attachment, and optimism) with family factors (e.g., relationship with parents, sense of responsibility towards others, and religious affiliation) and available environmental resources all shape individual resilience (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). It is this resulting resilience that propels individuals to subjectively view their lives as successful— independent of how others inside or outside their culture view their lives (Ungar, 2004). The concept of resilience is increasingly gaining the interest of developmental psychologists and humanitarian organizations as a framework for understanding how the various components of social systems interact to guard children against risk and how threat can be managed effectively (UNICEF, 2011b).

The girls in the study are remarkably resilient in that they are able to skillfully adapt to the stressors placed on them by their poverty and gender. It is evident in this study that the environment of poverty and the limits of girlhood have a constraining impact on the girls’ aspirations, capabilities, and freedoms, which in turn limits their ability to stay in school, pursue a career, and make other essential choices in their lives. That the girls have not given up their hope for a better life is itself remarkable and is a testimony to their courage and determination. It
is the girls’ own vision for a “different life” from their mothers’ lives—lives with greater freedom and autonomy—combined with their own determination, that allows so many of the girls in this study to beat the statistics and stay in school. It is the desire of the mothers to want a “different life” for their daughters, one with less suffering and more dignity, which provides invaluable support for many of the girls in this study to stay in school. There is little doubt that the girls in this study are remarkable. A relevant question to address in future research is whether the girls in this study are particularly exceptional or if they are representative of the larger population of girls in similar socio-cultural contexts? Additionally, exploring the interaction of personal, family, social, and institutional factors which contribute towards determining the high levels of resilience of some of the girls in this study would be a valuable focus of future research.

The widespread benefits of education are most evident in the lives of Shaveta, Sapna, and Prerna’s older sisters who have greater confidence to challenge tradition, increased autonomy to make education and marriage choices, and increased independence. The benefits of educating these girls spread to the family with whom they share their income and educational benefits. The question that must be asked is: What price does India pay for not educating its girls? Dreze and Sen (2013) insist that it is time we shift from asking what the country can do for women to asking what the women can do for the country.

Nussbaum (2000, 2011a) argues that it is a tragedy when there is a wide gap between what an individual is capable of being and doing and what they are actually able to be and do. Deep class and gender inequalities continue to persist in India for several reasons, primary among them is that the suffering of the poor, particularly poor girls and women, is so widely ignored and tolerated. Dreze and Sen (2013) insist that there is an urgent need for public outrage at the treatment served out to the poor, particularly poor girls and women in India.
Recommendations

Since one of the central questions of this study was to explore the impact of educational policy and its implementation on the lives of girls in poverty, it is fitting to end with a list of recommendations:

**Policy implementation.** The RTE is a significant step forward in providing free and compulsory primary education in India, but the policy’s effectiveness is limited partly because of poor implementation. It is often noted that, on paper, India is a progressive and egalitarian democracy; however, these policies are however rendered ineffective in the face of poor implementation, lack of accountability, and high levels of corruption. Within India’s federal system, state governments have significant autonomy within their state boundaries. States like Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Naidu are demonstrating impressive gains in reducing educational and social inequalities and improving human development outcomes, mostly because governments in these states are reasonably effective. There is an urgent need to redefine a system that allows certain state governments and institutions to openly ignore education and social policies (such as the RTE and the Marriage Act) without any consequences. Immediate attention needs to be focused on creating effective systems of accountability that allow for effective implementation of existing policies.

**An urgent focus on early childhood.** Early childhood experiences are critical in shaping life outcomes, particularly for children living in poverty. In India, the need for early childhood programs, particularly targeted towards meeting the essential needs of girls living in poverty, has been recognized as a critical factor in ameliorating the wide disparities in the investment that such families make in their sons over their daughters. The Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) was established by the central government to address these
concerns, but it fails to meet its goals due to limited funding, misappropriation of funds, shortage of qualified staff, and scarce ICDS centers in urban areas. Effective comprehensive early childhood programs that address the health, nutrition, social, and educational needs of girls from birth is a critical need across India.

**Rethinking the RTE.** Passage of the RTE has led to a significant increase in primary school enrollment. It is recommended that the RTE expand its mandate for providing free and compulsory education through the secondary level. For girls living in poverty, this could increase their chances of staying in school through the secondary level and would add additional pressure for families and schools to address concerns of domestic responsibilities and early marriage.

The RTE requires that grade placement be determined by age of the student rather than by ability. For first-generation learners, many of whom are girls entering school later in their lives, this poses a significant obstacle not addressed by the RTE. Taking the cue from successful programs like the MV Foundation, which supports the successful transition of child laborers entering school, the RTE should require government schools to provide bridge programs for students starting school later in their childhoods. The bridge program would offer a transition year of academic and social support to prepare students and their families for school. A bridge program, offering mentorship and tutoring should also be offered to students struggling academically.

Teachers can play a significant role in the lives of girls living in poverty. Since the majority of teachers are from upper castes and do not come from poverty, it is essential for teacher education and development programs to challenge common assumptions about children, particularly girls, living in poverty. Additionally, teacher education and development programs
need to prepare teachers to teach students in an engaging and meaningful way and should incorporate information on child development and the individual needs of diverse students.

The RTE mandates that no child be held back between grades 1 and 8. This allows students struggling academically to complete grade 8, but also poses significant struggles in terms of their school success in the face of the high academic demands of secondary education. While the impetus of the policy is a good one, in practice it creates more obstacles for academically struggling students. There needs to be provisions within each grade to ensure each student successfully meets the minimum requirements of the grade.

The RTE only peripherally address the growing need for tutoring. A thoughtful review of the curriculum, teaching effectiveness, and the heavy reliance on tests needs to be conducted to minimize the need of tutoring, which has become a significant source of academic inequality.

There is a distinct lack of reliable and disaggregated educational data at the secondary level. Data on enrollment, attendance, achievement, and graduation at the secondary level is sparse. Such data needs to be made available, disaggregated by at least gender and income, if not also by religion and caste.

Providing opportunities for meaningful participation. There is no doubt that the limited participation of women in decision making results from culturally-determined gender roles and behaviors. Policy can, however, make a difference. The RTE requires that at least 50% of the members in the parent-teacher council be women. This requirement can be extended towards the creation of student-teacher councils which must also require a strong representation of female students. Purposeful involvement of girls in making meaningful school decisions will provide them with much needed experience with decision making and leadership.
Meaningful participation of students, particularly girls, is missing in educational discussions and educational reform efforts. It is essential that students, and in particular girls living in poverty, be offered meaningful opportunities to participate in identifying their educational obstacles. Solutions to reducing obstacles identified by students can be the most effective in improving educational outcomes. For example, take the simple and cost-effective provision of bicycles to girls in some villages following a discussion in which the girls revealed that bicycles would greatly improve their chances of attending school.

**Academic counseling.** There is a need for schools to offer academic counseling services for students and parents. For students living in poverty, particularly girls, who have few if any role models or mentors, academic counselors would fill an essential role by guiding parents and students through the school system. Additionally, there is a conspicuous absence of vocational and college counselors in government schools. Presence of such counselors would provide parents and students with a professional who can help them make informed career and academic decisions.

**Regulation of private schools.** The rapid and unregulated growth of the private sector in education needs immediate critical review and accountability. “Private schools” that offer computer training, engineering courses, teacher training, and correspondence courses for higher education degrees all promise an education for a “good” job. The quality of these courses is unregulated and there are no available graduation or job statistics that provide support for the claimed promises. Location of residence, parental income, and parent health all significantly impact educational outcomes for girls living in poverty.

**Increasing public awareness.** Equally important is to increase shows like *Satyamev Jayate*, produced by Bollywood star Amir Khan. The show is in its second season and
effectively uses technology to create mass public dialogue around social issues such as dowry deaths, corruption, sex-selective abortions, and sexual violence against women. It is necessary to undertake campaigns to raise public awareness of children’s rights.

**Concluding Thoughts**

It is evident that poverty and gender limit the freedoms, capabilities, and choices of a majority of the girls in this study. It is a credit to the girls’ determination and their resilience that they retain their hope for a better future. The girls have very modest aspirations. They want to study and become someone, someone who is respected and who has the ability to make choices in her life. The realization of even these simple aspirations is made challenging by the low levels of their parents’ education, lack of access to health care and other forms of social support, as well as lack of access to early childhood education. Other multi-faceted obstacles include the high cost of tutoring, heavy reliance on tests, poor teaching, limited access to critical educational information, gender role perceptions, and early marriage. For several girls in this study the support of their mothers, older sisters, and teachers provided them with the strength and guidance to successfully negotiate these obstacles. There is no doubt that the girls are remarkable. It is however essential that the social, economic, and political climate that pushes these girls to be remarkable needs to be transformed so that all girls, irrespective of class, caste, and region, can be successful in school. It is time that it matters what the poor want, it is time that it matters what a girl wants. It is time that girls and women living in poverty be given access to quality education and a “good” life—a life with autonomy, choice, and dignity. A life they want and deserve.
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### APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name, Chapter</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Residence</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
<th>Mother's Occupation</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Sikhya</td>
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<td>Slum</td>
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<td>Servants’ quarter in the city</td>
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<td>Maid</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Servants’ quarter in the city</td>
<td>2 older brothers, 1 older sister</td>
<td>Maid</td>
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APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORMS

Letter of Information for Youth Participants

I am a student studying at Eastern Michigan University in America. I am interested in understanding your views about education and your experiences in school. For this purpose I will interview for approximately sixty to ninety minutes, depending on your preference. The researcher will begin with an informal interview with my family and if my family gives permission she will interview me alone or with my mother present—depending on my preference. After interviewing me the researcher will set up a time to interview my mother. The interview will be audio-taped. If you do not wish to be audio-taped let me know and I will take notes with your permission. In the interview I will ask you about your school, what you like or do not like about school, and what you want to do when you complete your schooling. With your agreement I may request to meet with you for a second follow-up interview for further clarification. With your permission I would also spend a day with you so I can understand your typical day. Participation in the study is completely your choice and you will be assured of complete confidentiality and privacy (no-one will know your real name) if you choose to participate. You may choose to end your participation in the study at any time if you do not feel comfortable. If you have any questions now or at any other time please feel comfortable to ask me.

Benefits of the Project

This research project will provide me with valuable information about your views about education and your experiences in school. What you tell me will remain completely confidential and you will be assigned a fictitious name. There are no foreseeable risks and there are no direct benefits to you from participating in the project. If at any time during the interview or
observation you feel upset we can stop and I can provide you the name and telephone number of a counselor at one of the local organizations you can speak with.

**Dissemination of Results (Talking and Writing about the Results)**

Results from this study will be written up in my doctoral dissertation and shared with educators and policy makers. Results will also be used in possible presentations and/or other publications. Your identity and that of your family and your community will be protected at all times in any dissemination of findings and complete confidentiality will be ensured.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions about your participation in this study you may contact me at:

Iman Grewal  
1529 Franklin Street  
Ann Arbor, MI 48103, USA  
igrewal@emich.edu  
2740497 (Tel no. in India)

If you would like to participate in the research study, please read and sign the consent form.
Consent Form for Youth Participants

I agree to participate in one or more interviews as part of a research study that will focus on my views on education and my experiences in school. I understand that the interview(s) will last approximately sixty to ninety minutes and I will be asked questions about my views on education, my school experience, what I like or do not like about school, and what I want to do when my schooling is completed. I understand that the researcher will begin with an informal interview with my family and if my family gives permission she will interview me alone or with my mother present—depending on my preference. After interviewing me the researcher will set up a time to interview my mother. I agree to allow the researcher to spend a day with me. I understand that the purpose of this is to allow the researcher to understand my typical day.

I understand that my participation in the interview(s) and observation is completely my choice; that I may choose not to answer any questions, I may choose to not allow the researcher to observe me, and I may decide not to participate at any time with no negative consequences for me and my family. I further understand that my privacy and confidentiality will be protected at all times and that I can choose a fictitious name, and my school will be assigned a fictitious name and that any identifying information about me, my family, my school, and my community will be completely confidential.

The researcher will audio-tape my interview and it will be typed up in the form of a transcription. If I do not wish the interviews to be audio-taped I will let the researcher know and she will have my permission to take notes of the interview instead. The researcher will also transcribe the observation notes. The tapes and transcriptions will be assigned a code and kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researchers’ office and in a password protected computer file. If I decide at any point during or after the interview that I do not wish to participate, my tapes and
transcripts will be destroyed and no material will be used from the interviews. I understand that there are no foreseeable risks and there are no direct benefits to me from participating in the project. If at any time during the interview or observation I feel upset I can stop and the researcher will provide me with the name and telephone number of a counselor at one of the local organizations I can speak with. I understand that in exceptional circumstances it may be necessary for the researcher to breach confidentiality if harmful events or criminal activity are observed.

I agree that the researcher can use the findings of this study for writing her doctoral dissertation and in any other future publication; but my privacy will be secured and my identity will remain confidential at all times and no-one will be able to recognize me.

If I have any questions concerning my participation in this research study now or in the future, I can contact Iman Grewal at 2740497 (local telephone in India) or via email at: igrewal@emich.edu

Interview Respondent’s Name: ____________________________________________

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Name of Counseling Organization: Indian Council of Social Welfare—Chandigarh. Contact Number: 2745914

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee for the period between 08/10/2012 to 08/10/2013. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact the UHSCR committee at: human.subjects@emich.edu
Consent Form for Parents/Guardians

I agree to allow my daughter ______________ to participate in one or more audio-taped interviews as part of a research study that will focus on her views about education and her school experience. I understand that if my daughter does not wish to be audio-taped the researcher will take notes instead. I understand that the researcher will begin with an informal interview with my family and if the family gives permission she will interview my daughter alone or with her mother present—depending on my daughter’s preference. After interviewing my daughter the researcher will set up a time to interview the mother. I understand that the interview(s) will last approximately sixty to ninety minutes and that the interview(s) will focus on my daughter’s views about education and her school experiences. I agree to allow the researcher to spend a day with my daughter. I understand that the purpose of this is for the researcher to understand a typical day in my daughter’s life.

I understand that participation in the interview(s) and observation is completely voluntary; that my daughter may choose not to answer certain questions, and that I may withdraw and discontinue her participation at any time with no negative consequences, no penalty, nor loss of benefits to my daughter. I further understand that her confidentiality will be protected at all times and that a fictitious name will be assigned to my daughter after the interviews and observations are completed, and that any identifying characteristics about her or my family or her school or community will be deleted. The transcripts of the tapes and observations will be assigned a numerical code and kept in a locked filing cabinet in a faculty office at Eastern Michigan University and in a password protected computer file. I further understand that if my daughter or I decide at any point during or after the interview that she does
not wish to participate, the tapes and transcripts will be destroyed and no material will be used from the interviews.

I understand that my daughter’s privacy will be secured and complete confidentiality will be maintained in any dissemination of the study. I agree to allow these confidential research findings from my daughter’s interview(s) to be disseminated in my dissertation and other publications and presentations knowing that her confidentiality will be fully protected at all times. I understand that there are no foreseeable risks and there are no direct benefits to my child from participating in the study. If at any time during the interview or observation my daughter feels upset she can stop and the researcher will provide us with the name and telephone number of a counselor at one of the local organizations we can speak with. I understand that in exceptional circumstances it may be necessary for the researcher to breach confidentiality if harmful events or criminal activity are observed.

If I have any questions concerning my participation in this research study now or in the future, I can contact Iman Grewal at 2740497 (local telephone in India) or via email at: igrewal@emich.edu

Parent/Guardian Name: ______________________________________________________________

Signature: __________________________ Date: ________________________________

Name of Counseling Organization: Indian Council of Social Welfare—Chandigarh. Contact Number: 2745914

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee for the period between 08/10/2012 to 08/10/2013. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact the UHSCR committee at: human.subjects@emich.edu
Consent Form for Parents/Guardians (Hindi)
Consent Form for Adult Participants

I agree to participate in one or more interviews as part of a research study that will focus on my views about education and my daughter’s school experiences. I understand that the interview(s) will last approximately sixty to ninety minutes and that the interview(s) will focus on my views about education and my and my daughter’s school experience. I will be asked questions about my schooling, my daughter’s schooling and any other issues that I would like to talk about regarding my education. I understand that if I do not wish to be audio-taped the researcher will take notes instead. I understand that the researcher will begin with an informal interview with my family and if the family gives permission she will interview my daughter alone or in my presence—depending on my daughter’s preference. After interviewing my daughter the researcher will set up a time to interview me.

I understand that my participation in the interview(s) is completely my choice; that I may choose not to answer any questions, and that I may decide not to participate at any time with no negative consequences for me and no penalties. I further understand that my privacy and confidentiality will be protected at all times and that I can choose a fictitious name, and that any identifying information about me, my family, and my community will be completely confidential.

The interviewer will audio-tape my interview and it will be typed up in the form of a transcription. The tapes and transcriptions will be assigned a code and kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researchers’ office and in a password protected computer file. If I decide at any point during or after the interview that I do not wish to participate, my tapes and transcripts will be destroyed and no material will be used from the interviews. I understand that there are no foreseeable risks and there are no direct benefits to me from participating in the project. If at any
time during the interview or observation I feel upset I can stop and the researcher will provide me with the name and telephone number of a counselor at one of the local organizations I can speak with. I understand that in exceptional circumstances it may be necessary for the researcher to breach confidentiality if harmful events or criminal activity are observed.

I agree that the researcher can use the findings of this study for writing her dissertation and in any other future publication; but my privacy will be secured and my identity will remain confidential at all times and no-one will be able to recognize me.

If I have any questions concerning my participation in this research study now or in the future, I can contact Iman Grewal at 2740497 (local telephone in India) or via email at: igrewal@emich.edu

Interview Respondent’s Name: ____________________________________________________

Signature: _____________________ Date: ____________________________

Name of Counseling Organization: Indian Council of Social Welfare—Chandigarh. Contact Number: 2745914

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee for the period between 08/10/2012 to 08/10/2013. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact the UHSCR committee at: human.subjects@emich.edu
Consent Form for Adult Participants (Hindi)
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol with Open Ended Questions for Youth Participants

1. Tell me about your family.
2. Tell me about a typical day for you.
3. Tell me about your school. What do you like and what don’t you like about school?
4. Are there any things that make it hard for you to stay in school?
5. How do your parents feel about you going to school?
6. Tell me what you would like to do when you finish school.
7. Tell me who you will be and what you think you will be doing ten years from now.
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol with Open Ended Questions for Adult Participants

1. Tell me about a typical day in your life.

2. Tell me about your family.

3. Tell me about your daughter.

4. Tell me about your daughter’s school.

5. Did you go to school? Tell me about your experiences with your own schooling.

6. Tell me about your hopes for your daughter’s future?
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol with Open Ended Questions for Adult Participants

(Hindi)

1. मुझे अपने जीवन में एक खास दिन के बारे में बताओ.
2. मुझे अपने परिवार के बारे में बताओ.
3. मुझे अपनी बेटी के बारे में बताओ.
4. मुझे अपनी बेटी के स्कूल के बारे में बताओ
5. क्या आप स्कूल गये? मुझे अपनी खुद के स्कूल कि अनुभवों के बारे में बताओ.
6. मुझे अपनी बेटी के भविष्य के लिए अपनी आशाओं के बारे में बताएं?
APPENDIX D: PLAN FOR ADVERSE EVENT

As a researcher in another country, I have made myself familiar with Indian rules that safeguard the welfare of the participants in my study. I will observe and follow these rules. I acknowledge that in some circumstances the rules are significantly different from those in the U.S. For instance, disciplinary processes in schools in India can involve physical punishment. Even though physical punishment in schools has been prohibited by the RTE (2010) it continues to be frequently used with no objection from the parents.

I spoke by telephone (August 8, 2012) with the national RTE coordinator working at National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights in New Delhi (NCPCR, a national agency that monitors the implementation of children’s rights in India and the organization where I did my research internship last year) and she informed me that there are no laws requiring teachers, principals, or observers to report incidents of child abuse or neglect to authorities. The principle of the school at which I will be conducting my observations also confirmed this in a personal conversation I had with her.

While the law may not require me to report incidents of child abuse, I have a recommended list of agencies I can contact in case an adverse event occurs. Depending on the situation, I would begin with informing the mother of the child. If the incident occurs in the home, I have a list of agencies I can contact.

If the case involves children, I will contact the director of the Childhelp Line at 2749882. The office is located in the Advance Pediatrics wing of the local research hospital and specializes in skilled and discreet interventions and solutions of adverse situations involving children.
An agency specializing in counseling services for the family and one which specializes in
cases of domestic abuse is: Karuna Sadan: Indian Council of Social Welfare-Chandigarh.
Contact Number: 2745914.

During my internship last year, I also spoke with three attorneys who donate their time to
local NGOs like Gyan Vidyalay—a school for child beggars. I have already contacted (August
9, 2012) two of the attorneys and they are willing to offer me advice and direction if and when I
might need it.

I had a long meeting with the principal of Sikhya (August 9, 2012), the school at which a
number of my potential participants attend, and she too has offered her guidance and advice if
and when I might need it.

With the list of agencies and with the help of my local contacts, I am confident I will do
right by my participants.