

## CHAPTER 9: *PARHĀ'Ī KA MĀHAUL?* AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT IN BIJNOR, UTTAR PRADESH

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In small towns in north India, educational institutions of one kind or another are increasingly visible features, and they are central to the generation of local discourses on progress and modernity. While the content of the curriculum, the messages that are directly and indirectly communicated through text-books, examinations, teaching styles and so on, are all important, educational institutions are also embodied in buildings that help to shape the urban environment. School campuses are clearly major contributors, but they also help to give meaning to the buildings that surround the schools. These meanings are not, of course, negotiated and reproduced locally in a vacuum. School buildings copy models derived from India and elsewhere; curricula are national or State-wide; managers, teachers and principals (and sometimes pupils) are mobile. Schools also derive their strength, in part, from the possible futures that schools and colleges may provide for their students—futures that may be in other Indian urban centres or further afield.

The idea of an 'educational environment' (*parhā'ī ka māhaul*) is a familiar one in Bijnor District, where we have carried out research intermittently since 1982.<sup>i</sup> Villagers have often told us that one problem they face in getting a good education for their children is that there is no educational atmosphere or environment in the villages, which places their children at a major disadvantage compared to their peers in town. They seem to mean several different things by the lack of an educational environment, including, for example, an absence of electricity to let their children study in the evenings, a lack of good tutors to supplement what

is learnt at school, as well as the more diffuse effects produced by neighbours' children, when most of them do not regularly attend any school. The imagined alternative environment is, in this context, an urban one. For many villagers, a town like Bijnor presents a somewhat undifferentiated opportunity for educational advancement, but others have more awareness of the diversity and differentiation that urban areas offer. Their conceptual maps of the town are divided into *mohallas*, primarily residential zones within a densely populated town with distinct names and populations, where residents may share caste, class and communal characteristics. Opposed to these are *colonies*, newly opened suburban settlements, which are usually regarded as the more desirable places to live, especially those accessible to the 'good' secondary schools. Proximity to educational institutions thus gives some particular urban spaces social, economic and political importance. In urban Bijnor there are several such combinations of 'good' schools and desirable *colonies*: in some cases, the colony came first, and the school later, but elsewhere, the school came first and attracted colonies of particular characteristics to cluster around it.

In trying to understand the significance of one such 'educational-cum-residential space' we start from the work of urban geographers who have characterised how groups are 'inscribing spaces and zones with particular meanings and discursive practices' (Bridge & Watson 2000: 252-3). In a specifically north Indian context, Orsini reminds us that, for the Hindi intellectuals in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, 'a modern, centralised system of education' was important 'both as an *institutional* and a *discursive* space' (Orsini 2002: 89, her emphasis). While individual schools obviously constitute such institutional spaces, and the curriculum (formal, informal and/or hidden) provides some focus to the discursive spaces, processes of inscription of meaning and creations of identity are also attempted, challenged

and negotiated in the neighbourhoods in which the schools are placed, or which develop around the schools.

In this paper we will describe and analyse one such hybrid urban space, which: we shall call ‘NW Bijnor’ for the sake of simplicity, since it has few obvious boundaries, and was rarely referred to as a coherent space by locals, because it has a mix of residential and institutional properties. Most of the land was bought by an educational entrepreneur in the immediate post-Independence period, when it consisted of fields on the edge of what was then the town. Over the following 50 years he organised the building of five educational institutions on this plot, and encouraged the location of Government educational facilities (an Industrial Training Institute, sports stadium and park) on adjacent properties. Residential colonies and shops have come up along the main road bordering the schools and colleges, in the interstices on land he did not buy, and on the side of the plot furthest from town. Most people approach this space either from town, where the space is marked by a cross-roads at the edge of the Civil Lines, or on the road from Meerut and Delhi, where another road junction marks the beginning of the built-up area of Bijnor town. In discussing this space we focus on three dimensions of its meaning: as a space of transitions; as one locus of a post-colonial civilising mission that involves dominance and exclusion; and as a space of political contestations. First we provide a partial account of NW Bijnor and its physical characteristics.

### **Bijnor: a post-colonial town?**

Small towns like Bijnor are missing from the literature on post-colonial urbanism, which is highly focused on a few agglomerations, large enough to count as ‘world cities’ (King 2000: 266). Yet in demographic terms, the 98 towns with populations between 50,000 and 500,000

made up about one-third of UP's 'urban' population in 2001, as much as the 11 cities with populations larger than 500,000. Bijnor, as an agglomeration (i.e. including adjacent areas that are under different local authorities but contain built-up land contiguous to the area controlled by the Bijnor Municipal Board) had a population of just over 90,000 in 2001 and some basic demographic characteristics similar to other towns of its size (see Table 1). In 1971 its population was evenly divided between Hindus and Muslims, though in the district as a whole the urban population is roughly 65% Muslim and 33% Hindu.<sup>ii</sup>

**Table 1 Sizes and characteristics of towns in Uttar Pradesh as defined by the Census 2001 compared with Bijnor (half page)**

Bijnor's urban space can be understood as a combination of pre-colonial, colonial and post-Independence spaces, though these are not neat categories.

The pre-colonial core of the city is a maze of narrow shopping streets centred on the fruit and vegetable market. The main colonial buildings are the clock tower, for many years devoid of a clock, and the post office on the northern edge of the old town. The other large buildings are mosques and temples. These are mostly in the *mohallas*, several of which bear names suggesting caste or community origins. Like other nearby towns, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries Bijnor was a *qasba*, a town dominated by a Muslim service elite, but it has increasingly taken on the characteristics of a *ganj*, a town dominated by Hindu merchants, with close relationships to a predominantly Hindu civil service in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bayly 1983; Freitag 1989: 102-3). Beyond the Post office to the north of the old town are the Civil Lines, which still retain that name, with the Government Inter-Colleges, the bus station, the office-cum-residence of the District Magistrate, set in its own fields, and the

houses and offices of other district administrators, the church and school of the Methodist Mission, the jail and the district courts. To the east of the old town is Nāi Basti, a colony dating from the 1950s; beyond it is the railway station and the sugar mill, still the largest local employer apart from the Government of UP. Beyond the old town to the south and west, and beyond Civil Lines and Nāi Basti to the north and east, are areas of new housing and shops, with small offices and workshops, and, increasingly, non-State schools.

Government schools are mostly in the heart of the *mohallas* or in Civil Lines. Non-state primary schools are spread through the residential areas, often using converted houses, but non-state secondary schools are mostly in purpose-built structures on the main roads leading out of town, or on the makeshift ring road. This reflects the relatively recent growth of secondary schooling in UP in general, and in Bijnor in particular: Out of the 32 secondary schools serving Bijnor 23 have been founded since 1972. New institutions could not afford land in the middle of Bijnor, and were established on cheaper land on its outskirts. These vantage points also allow them to attract students from the rural hinterland.

NW Bijnor is different, because the educational institutions here are not isolated but form a group, whose collective meaning is more than the sum of its parts. They line the main road that has, since 1985, carried the main traffic to and from Delhi. All five institutions are managed by the same charitable society, and are sometimes known as ‘Kunwar Sahib’s Colleges’. In order of founding they are (1) a Government-Aided Boys’ Inter-College; (2) a Government-Aided Girls’ Inter-College; (3) a Women’s Degree and Post-graduate Degree College; (4) an English-medium co-educational Public School; and (5) an Engineering College (see Table 2).<sup>iii</sup> The first four are named after deceased members of the family that dominates the charitable society; the fifth bears the family surname. The individual schools and colleges share many features in common with others in town; similarly, a further six educational

institutions are managed by the same society in Bijnor and in Muzaffarnagar District. The three schools teaching secondary-age pupils (1, 2 and 3) contribute over 25% of the secondary school places in Bijnor town.

On the opposite side of the Delhi road are the Government Industrial Training Institute, and three other education-related spaces, the Nehru Sports Stadium (almost entirely used by school and college children), an empty plot of land owned by the school-based National Cadet Corps, and the Indira Park, which comprises of swings and a roller-skate rink. Table 2 lists some basic data about these institutions. There is also an ambiguous space, known as the *numāish* (exhibition) ground and used to park buses and trucks on a regular basis, where during the monsoon an annual ‘exhibition’ with stalls and a circus takes place.<sup>iv</sup> Lining the road are shops, some on land abutting to and paying rental to the schools, a few houses and some other Government offices including the Telephone Exchange, the Irrigation colony, a Public Works Department office, the Life Insurance Office and the office that manages primary schooling in the district. All these building came up over the last three decades on ground that was either used as mango orchards or for general agricultural purposes—and signs of these earlier uses remain.

#### **Table 2 Educational and related institutions on the Main NW Road (one page)**

The density of educational institutions makes this space unusual. Its educational nature is made clear in several ways, at least along the main Delhi road. Most of the posters on special boards or hanging from poles advertise education-related topics (usually, private computer training institutes), and, after a fatal accident involving a schoolchild in 2000, speed-reducing bumps were put into the road surface on either side of the first and last school. The Awās

Vikās Colony (where we lived in 2000-02) was established from the mid-1980s and is not yet complete: new houses are still being built on some of the vacant plots. It is by far the largest residential area on this side of town. Its three qualities of housing—Upper Income, Middle Income and Lower Income—are graded by size of plot and accessibility to the main road. Many of those living in the Upper Income Group housing are teachers, not only in the neighbouring schools and colleges but also in the Government colleges. Others here send their children to the neighbouring schools, and the proximity of these schools is one positive feature of this colony often mentioned by other people. But the area is not entirely educational in the activities it supports. In addition to the shops selling school books, or offering snacks or photostat services mostly to school children, there are also car parts shops, general merchants and phone booths.

### **Relational Nets**

Manuel Castells contrasts ‘the cosmopolitanism of the élites, living on a daily connection to the whole world (functionally, socially, culturally), to the tribalism of local communities, retrenched in their spaces that they try to control as their last stand against the macro-forces that shape their lives out of their reach’ (Castells 1994: 29-30). This dualistic approach has been challenged by others:

The social space of what we take to be the city is thus a complex layering of time-space rhythms of multiple time-space relations, some of which are narrowly confined to a particular part of the city, others of which spread across many places near and far from the city. Interweaving with these multiple relational webs are the processes by which identities are constructed, in all their range and diversity (Healey 2002: 1780).

Certainly, NW Bijnor is the site of particular relational nets, which operate on a series of different scales of time and distance. The continuous flow of traffic on the main road is dramatically enhanced by daily flows of school-children coming from within the town and from the surrounding villages. These flows are of major concern for the town authorities: flocks of children on bicycles, loaded onto rickshaws or travelling on the bicycles and scooters of parents or elder siblings pose traffic hazards. Before and after the school day older pupils on cycles and motor-scooters come and go from the residential colonies, visiting the homes of tutors, who are also often teachers. In addition, private buses transport students to a second engineering college, also established in 1999 but located in farmland some 16 km from Bijnor town, on the far side of the River Ganga. Its 'camp office' is located in the Awās Vikās colony, and its bus collects and delivers students along the main road as well as from other parts of the new residential colonies.

These schooling-related flows are not, of course the only ones: men and a few women leave the residential colonies for their work, other men come in to deliver newspapers, sell vegetables, press clothes, or to collect and deliver people by rickshaw. Women move in and out to cook and clean the houses, to wash clothes or to provide child-care. Trucks, tractor-trolleys and buffalo-carts on the main road transport sugar cane to the sugar factory on the other side of town, and local and long-distance buses, three-wheeler vans, rickshaws and horse-drawn buggies take people on their everyday business past the school campuses. Above and beyond these daily flows are longer-term movements, for example of students from elsewhere in UP or even abroad, to attend the Engineering College, at the same time as Bijnor students move elsewhere for higher studies. These flows also provide models of imagined futures, as the outcomes of the schooling that the institutions provide or are stepping stones towards. Thus in 2001-02 the advertisements for computer training that festooned the



telephone posts along the road were promising ‘Destination USA’ for successful graduates. In this way one can see some of the ‘concrete local processes through which globalisation exists’ (Sassen 2000: 169).

These flows make obvious how misleading simple-minded dualisms of local-cosmopolitan, or urban-rural are for understanding spaces like these. Imagined localities, imagined futures and imagined modernities are inter-related, and spaces such as NW Bijnor are central to some—but not all—of such processes. For example, although the old town of Bijnor, and the villages in its hinterland, appear as relatively static spaces, compared to the new colonies and the educational institutions, yet they also play active parts in contributing flows and movements that link them to regional, national and global processes of various kinds. Migrant labourers go to Delhi, Bombay and the Gulf, and Islamic scholars from Bijnor end up in Deoband, Lucknow and the Arab world, either permanently or temporarily. We must enter one caveat here, however: focusing on flows may tend to draw attention away from the bedrocks of power and difference on which they are based, and which they help to reproduce. Control of the old town, the villages and the educational spaces is contested with greater or lesser success by different social groups: imagined futures for some require the exclusion of others. We now turn to these contestations of dominance and exclusion that lie behind efforts to assert the nature of this particular educational space.

### **Difference and educational spaces**

Western, formal schooling in north India, as elsewhere in south Asia, is part of a civilising mission with its roots in the colonial period, when, according to Krishna Kumar, ‘some of the natives had to be educated so that they could be civilized according to the master’s idea’

(Kumar 1991: 24). For the different institutions in NW Bijnor, the ‘masters’ are a closely knit social group with an urbanising and gentrifying project, but the ‘natives’ have varied class, caste and community social characteristics—which occasionally emerge into open conflict (see below).

The two Inter-colleges teach in Hindi, and have reputations as serving mainly rural land-holding students, reputations justified in the case of the boys’ college, whose pupils are 60% rural, but not in the case of the girls’ college, where only 32% of the pupils have rural addresses. The urban students attending the inter-colleges and the English-medium school are largely from the urban middle- and upper-class population. We were told by managers that poor children, who represent roughly 20% of the pupils, received free schooling in the boys’ Inter-College, that the college did not charge more than the very low fees permitted by the government for subsidised colleges, and that these fees were also waived for pupils belonging to the officially recognised Scheduled Caste groups (SC) in the girls’ Inter-College.<sup>v</sup> In practice, however, fees of various kinds (both legal and illegal) generate monthly charges for the families of boys starting at around Rs 70 per month in Class 6, going up to at least Rs 140 per month in Classes 11-12, with additional charges for examinations, laboratory work etc. According to the clerks dealing with collecting these payments, not a single student was exempted from these charges. Students are also required to wear a school uniform, though some of them may receive free items of clothing from the school management (see below). Not surprisingly, within the villages we studied, the institutions were perceived as the preserve of the rich.

Muslim and SC children were also under-represented. Muslims, who made up 35-40% of the surrounding population, formed 10% of the pupil body in the girls’ Inter-College and the English-medium school, and 3% in the boys’ Inter-College.<sup>vi</sup> SC children, who stemmed from

groups making up 20% or so of the local population, represented 12% of pupils in the girls' Inter-College, and 17% of the boys' Inter-College pupils, but none of the children in the English-medium school were identified as SC.<sup>vii</sup> About 80% of the pupils in both Inter-Colleges belonged to the officially recognised Other Backward Castes (OBC), mainly of Jats, the dominant Hindu land-owning caste or the 'General' category, roughly twice their share in the population as a whole, both in the town itself and in the District.

As a condition of receiving government aid, the Inter-College fees are limited, but the English-medium public school has no such limits and clearly serves the urban elite. Its fees place it well beyond the reach of all but the richer farmers in the nearby villages. Some of the richer peasants in one of our research villages, complained about the fees, but were unable to get a reduction. But their complaints also shed light on why these schools remained attractive to them:

All his schools are *very* expensive. ... [In the English-medium school] if a child gets a good number in their class, even then to get into the next class, they must pay Rs 1100. They must also pay Rs 300 in fees each month and it costs Rs 2400 to get admission. Every month it is necessary to pay fees on the 15<sup>th</sup>, but if you pay them on the 16<sup>th</sup> there is a Rs 10 fine. There are many expenses in his schools. Imagine that a child needs a pencil. The pencil may cost just Rs 2 in a shop in the bazaar, but they will say that the child must buy the pencil in the school's own shop where it costs Rs 5, and the school is very strict in this respect. ... But he has a sharp mind and he does all the work related to his schools himself. So the teaching in his schools is very good and the teachers are very good. ... For these reasons, despite the high fees and expenses, we like to send our children to study at his schools.

In this quote, more general issues of quality, such as the need for owners and managers to take a personal interest in the management of the school if the institution is to flourish, and how such interest translates into ‘good’ schooling, are merely hinted at. Others, such as the personal characteristics and networks of the founders, managers and teachers, are also very important reasons why some schools are preferred over others. But for most local people, teaching in English is also a necessary element in high-quality schooling. The women’s degree college, which teaches in Hindi- and English, the Engineering College, which teaches mostly in English and the English-medium public school, all attract relatively wealthy students, mostly from urban backgrounds, who are the only ones to have heard and spoken sufficient English at home to have a chance of gaining entry to and benefiting from the schooling they offered.

The two older institutions are in cramped quarters. The three more recent institutions, those serving the urban elite, are set in extensive grassy compounds, the largest being for the English-medium school and the Engineering College. All are walled, with single points of entry. All are new, quintessentially urban buildings with few decorative flourishes. Nevertheless, they share family resemblances to the schools and colleges in India’s larger cities, where a ‘school building was indispensable to proper education, preferably a grand edifice costing enormous sums of money, for which large-hearted donors had been mobilized by unusually enterprising spirits’ (Kumar 1996: 141).

In Bijnor, the large-hearted donors are mostly the family and friends of the descendants of a man born in about 1880 whose forebears came from Mandawar, 12 km north of Bijnor town. He rose to the rank of Chief Engineer in the United Provinces and was granted substantial lands north-west of Bijnor in the 1920s. He met Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861-1948) a Congressman, but also founder of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Banaras Hindu University,

and regarded him as his guru. This man became a local President of the reformist Arya Samaj, founded a school in Meerut, and lived in Banaras for eight years, helping to build the Banaras Hindu University. He was also involved in the construction of the Birla Temple in New Delhi, and died in September 1944.

His eldest son became an officer in the Indian Colonial Service (ICS), and served as Nehru's Cabinet Secretary as well as Governor of Karnataka and West Bengal. The second son, a businessman, lived in Lucknow for many years: one of his own sons, a retired senior civil servant, has houses in Delhi and Bijnor and now chairs the family's charitable trust. The third son, born 1911, returned to Bijnor after university education in London before 1939, and has managed the family's lands in the district, as well as being a very prominent politician. He administered the educational institutions established by the family trust until his death at the age of 92 in 2003. He appears as 'the manager' in the rest of this paper. He inherited his father's involvement in a small Arya Samaj school in Bijnor, turned it into the Senior High School that became the boys' Inter College, and moved it to its present site in 1952, when its foundation stone was laid by Govind Ballabh Pant, the first Chief Minister of UP.

The remaining institutions were opened from the 1970s onwards, and they are all formally managed by the Charitable Society, but unquestionably the 'unusually enterprising spirit' was the manager. He was a figure of some considerable respect in Bijnor town and in its surroundings, but his political influence waned dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s. Nonetheless, he remained politically active until he died, using his networks within and outside the district to maintain patron-client relationships and to forge factional links in the Congress and Samajwadi parties. His extended family, part of India's cosmopolitan elite, has members serving with distinction in the Indian Administrative Service, in academia in India, the UK and the USA, and in international businesses. As such, they can play only fleeting

roles in Bijnor's affairs and the manager had to seek assistance from some local notables: landlords, lawyers and teachers, all from urban upper-caste Hindu origins. Inevitably, he needed the support of the local administrative elite, the District Magistrate and the District Inspector of Schools and the District Sports Officer, who manages the Nehru Stadium. In 2002, recognising a potential crisis of transition to a new generation of managers, moves were made to bring some of the Delhi-based family members into more active management roles, and to widen the base of members of the charitable society from Bijnor, possibly to include a representative of an elite Muslim family from the old town. Their lifestyles of secularised modernity, closely linked to the Nehruvian project, have become increasingly out of kilter with the resurgent Hindu nationalism espoused by the Bharatiya Janata Party, who have provided most of the district's elected politicians since 1991.

The manager and his family and associates, then, have used their dominance of the NW Bijnor institutions to try to inscribe them with particular meanings. In managing the schools, they employ particular discursive practices, especially through their support for special events put on by some of these institutions. Obviously, daily routines are also crucial. But social dominance is routinely reaffirmed and assured through visible and semi-public 'events', ranging from the least public (daily assemblies, in which outsiders often play a role) to substantial advertised events based on many days planning and involving parents and relatives as well as local notables.<sup>viii</sup> These events open up possibilities to subvert, spoil or disrupt what is happening. The prevailing moods may be tense and uncertain, since these events are a means of testing, reaffirming and developing a range of uncertain loyalties, for instance between parents and management, pupils and teachers, or the local administration and the management. Most of the institutions have founders' day celebrations, as well as marking the national holidays ie Independence Day, Republic Day, Gandhi's birthday etc To give a flavour

of what happens at these events, we describe a sports' day, which is common to the five institutions, two functions at the Engineering College, and a Founder's Day at the girls' Inter-College, before drawing out some common themes from these and other events we attended.

### **Sports Day, 26 November 2000**

For these schools, a Sports Day is a very recent invention, though it clearly borrows from much longer traditions (for an account of the Central Hindu College's annual days see Kumar 1996: 140). According to the manager, the idea came from his third son, who had been a sportsman and had attended elite public schools, and wanted to copy their sports days for the charitable Society schools.<sup>ix</sup> The manager said, 'Before that Bijnor was very backward', suggesting that he sees a connection between the successful staging of public functions comparable to those found in the larger cities and elite schools as crucial indicators of modernity. In 2000 the Sports Day was held at the Nehru Stadium over three days, but the public ceremony was restricted to the morning of the first day. By 10.30 there were maybe 500 children sitting in the middle of the running track in fairly straight rows and columns. Around the running track were other groups, including boys from the Engineering College. At 11.00 prompt the District Magistrate arrived at the stand; everyone stood up, and he was shown to the seat next to the manager. Others local notables were in the front two rows, and in total there were about 100 adults consisting of teachers and parents in the stand. After patriotic songs, the District Magistrate declared the proceedings open, and released two doves and a bunch of balloons. Fireworks were set off, and the District Magistrate sat down for the march-past, led by a girls' band. Each group, a Scout troop, a group of young girls in yellow dresses, two National Cadet Corps platoons, and groups representing other smaller schools, had a

banner and a flag. A runner took a lit torch and ran half-way round the track, passing it on to another, who brought it back to the stand, accompanied by rhythmic clapping all the way round. Then a student led all the students in a pledge: she said a phrase and they all repeated it back to her, loudly and with enthusiasm, ending with a '*jai hind* (long live India)'.

A series of small 'skits' followed, lasting 90 minutes or so: singers, dancers, a series of body-building exercises with small dumb-bells and tambourines, human pyramids, a skit set in a class-room, where the teacher came in and started teaching the English alphabet. The three groups in the middle then in turn they went through mass exercises: waving, standing, bending etc, including in each case a set done sitting down. All started with standing to attention and shouting '*jai hind*'. A pupil banged out the rhythm on a drum to accompany each set of exercises. Then the race took place, a 50-metre dash for five to six year olds. The District Magistrate stood up and took the microphone for a very short speech, in which he praised the manager and the contribution he had made to the development of the district by his educational work. Then a college principal responded briefly, but no-one in the stadium seemed to take much notice of either speech. The front row left the stand, going to the college for tea and snacks with the District Magistrate.

### *Engineering College Functions*

An 'Old Boys—Young Boys' function (26/9/00)

Each of the 100 or so new 1<sup>st</sup> year students (88 boys, 7 girls) introduced themselves to their peers and to the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students in a formulaic manner. Students came forward one by one and later in twos, gave their name, father's name, place of residence, the Inter-college they attended and their overall percentage in the 12<sup>th</sup> class exams, and stated their hobbies for



example reading books, chemistry, physics and maths, cricket, chess and singing, in that order. Some students started by thanking or paying respect to the manager, teachers and/or senior students. They spoke in a mixture of English and Hindi. Students who could sing were asked to perform, some of them performed three or four Bollywood numbers, mostly received with great enthusiasm by the students. The manager occasionally teased or harassed nervous-looking students and the seniors sometimes openly laughed at the juniors. The audience consisted of male teachers, senior students and juniors, two members of the management committee and three social researchers. The students all wore trousers and shirt or *shalwār kamiz*.

#### *The Annual Function for 2001*

This started with three small lamps with clarified butter (*diyas*) were lit on an ornate golden candle stand in front of a small model of a Hindu god. The function followed a printed programme and a cameraman filmed the acts and the audience's reactions. Two other men took photographs, one using a digital camera. The scheduled acts mostly involved singing and dancing and followed a common pattern. All started with an introduction in formal Hindi or more often in English, which contextualised the act and illustrated its artistic worth, moral value or capacity to operate as social commentary. Some performers gave a small *namaste* (greeting) to the little statue of the deity before they started. Fillers between the acts included impressions of Hindi film stars, jokes and small comic skits.

Four of the more substantial events were as follows:

First a mime involving five male students was performed. One stood in the centre of the stage in a position that suggested that he was at prayer as a Hindu. His body was then shifted by another man applying an imaginary hammer to his limbs, so that he took up a series of poses,

the last three being a position of Muslim prayer, his forehead on the ground and kneeling down, then the position of Christ on the cross and finally representing Gandhi in a walking position, holding a staff and with back bent. A young man said, in English, that the act demonstrated how all religions are in fact just one, and that India contains many religions and people respect others whatever their religion.

Secondly, a 'Choreography (Women Liberation)' was introduced (in English) with reference to social surveys in India that demonstrated the extent and nature of physical violence and psychological harassment perpetrated against women in marriage, even in Kerala where literacy rates are high. Although women have learnt to be silent in the face of this harassment and violence, the motto of this act was 'silence no more.' A woman dancer mimed breaking chains that held her, and then three groups of three students mimed domestic scenes in which a woman was beaten or slapped by drunken men. One couple mimed burning the woman. Then the three women presented three small paper banners, with the words 'dowry', 'illiteracy' and 'physical abuse', before setting them alight. The act closed with a short speech saying that women still experience silent bondage.

This was followed by a mime on drug abuse. A drug Mafia don tells his middleman to distribute drugs to some college students. The dealer gets the students to take the drugs, and one dies, while another becomes critically ill and is saved by a doctor. The students realise the dangers of taking drugs, and in the final scene the actors displayed a banner with a skull and cross-bones and a packet of cigarettes, a bottle of whisky, a tin of marijuana, and packet of *pan* mixed with tobacco. Across the top of the banner was written 'Say No To Drugs'. This was greeted with clapping and cheers.

And lastly a dramatisation of Prem Chand's short story *Namak kā Daroga* (The Salt Inspector) was performed. A man tells his son that he must take a job with a good income

above his salary. The son wishes to remain honest and not take bribes. When he gets a job as a salt inspector he captures the employees of a powerful local priest (*pandit*), who were illegally transporting salt. He refuses to release them despite being offered increasingly large sums of money by the *pandit*, and eventually loses his job. But the *pandit* is so impressed by the inspector's honesty that he offers him a job as manager of his own estates, and the ex-inspector inherits the *pandit's* fortune.

#### *Girls' Inter-College Founder's Day*

In 2001 this was held on the death anniversary of the manager's wife. In the morning a *puja* was conducted by a *pandit* within the school premises to unveil a statue of her. Those attending the ceremony were mostly family and their friends, with teachers from the charitable society schools making up the audience. In the evening a full dance and song programme was put on by the students, preceded by a science exhibition located in one of the classrooms. The acts included a dance for Saraswati and a dance to the tune of '*Phir bhi ham Hindustani hai*' ('Even so we are still Indians'). The older student who introduced this act said that Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs are all first of all humans: 'We all feel the same patriotism. A cultural programme would not be complete without a patriotic song.' This was followed by a folk dance. The Principal's address, from a prepared text, stressed images of duty, energy, development, and progress. She talked about reverence for the founder and for the manager. She mentioned computer education as a separate subject and the buildings construction in progress, and noted the school's successes in state-level competitions in sports, guides and science exhibitions. She gave credit for this to the chairman, the manager, and other respected members of the district's 'glorious institution,' the charitable society. She thanked the chief guest, the District Magistrate, for taking time to attend their function, and she thanked all the

parents who gave ideas and money to develop the college, as a result of which they were moving further and further towards progress. Then the official cameraman photographed the manager handing out free uniforms to a series of needy students. The dance show then continued, with fillers of one-line jokes between the acts, for the rest of the evening.

What do these examples suggest about the meanings that are attempted to be inscribed on this space? Here we discuss three aspects of how these spaces are being inscribed with particular discursive practices: their apparent espousal of the Nehruvian vision; their obsession with discipline; and schools as a political resource. We then consider some signs of resistance to these attempts.

### **The Nehruvian secular project**

These functions are a testament to the enduring appeal of the Nehruvian vision. Nehru was committed to science, especially the embodiment of that science in dams, power stations and steel mills, to non-discrimination on the basis of caste or religion, and to the ending of ignorance and inequality of opportunity (see Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 24-32; Drèze & Sen 2002: 1-11). Schooling was central to that vision, and for the most part these schools, like others we visited in Bijnor, retain some public commitment to the ideals, one that the pupils appear to share. Women's empowerment, honesty in public servants, the absence of significant differences between members of different castes and religions, and the importance of science and reason were elements stressed again and again, in different ways, in all the functions we have attended.

Claims were repeatedly made that pupils could, through hard work and ability, use the educational system to achieve goals that would take them far from their roots. As the chairman

of the Engineering College put it, in the course of his address to the pupils at their second annual day function:

The efforts of the pupils of the college are even more important than the actions of the management. You must be determined and work hard to overcome the obstacles that you will inevitably face. You can raise the reputation of the college through hard work, commitment and good conduct. I am sure that you are capable of this. The results are very good and I have been impressed by the science exhibition. Your will has also been demonstrated by the items on display in the cultural programme this evening. It is a struggle, but you can do it. The first batch of students will be passing out this year, and their names should strike awe in future generations of students. The names of the current students would live on in the institution. I will be more specific about this college. We are not satisfied. We want to continue to improve the college so that it becomes one of the best engineering colleges in UP and then in India.

Examination results were stressed, not only in the speeches given by head teachers and the manager, but also in the Annual Review brought out by the Boys' Inter-College. Examples of individuals who had managed to enter one of India's elite Institutes of Technology were regularly reported to us, as were the successes in State-wide examinations, for example for entry into medical and engineering colleges.<sup>x</sup>

These commitments to secular ideals were, however, undermined in subtle ways. The most obvious were the ways in which religion entered into aspects of apparently secular ceremonies. Some ceremonies, such as the unveiling of the statue at the Girls' Inter-College, were entirely Hindu in their orientation, and non-Hindus were almost entirely absent. But others with no apparent religious character were imbued with 'banal Hinduism', such as the

lighting of lamps and the presence of a Hindu statue at the Engineering College's annual function, or the unconscious use of Hindu imagery in the sanskritised Hindi routinely used in the speeches. The colleges are also connected to more overtly Hindu institutions, since the principal of the Arya Boy's Inter-College was the chief guest at the Independence Day celebrations organised by Seva Bharti (a Bharatiya Janata Party organisation) and another Hindu nationalist group organised competitions at the Girls Inter-College, handing out shields and prizes at their Republic Day function. Thus we can see how Nehru's vision is being subverted from within. Commitment to some of his ideals (science, progress) is increasingly being framed within a specifically Hindu modernity, increasingly excluding Bijnor's non-Hindus. Our 24-year-old Muslim research assistant could see the changes made to the morning assemblies at the Girls' Inter-College: since she had left, for example, *Vande Mataram*, an anthem with a distinctly Hindu imagery, had been introduced as the national song.

### **Disciplined bodies, docile behaviour**

Krishna Kumar has argued that the main contribution of schooling in independent India is 'the maintenance of law and order' (Kumar 1991: 19), and we would argue that school functions such as these contribute to this in several ways. Firstly, and most obviously, many sections of the Sports Day function were based on the idea of disciplined bodies, marching in time, standing and sitting in straight rows, exercising together, wearing uniforms, speaking with one voice.<sup>xi</sup> Similar, but less public and elaborate, routines were followed in daily assemblies and on other events.<sup>xii</sup> The Girls' college had a half-time male member of staff, whose main role seemed to be to lead the mass exercises. At the Republic Day ceremony he was responsible for

15 minutes of rehearsal of standing to attention, saluting, and shouting ‘*Jai Hind*’ with clenched fists raised into the air that preceded the flag-raising ceremony.

Discipline was particularly an issue at the Arya Boys Inter-College. Physical threats and beatings are a routine part of everyday life within the Inter-College. Two or three watchmen and messengers are armed with staves to control access to and from the school. A newly-appointed teacher reported that the school was somewhat unusual in its focus on discipline in this way:

In our school you will find all the teachers have sticks, it is the uniform of the teachers. And this is the uniform only of our school, not of any other school. When I first came here I didn’t have the habit of taking a stick in my hand, I used to go with an empty hand into the class to teach. So other teachers told me to certainly take a stick with me because here it is the uniform of the teacher. So having come here, slowly I adopted this habit.

The Principal wrote in the annual magazine of the school that discipline was what made a school good or bad: ‘Discipline is the breath of life to a student. He is today’s, tomorrow’s citizen. Without discipline a student cannot be made a citizen.’<sup>xiii</sup> And nor can he succeed in his individual life’ (Tyagi 2001). He regularly threatens to hit pupils himself. Newspaper reports (*Amar Ujala* 2001; *Bijnor Times* 2001) refer to beating of teachers by students and their fight-back. It seems that some teachers see beating as a necessity, not just to maintain order within the school but also in its relations with the outside world:

We don’t often raise our hand against children. But if I give one or two people a sound beating (*marammat karma*), the others all understand that if I beat someone they MUST have been doing something wrong. The parents of children who come here also

understand that I don't beat someone without good reason. It is sometimes the case that boys at the school 'challenge' me. They say: 'come outside the college and THEN let's see what happens.' Sometimes I accept this challenge. I have even sorted out a few boys outside the college! There are some old students who try and corrupt the children here. There are some ex-students – the rotten (*badmāsh*) types, who keep on hanging around in the college interfering. I sort them out. I only raise my hand once or twice a year. But that is quite enough to fill the year. You will have seen even now that the principal *sahib* called me to see what was going outside the gate. I have the worst name (*sabse badnāmi*) for beating amongst the teachers!

The current Principals of the Arya Boy's Inter-College and of the Government Inter-College were reputed to have brought discipline to these institutions, and despite some hostility from some of the teachers, largely over issues to do with tuition, which we discuss further below, this has received considerable support from newspapers and from the educated middle classes. One innovation is that the Arya College gates are now locked for a substantial part of the day, to prevent pupils congregating outside and making a nuisance of themselves to passing pedestrians, including the girls going to the girls' college.<sup>xiv</sup> The colleges also insist on school uniforms for their pupils, in part so that they can be identified outside the school if they are misbehaving.

### **Schools as a political resource**

The manager played an active part in local politics for over 50 years, and the schools have been a central part of his political resource. Through his control over discretionary admissions, his dominance over recruitment of staff, and the opportunities his schools offer for contracts of



various kinds, he has been able to build a network of supporters under an obligation to help him in politics. Others also see the schools as politically valuable. Thus, in the run-up to the 2002 State elections, the manager was told that he would get official permission for extending his schools only if he joined the Bharatiya Janata Party. He also claimed that a dispute in one of the rural schools run by his society reflected an attempt by the party to take the school over, believing that it provided a platform for political advance in the region.

These political manoeuvres came out into the open at the time of the UP Assembly elections in 2002. The manager's son, who was already a member of the District Board for the constituency that included the Awās Vikās colony was refused a ticket by the major parties, and stood as an independent candidate. The society headquarters was turned into the election campaign headquarters, and school resources were commandeered for the three weeks of the campaign. As the teachers in the Arya Boys' College put it, 'The management were involved in the elections, so we had to co-operate' (Fieldnotes, 2 March 2002). A major plank of the campaign was inter-religious harmony, another was the manager's promise to build a Medical College in the town. But the manager's political procession through the town was largely populated by staff from the society schools, and the manager's son received only 3.3% of the votes, losing the deposit he had to invest for getting a ticket. There are, in other words, limits to the extent to which the manager could impose his preferred meanings of the schools in general, and the work of his society in particular, on the local populace. *Noblesse oblige* is an increasingly inadequate means of mobilising support, as the chairman of the Engineering College was forced to acknowledge:

The committee wants to continue to improve the college so that it becomes one of the best engineering colleges in UP and then in India, but it requires the help of the

citizenry in Bijnor. There is a mentality in India that things should be provided without the people's direct involvement, but they must learn that, if they want an institution like the College in Bijnor, then they need to contribute to it in some way: in cash, in kind, or through some other sort of help, such as assisting at events such as these.

In these ways, the manager is portrayed by those around him as the town's supreme benefactor. This image is reinforced by his ability to persuade the senior government officials in Bijnor, the District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police, to attend some of his school functions. But the middle classes of Bijnor are showing up the hollowness of these claims, not just by staying away from the manager's political bandwagons, but in more direct ways as well.

### **Contesting meanings**

The locations of buildings, their naming practices, their design and arrangement 'have been manipulated so as to present the current social hierarchy as natural and permanent' and that what we have here is an 'urban form as an ideological project' (Philo & Kearns 1993: 13). To what extent is this a project of displaying 'what constitutes a 'good' or 'proper' way of living' (Kearns & Philo 1993: ix) being challenged?

There were some apparently spontaneous refusals to engage with aspects of the functions. For example, at the end of the first Engineering College function, the final item was a speech by a senior male student that was cut off. The student became angry when the College Proctor told him not to mention the allegedly poor standards of teaching and teachers at the college, the student demands to be allowed to rag the first year students,<sup>xv</sup> and for improvements in the accommodation. The student later apologised and finished with a simple 'I wish you all well'. Immediately after this half-hearted apology, most of the male students rushed away from the

floodlit function area towards the exit from the college grounds, explicitly rejecting the snacks that had been laid out for them and embarrassing the director, teachers and the manager. A small group of students talked to the director and the manager, but the director told them that since they agreed with the protestors they should also leave, and they did so. After the function the Proctor resigned.

Most subversions were less direct. The speeches of the District Magistrate and the headmaster of the Arya Boys' Inter-College at the Sports Days were simply ignored. Collecting so many young people together is always a risk to public order, and the following year students of the boys' Inter-College fought those of the Engineering College.<sup>xvi</sup> There is also contestation over what should be presented on these occasions, with the more cosmopolitan managers objecting to the reliance on film music and the practice of including a cross-dressed boy doing a girl's dance.<sup>xvii</sup>

More generalised opposition to the whole project was provided by the people who criticised the manager for naming the schools after members of his own family. No other Bijnor schools were named after family members, though some were named after prominent outsiders, for instance Jagjivan Ram, the former Union Minister from an untouchable caste background. Some disputed the benefits of the Engineering College, since the only seats available to them were the 'paying' ones, far too expensive to be taken up by local residents. The manager's desire to open a Medical College in the town, as his lifetime achievement, had widespread support, but others argued that it would only bring glory to the family trust, since no students from Bijnor could afford to study there.

Tuition after school is also as a morally ambiguous arena, one of increasing conflict between teachers, management and pupils that highlights some contests over educational meanings, especially, but not only, in NW Bijnor, since much tuition is offered in residential

colonies like Awās Vikās. The rising significance of tuition reflects a ‘curricularisation’ of everyday life, but it is also a sign of a withdrawal of legitimacy from the schools, by teachers and pupils and/or their parents. Parents complain that teachers do not teach properly in schools, or threaten pupils with failure in internal examinations, in order to pressurise pupils to take private tuition with them. Most people seem to believe that there is a law against tuition, though the official in charge of secondary schooling in the district explained that teachers must get permission from the management or the principal to take on one or two tuition classes. He said that this rule was not being followed, and some teachers took many batches, but if the government wanted to stop tuition they could do so. But he also expressed his own ambivalence about the practice, noting that there is considerable demand from parents and pupils, who are also the people who complain. No-one supports teachers who ‘compel’ pupils to take tuition, either by outright demands, by failing students who do not take tuition, or by failing to teach properly in school. Many teachers argue that there is no reason why they should not be allowed to do tuition, since pupils request it and because it is hard to give pupils individual attention when class sizes are so high, but even they criticise teachers who seem to be motivated solely by commercial factors, as one teacher explained:

Teachers are being defamed because people are saying that they are forcing children to take tuition, but children and their parents want tuition to be arranged. Every child is taking tuition, whether they are Science side or Arts side. Without tuition the children themselves don’t progress. It is not at all unusual for children to take four, five or six tuitions, but no children take less than four. That makes Rs 1000 rupees at the end of the month, for sure. Why will teachers oppose this? But I have seen teachers who are

willing to be beaten [by a student] in order to teach in tuitions. They accept a beating if it means that they will get tuition work, because their ‘aim’ is to make money.

And another one suggested: ‘Their aim isn’t to teach; their aim is to make money. There is a Sanskrit saying: ‘by hook or by crook they have to seek wealth’. Now they have to bear so much shame, but they certainly give tuitions.

The society management feels, not surprisingly, that teachers should be disciplined to teach properly within the school, but were hamstrung by the lack of control they had over teachers whose salaries were paid by the Government. The manager was unable to sack a teacher who gave higher marks to pupils who took tuition from him. The teacher’s increment was stopped because ‘He had done such a wrong thing, it was immoral. What distinction would there be between a foolish and an intelligent boy? It was very bad.’ Although the Society tried to ban tuition by the teachers it paid, it was unsuccessful, as the chairman of a college committee pointed out:

We have banned tuition. ... we have put out a directive that tuition is banned and if anyone is caught doing it there will be serious consequences and they could maybe be dismissed. ... But having said that, we are not pro-actively going round trying to catch them. Mostly we find that it is other teachers jealously complaining about someone, or some parents complain.

Tuitions certainly provide opportunities for very different, less hierarchical and less formal relationships to develop between teachers and pupils, which some see as a threat to discipline within the school. Others, especially boys, see tuition as an opportunity to escape the home for a while, and to tour around the town on their bicycles, whereas girls are more likely to go and come back directly. Our evidence suggests that tuition classes are dominated by boys, but

nonetheless, tuitions are also social spaces where unrelated boys and girls can occasionally meet on neutral territory.

Tuition also, of course, tends to exclude: tutors are often selected from family, caste and religious networks, and given the costs involved, tuition systematically tends to reduce the chances of poor children—even those from Scheduled Caste backgrounds who have scholarships to help keep them in school—from being able to use education to gain social mobility.

## **Conclusion**

We have shown that the manager and other members of his charitable society are trying to manipulate the cultural resources represented by the schools they manage ‘to engineer consensus amongst the residents of their localities ... [about] what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘proper’ way of living’ (Kearns & Philo 1993: ix). They use their own cultural and social capital to project particular visions of modernity, progress and success, ones that are seamlessly linked with their own life-worlds, highly westernised, international in orientation, and secular. In some measure, these meanings mesh well with those being chosen by teachers, students, and other members of the urban elite, as can be seen from the explicit messages communicated in the skits put on at the functions organised at the Engineering College and at the Girls’ Inter-College. But increasingly, such meanings are being contested and undermined, as ‘Hindutva’ (a Hindu way of life) models of modernity and Hindu symbols and iconography become integral to the everyday practices of these institutions. Bijnor’s new middle class, which dominates the new *colonies*, the civil lines and most of the wealthier parts of the old town like the commercial life as well as government service, are using their dominance of the teaching profession and of the student bodies at these institutions to push Muslim and

Scheduled Caste children to the margins of this modernity. These moves are consonant with developments at the level of the UP State, which has been dominated by a BJP-led Government until the 2002 elections, and that of the Central Government in which the BJP led a coalition from 1999 to 2004. These years saw a major push by the BJP to claim the academic worlds of historical research and teaching for a revised, Hindutva model, a push which was accepted if not actively welcomed by teachers in Bijnor. The manager's society is also facing competition from expensive, English-medium schools and colleges or from explicitly religious foundations, both Hindu and Muslim. What is clear, however, is that all of these changes tend to undermine the Nehruvian models which underpinned the society schools from their inception. The imagined futures that gave these models meaning have turned out to be illusory: if the new visions of the future also turn out to be unreal, the scapegoats - the excluded Muslims and Scheduled Castes - are already being prepared to suffer the consequences.

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<sup>ii</sup> As far as we are aware population data by religion by urban area have not been published since 1971. In the Bijnor urban agglomeration Hindus probably now outnumber Muslims, since Hindus predominate in the new colonies, though Muslims probably predominate in the area controlled by the municipal board.

<sup>iii</sup> In UP, secondary schools that teach classes 6-12 are usually known as Intermediate or Inter-Colleges.

<sup>iv</sup> The *numâish* ground is also a space noted for assignations between young men and women.

<sup>v</sup> Brighter urban children try to get admission to the government-funded boys' and girls' Inter-colleges, which have even lower fees and higher academic reputations.

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<sup>vi</sup> The Bijnor Inter-College, the Muslim Girls Middle School, the Rahimya Public School, and Jalaluddin High School, as well as *madrasas* are managed by the Muslim *qasba* elite and are, by contrast, dominated by Muslims.

<sup>vii</sup> Scheduled Caste (SC) children were well represented in the Government schools, which reflects the reservation of places for them.

<sup>viii</sup> Although there were no checks on people attending these functions, informal social controls ensured that the audiences were restricted in practice to men and women from the middle and upper sections of Bijnor society.

<sup>ix</sup> This is only one among many examples of how these schools are connected to educational practices elsewhere in India and further afield. For example, the chairman of the engineering college is also a Vice-Chairman of the Delhi Public Schools; the nephew of the manager, who is taking over some of his functions is also on the board of the United World College in Pune. Family links to the Doon School, India's nearest equivalent to Eton or Harrow, are also exceptionally strong.

<sup>x</sup> Each of these successes, of course, takes the successful student away from Bijnor, not only for higher study but for careers that Bijnor town cannot offer.

<sup>xi</sup> The issue of time-keeping was important the following year, when the District Superintendent of Police was the chief guest: he arrived late, when the organisers were debating whether to start the proceedings without him, since the children were all sitting ready.

<sup>xii</sup> At the Sports Day the two Hindi-medium schools were far more successful at keeping time in the group aerobics than was the public school, whose Principal said that she did not take these events very seriously because they interrupted the scholastic activities of her school.

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<sup>xiii</sup> *Anushasan ke bina vidhyarthi na to sabhya nagrik ban sakta hai.*

<sup>xiv</sup> During the Mandal and Ayodhya disturbances of 1990-91, boys from the college were said to have taunted girls en route from Bijnor town to the degree college, and to have challenged them—especially those thought to be Muslims—to respond to greetings of ‘Jai Shri Ram’.

<sup>xv</sup> Ragging is illegal in UP.

<sup>xvi</sup> The Inter-College boys jeered the Engineering College girls’ folk dance. The police broke up the fight, but one boy had a cut head. The two institutions also compete over the use of common playing fields.

<sup>xvii</sup> Muslims particularly object to cross-dressing, explicitly seen as sinful in the Qur’ân. The Principal of a *madrasa* on the other side of Bijnor scoffed that he saw the children putting on a dance show inside a public school ‘So now I believe that all they do in that school is teach children how to dance, I don’t think they offer any education! So they are teaching their children how to dance and we are teaching our children Quran Sharif’.