**ISSN: 2456-9550**
**JMC**
**November 2019**

# Interview

# PERSPECTIVES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION AND NEP 2020
# A CONVERSATION WITH
# PROFESSOR MEENAKSHI THAPAN

***Interviewer:***

**MADHULIKA SONKAR**

Email: madhulika.sonkar@gmail.com

Department of Sociology, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi

**Volume 4, 2020**

**THE JMC REVIEW**

***An Interdisciplinary Social Science Journal of Criticism, Practice and Theory***

http://www.jmc.ac.in/the-jmc-review/content/

**JESUS AND MARY COLLEGE**
**UNIVERSITY OF DELHI**
**NEW DELHI-110021**

# PERSPECTIVES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION AND NEP 2020 A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR MEENAKSHI THAPAN

**MADHULIKA SONKAR***

## Introduction

Prof. Meenakshi Thapan is a distinguished sociologist and educationist. She is currently the Director of the Rishi Valley Education Centre, under the aegis of the Krishnamurti Foundation India, in rural Andhra Pradesh. She recently retired as Professor of Sociology and Director, Delhi School of Economics, and Co-ordinator of the D.S. Kothari Centre for Science, Ethics and Education, University of Delhi. Her work in the field of education has focused on schools and schooling processes in India and in Vancouver and Paris. She has also worked in the areas of migration in the context of Indian immigrants in the Italian countryside, and embodiment and womanhood in contemporary India. Prof. Thapan is the author of numerous books, research papers and articles in several prominent publications. She is currently Series Editor of *Education and Society in South Asia*, Oxford University Press (2018–2022).

**Madhulika Sonkar (MS):** It has been a year since you moved to Rishi Valley (RV) after more than four decades of illustrious work as a sociologist at the University of Delhi. How do you look back at the transition from the University to now being in the middle of the school where it all began?

**Meenakshi Thapan (MT):** Being an anthropologist/sociologist and an impassioned fieldworker go hand in hand. To my mind, the cognitive is inseparable from the psychological and the personal. Hence, what one thinks, writes about, and makes sense of as an anthropologist in the field, is deeply connected to one's emotions, feelings, and experience of being an ethnographer in a community. Despite being deeply committed to my role as a fieldworker in 1980, and conscious of my tasks, I did not see any division between the field (Rishi Valley) and myself. I did not experience a sense of marked distance, alienation, or separation from the field. In other words, what I was observing in the daily life of school processes and practices was not playing out, in front of me, for my observation. Rather, I was experiencing everything through my cognitive, psychological and embodied experience of being in the field. There was complete 'ethnographic immersement', as Marilyn Strathern puts it in *The Ethnographic Effect I* (1999), and an amalgamation of experience. I did not leave the field 'behind' me when I returned to the university

* Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi. Email: madhulika.sonkar@gmail.com.

to write up my thesis or get on with my academic career. Rishi Valley came with me everywhere; it had become an inescapable part of my consciousness and personhood. In that sense, Rishi Valley does not exist as a physical space alone. There is an ethos, an atmosphere that is communicated to whoever is open to it. It is this experience that made me an indelible part of Rishi Valley, or the other way around, and that has made the 'transition' to being here so very simple and profound at the same time.

**MS: The last seven months during the pandemic have brought inequalities of access to education in the spotlight for academics and policymakers. This attention is not sudden; the pandemic seems to have exacerbated questions of differences and inequalities. How would you make sense of the shifts in teaching and learning processes during COVID-19?**

**MT**: Inequalities of access have not only become more visible, but have heightened as well. Access depends on many factors including availability of schooling for all. Despite the RTE Act (2009), this bridge has not yet been crossed. However, access to schools and enrollment are not enough. The really tough part is keeping students in school through a provision of interesting, useful and child-friendly material, engaged teaching, and above all, a non-authoritarian and enriching atmosphere in the classroom. To do this online, while living through the pandemic, is even more difficult. The shifts in teaching methods through an online mode, despite best efforts results in some intangible costs, including a poor connect with the material or with the teacher, lack of peer interaction and support, and low individual feedback from teachers, apart from the physical and psychological strains of working online for long periods. As for those who have little or no access to the internet, the costs are very high for we are in fact denying them the education they have a right to. We should have better ideas for enabling education without physical attendance. This needs advance planning and commitment to every child, something sorely lacking in this country. Do we for example have educational access for children of migrants or nomadic tribes or do they lie outside our frame of reference? Are their teachers and teacher-learning material mobile like them? Unless we can begin to seriously address questions such as these, we will continue to lag behind in our plans for educational access for all.

**MS: The educational spaces of Rishi Valley are situated in a complex setting. In the sense, there are students from diverse backgrounds becoming part of the educational environment at RV. The rural education centre, satellite schools, and Rishi Valley School cater to students from diverse social and economic backgrounds. In that case how has the closing of educational institutions and shift to online teaching and learning affected the students and teachers involved?**

**MT**: Rishi Valley is a unique space. There are children from diverse backgrounds in the fee-paying school, in our rural middle school which is also residential, as well as in our seven satellite schools. The shift to online teaching has been smooth in the fee-paying residential school where students are from all over the country and have access to computers although perhaps not internet in equal measure. In grades 4–7, we are meeting students only once a day in one subject to discuss the material that is posted online for them to work on at home. Grade 8 onwards, we have a schedule and more regular online teaching. However, many students have expressed the view that they eagerly want to return to school to be with their friends, to play sports, and to engage with teachers face to face rather than through this online mode.

In the residential rural middle school, the students have all been sent home and study material is sent to the students weekly through Whatsapp groups, and it is also posted online. Some students who do not have access to the internet have been provided phones by the teachers. The material is then collected weekly and corrections are shared with students. In the hamlets, where our satellite schools are located, teachers visit once a week with material and handouts and work with children individually or in small groups, with support from parents and the community. Once they have corrected the material, these are returned to the children with follow-up weekly meetings. This is a completely offline programme and works well as teachers are in touch with the children even if it is through a weekly visit. I think this is probably the best method we are using and is possible only because the hamlets are very small, children very few, and teachers are from the local areas and can visit the villages. In the larger scheme of things, this shows us that we need to conceive different approaches to both online and offline teaching, working with students, and focus our energies to try and build on personal interaction between teachers and children wherever possible.

**MS: This brings me to my next question. The categories of 'alternative' and 'mainstream' have been instrumental in shaping educational research on schools. For sociologists working in the field of education, what have been the epistemological implications of such categorisations?**

**MT**: I am of the view that all schools, if they are affiliated to a state, national or an international school board, are mainstream. By categorising some schools as 'alternative', we are in fact doing a disservice to the efforts of these schools to bring in different approaches and perspectives, novel methods, innovative pedagogies, and a mixed curriculum to schools. We oppose these to so-called 'mainstream' schools. These so-called alternative schools are mainly private, run by a Trust or a Registered Society, and are concerned with the overall development of the child. The difference lies in their flexibility to address problems and constraints set by the board and the official curriculum, their pedagogy, and the resources at their command. Mainstream schools can also aspire to these aims and methods but a failure to do so is primarily because of the expectations by state governments about teacher performance and accountability judged primarily by students' success at examinations.

By labelling schools as 'alternative', sociologists tend to slot them into a category and argue that it is easier for such schools to attain their goals because they are alternative. They are also ignored for study precisely because they are seen as not making a larger contribution to the vast landscape of schooling in India. There is a danger in this. By shutting them out from our purview as sociologists, we tend to ignore or neglect the work they do and thereby its significance for other kinds of schools is, perhaps, lost. By engaging with these 'alternative' schools, sociologists would bring forth a slew of ideas, methods, perspectives, approaches to teaching/learning that would in fact provide invaluable resources to many other schools that would benefit in different ways.

**MS: Do you think the category of 'alternative' has also limited the ways in which we locate institutions such as Rishi Valley School or the Aurobindo schools, among others, in the larger paradigm of schooling in India?**

**MT**: Yes, it has certainly limited the ways in which sociologists of education view such schools. I have often heard the phrase: 'Oh...Krishnamurti institutions cater only to the elite!' from sociologists and educators. Clearly, they have not attempted to understand the vast range of the educational work that Krishnamurti Foundation (India) institutions are engaged in. Apart from our rural education initiatives in all our centres, the fee-paying school has always taken in children from underprivileged and marginalised sections of society. These children are provided remedial education to bring them at par with other children and every effort has been made to be inclusive and open. This however is rarely acknowledged by educators who consider Krishnamurti schools 'alternative' and serving the elite.

You mention the Aurobindo school. In Puducherry, there is the school run by the Sri Aurobindo ashram known as the ashram school as well as some other schools at Auroville run by members of the Auroville community. These schools award their own school leaving certificates and may be considered truly alternative. Their approach is known as 'free progress' where children work on subjects they may choose, at their own pace, facilitated by a teacher. Teachers guide students through various projects and students learn about a variety of subjects as they go through school. There are many other schools that develop their own curriculum and pedagogic methods and we need to study them and learn from their experience and outcomes. It is so easy to dismiss such schools as being 'alternative' and therefore in some sense privileged to do things their way. Even so, they have something to offer and we need to pay attention to such schools and understand them much more than we have done so far.

**MS: In one of your recent interviews, you talk about the role of Krishnamurti's social and moral vision for inclusive education. In the contemporary context, when the lives of children and youth are increasingly becoming entrenched in questions of identity, violence, hatred, economic and ecological crisis, do you think Krishnamurti's educational thought can give some direction for addressing these issues through everyday schooling processes in diverse kinds of formal and informal education endeavours?**

**MT**: In the current context, where divisiveness, violence and hatred seem to define human relations, Krishnamurti's work is even more relevant. Krishnamurti has raised significant questions about the state of the world, about our tendency to remain passive, conditioned and in a state of overwhelming confusion about how we relate to the world. His method, that he articulated through his talks and writings spread over many decades and geographical locations, delineates an unconditioned, reflective approach and emphasises self-inquiry. This may lead to a transformation in our relationship to people, nature, objects, and ideas. Krishnamurti argued that our minds are so conditioned that we are unable to look, listen or learn without our prior knowledge that foregrounds the role of memory and time. He therefore highlighted the need to work with young children whose minds are fresh, and free of the burden of memory, excessive knowledge, or ingrained ways of acting, thinking, and being.

Krishnamurti considered education to be the means through which teachers and children could work together in an atmosphere of freedom, without fear, authority, competition or comparison, to help understand our psychological processes as well as gain academic and technological skills.

The school is in fact the centrepiece of Krishnamurti's vision for psychological development and educational excellence. It is within an educational setting that Krishnamurti hopes the seeds for individual and social change will be planted and grow through a nurturing, affectionate and enabling environment.

At the same time, Krishnamurti emphasised an inclusive education that did not leave out children from different sections of society. The Krishnamurti schools in India have significant outreach initiatives with some running well-established rural education programmes. Krishnmurti's vision informs the methodology used by these schools and is central to the ways in which the schools have been planned in relationship with the community, and the ecological environment, in which they are located.

**MS: As we speak of the significance of Krishnamurti's ideas for a larger vision of education, it would be interesting to understand the rural school methodologies, such as the widely acknowledged, Multigrade-Multilevel (MGML) Programme. How do you understand the role of the MGML method in primary school learning, especially in terms of bringing the school, parents, teachers, and the village community into a relationship?**

**MT**: Apart from Krishnamurti's focus on inclusive education that underpins Rishi Valley's rural education programme, I would like to emphasise Amartya Sen's view in his well-known work, *Development as Freedom* (OUP, 1999). Sen has persuasively argued that 'Freedoms are not only the primary ends of development; they are also among its principal means.' In other words, the processes through which we seek to bring about development must reflect the intent of development. If we consider individual freedom as being central to our understanding of human and social development, the means too need to enable freedom in the very processes that engender development.

To do this, we need to work at the local level, with the stakeholders, with interventions that can be scaled up over a period of time. Beginning locally, with the community, and fulfilling their goals and aspirations in the most equitable manner is perhaps what makes the contribution of civil society initiatives imperative in the vast landscape and diverse people-scape that constitutes India. It is in this context of building agency, both among children and teachers, in elementary school classrooms, that the Rishi Valley Institute of Educational Resources (RiVER) initiated its pedagogic method, the Multigrade-Multilevel (MGML) in the 1980s.

The current context in which schools in this country exist is not one that is conducive to learning. There is often one teacher in a multigrade setting. Over 150,000 schools in India have a single teacher with the state of Madhya Pradesh leading and Uttar Pradesh second. This emerges out of necessity, rather than choice. Almost all such schools are government-run at the primary level, with the student strength ranging between 50 and 100. This is clearly not the best situation for our children to be in. In addition, in all our schools, the predominant mode of teaching is through the textbook which is sacrosanct for teachers. They tend to teach line by line from the textbook and students are expected to memorise sentences and entire paragraphs to be reproduced in examinations. As a method, this reliance on textbooks fails to help children learn, and induces boredom and alienation as textbooks do not often reflect the sociocultural or economic realities of

students' lives. Students develop techniques and skills for rapid memorisation, and often resort to 'cheating' to pass examinations.

As a result, classrooms are dominated by teachers and textbooks, learning is circumscribed and children are bored. There is little relationship between schools, parents and the community. And the drop-out figures for children from elementary and middle school are very high.

Understanding this scenario, Rama and Padmanabha Rao, between 1988–1992, developed a unique structure for elementary education at Rishi Valley that consists of a network of Satellite Schools where a community-based curriculum is taught by village youth trained in especially designed multilevel methodologies. The education kit, known as School in aBox, contains a series of carefully graded cards, replaces textbooks in the area of language, mathematics and environmental science, and closely follows the curriculum as mandated by the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005. Each card in the graded series is marked with a logo (rabbit, elephant, dog) and mapped on to a subject-specific 'Learning Ladder', a progress guide which traces out the learning trajectory for students. Spaces on the ladder are sub-divided into a set of milestones. These milestones consist of cards that explain a concept—the applications of the concept, evaluation of students' understanding and, finally, provide means of testing, remediation or enrichment. A student identifies her own place on the ladder and creates, within the broad confines of the milestones, her own path from grade 1 to grade 5.

RiVER sees education as a tool for deepening the student's sense of herself, of her traditions and roots, while also exposing her to a wider knowledge base. This community-based model of education also incorporates ideals such as tolerance for other cultures, protection of the environment, preservation of folklore and local medicinal traditions. Empty spaces are interspersed throughout the learning process to allow teachers to incorporate local stories, folk melodies, puzzles, nursery rhymes and puppetry. The focus is on reviving the traditional culture so that the richness of the local culture and the teachers' own creative impulses are present and active in classrooms. At the same time, our methods encourage silent self-study and individualised learning, though teacher instruction and group work are also a necessary part of the learning process. Fast learners may progress while slower learners are allowed to work at their own pace. Students absent from school do not lose out, as they are able to start from the space in the Learning Ladder where they left off. RiVER does not want every student to be at one homogenised level ordained by textbooks with uniform content. We believe this practice irons out cultural differences and alienates a student from her own roots, and our effort has instead been to build this relationship through sustained interaction with the parents and the community.

The agency of an individual who is able to bring about change rests on her lived experience in the family, community, and in the educational process that provides the capabilities for realising freedom/s. With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help one another. Experiencing gender equality in the elementary school classroom in an atmosphere free of authoritarian culture—and so free from fear—and learning life skills is both nurturing and empowering for the fostering of freedom. Our experience with the MGML method across the country and in partnership with other countries, shows us that it is possible to achieve this in great measure.

**MS: Prof. Thapan, in your monumental research on schools across diverse contexts, situating the 'teacher' as an agential participant in educational processes has been a prominent aspect. The teacher is not relegated as meek or docile in relation to the macro structures. Drawing insights from your ongoing work on teacher education and pedagogic approaches in Rishi Valley Education Centre, how do you think teachers can become stakeholders of pedagogic processes in a real sense?**

**MT**: At RiVER, the effort has been to empower the teacher and help her understand her role as being central to the entire process of schooling. The teacher at RiVER develops material, prepares the classroom, and engages with the community before interacting with the children in a continuous and lasting process. She knows that her role is critical to the successful implementation of the programme and she endeavours, with support and encouragement, to fulfil her responsibilities. While teachers do resist efforts in becoming 'docile' state subjects, the system in place nonetheless tends to demotivate and disempower them, by not allowing them any space in the 'classification or framing of knowledge', as Basil Bernstein (1977) has famously argued, nor allowing them to teach using innovative pedagogic methods. The focus is on completing the syllabi and for the students to pass examinations. Teachers, on their part, appear to focus much of their time and attention on maintaining 'discipline' in overcrowded classrooms with students who are victims of an outdated and alienating educational practice, a legacy of colonialism. Teachers are in some sense 'meek dictators', to use Krishna Kumar's memorable phrase, as they exercise authoritarian control over dozens of children but actually have no power at all in either the formulation of the curriculum or in its transaction. This is the tragic condition in which most teachers find themselves.

To work against this situation, and to establish a programme that gives agency to teachers, RiVER has been engaged in creating a formal course for educating elementary school teachers. The Rishi Valley Teacher Enrichment Programme (RTEP) is based on the guidelines of the NCF 2005 and the principles laid down in the National Council for Teachers' Education syllabus for Diploma in Elementary Education. The course is aimed at communicating pedagogical ideas and associated concepts to both urban and rural teachers, in simple and straightforward ways using an array of textual and audio-visual aids. We mean to transact the course through a simple and accessible technological interface. We propose to make this package available to the state education departments as part of capacity building collaborations between RiVER and the state governments to enhance the quality of teacher training programmes undertaken by the state agencies.

Each unit, consisting of curated multimedia content, is followed by reflective questions, suggestions for extending the teacher's learning experience and for translating experience into activity and inquiry-based classrooms practices. The course, in short, is an amalgamation of in-depth subject knowledge, pedagogical tools, reflective questions, learning experiences and activity suggestions that can be incorporated in schools. The programme enables teachers to stoke their imagination by helping them contextualise, compare and consolidate their ideas for better classroom preparation, so that they become academic leaders. We feel that without teacher readiness, not only as educators, but importantly, as leaders in the field of education, teacher autonomy will be compromised and learning outcomes will remain dismal and below par.

**MS: In its larger emphasis on preparing students for 'problem solving' and 'critical thinking', the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 acknowledges the need to bring teachers to the centrestage for any educational reform to work. The NEP 2020 lays out the task of overhauling teacher training, recruitment and professional development by preparing teachers for a merit-based approach and technological adaptability. It also has an interesting outlook for discontinuing transfers for teachers. In framing policies that aim at teachers' growth by devoting a set number of hours for continuous professional development, as the NEP 2020 does, do you think we tend to miss out the more complex questions of teachers' status, working conditions, contractualisation, salaries and autonomy, especially for teachers at the grassroots?**

**MT**: All policies in the domain of education must address the problems that beset teachers and teacher education. The NEP 2020 appears to make a significant step in this direction. What is noteworthy is the effort to train teachers in rural areas through a scholarship and employment programme. The policy also pays attention to service conditions, frequent transfers, and overwhelming administrative tasks. The recommendation that teachers are to 'be given more autonomy in choosing aspects of pedagogy, so that they may teach in the manner they find most effective for the students in their classrooms' (NEP 2020) is noteworthy. This is a very radical shift in perception of a teacher's role in the classroom. However, as there is no blueprint for implementation, it is not clear how such a drastic change will be effected. Teachers have been handcuffed to a traditional method of teaching from the textbook, according to a set syllabi, and it would require creative ways of re-training in-service teachers as well as student trainees, to enable them to embrace their autonomy and engage with innovative methods.

Teacher training programmes need to endorse such policy initiatives in their syllabi, so it remains to be seen what kinds of recommendations emerge for reconstituting the curriculum for these programmes. It is imperative that we develop a detailed implementation plan alongside policy recommendations. Else, they contain the possibility of failure in their very formulation.

At the same time, policies need to pay attention to the different kinds of situations that prevail on the ground in a country as diverse, multifaceted, and complex as India. Understanding remote regions, hilly terrains, tribal hamlets, nomadic movement, and other complexities prevalent in a large and diverse landscape is essential. This would require detailed study, and the formulation of a teacher education programme that is wide ranging and inclusive. Some amount of planning and skill would be required to have a diverse teacher training programme for the different kinds of schools we may have in vastly different regions of India. To my mind, the key lies in training teachers appropriately and continuously updating this training through periodic in-service interventions. Teacher autonomy would be upheld when teachers are adequately skilled to work in different conditions and contexts with diverse groups of children. At the same time, their working conditions, salaries and other issues could be dealt with both at the national level but also, locally, where conditions would perhaps vary depending on location. A catch-all, one-size fit all policy for all teachers would be an ineffectual exercise and would defeat the very purpose of overhauling teacher education and teachers' working lives in local contexts.

**MS: There are some significant aspects pertaining to curricular shifts in the NEP 2020. Like some of the earlier educational policies, vocational skill-building and equipping children with**

**'21st century skills' is back in attention, even as these skills may be 'coding'. The fluidity between disciplinary streams of Arts and Sciences is also being seen on a positive note. How would you assess the constant shift to vocational training in terms of its impact on holistic learning and development of the child?**

**MT**: First of all, let me say that, to some extent, NEP 2020 attempts to break away from Macaulay's (*Minute on Education*, 1835) legacy which is still in place in all our schools. We have inherited a British system of education, with an overwhelming emphasis on English medium education, strict demarcation between disciplines, a chalk and talk method, reliance on textbooks, a westernised uniform for children to wear to school, and so much else. MK Gandhi attempted to establish an 'Indian' kind of education; his idea of *Nai Talim* was based on his view that unless children were taught in their mother tongue, valued manual labour, and learnt from the local environment in which they were based, India could never hope to do away with westernised education, the English language or with servitude of the mind. This did not find much currency in the political set-up post-independence and with Gandhi's death, his vision of education was lost except in some small pockets in the country. These were known as Gandhian schools and have slowly been falling victim to lack of government support and leadership, resources, and also a disinterested population.

The NEP 2020 seeks to bring in some elements of this perspective while at the same time aspiring to stay in touch with modernity, with an effort to develop 'critical thinking' and a 'holistic' individual. We thus find a great deal of emphasis on the development of 'Knowledge of India' and of 'Indian' values in children, and teaching in the mother tongue in the early years. The diversity of India, including all religious and ethnic minorities, must be celebrated in the presentation of these values. At the same time, they must not be codified or become a kind of moral science that needs to be indoctrinated into a docile student body. In fact, the best examples or values, if you will, are communicated through the relationships between teachers and their students, not through classes on 'ethics' or moral behaviour. The NEP 2020 has also said that teaching in the mother tongue is 'recommended'. While this may be appreciated by many who believe that education in the mother tongue is essential in the early years, it would be difficult in a region like Chhattisgarh, for example, where Chhattisgarhi is only one language and there are many spoken dialects. So will schools in different areas have different mother tongues? How will the material be prepared differently for each state and for each dialect or language? It is however only a recommendation and therefore not an imposition on those who do not wish to subscribe to this method. In an effort to modernise the curriculum, it is recommended that 'coding' is to be introduced at the middle stage, which is when most private schools seek to implement it in any case. The NEP 2020 wishes to bring this and other such contemporary tools as subjects or activities into the government school sector.

As for vocational and skill-based education, the NEP is suggesting that children be introduced to it at the younger stage in a 'fun' manner (perhaps they mean in the form of different kinds of activities in school). Later, it is proposed to pay attention to vocational and skill-based learning for students in a phased manner so that by the time they are in higher education, they can opt for it in the natural scheme of things. There is no doubt that in this country we tend to look down on vocational and skill-based learning and consider it an option for only those whom we see as failing to fit into the main disciplinary streams that are dominated by science. We have a burgeoning

population and it is important that young people feel they have a choice, and that choice has a basis in a serious curriculum, and quality of education, as indeed do other disciplinary streams. As of now, the Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) are dismal places with poor quality education and lacklustre teachers and resources. Any effort to improve this sector of education need not necessarily be viewed with suspicion or mistrust. It is part of a holistic education we seek to empower our children and youth with. Educands must not think they alone are the beneficiaries of education because they have studied science or its subsidiaries, are engaged in frontier research, or study in business colleges. Those who study other undergraduate courses in the humanities, the arts, or in vocational training should not have to carry a stigma or face unemployment. Their education must receive the same benefits equally as do other more 'elite' or 'mainstream' educational institutions and their disciplines.

There is a particular emphasis on 'multidisciplinarity' in higher education in NEP 2020 which offers the potential for a seriously holistic form of education even as children move from the secondary to the higher education stage. The NEP 2020 does not however tell us how this will be accomplished. What are the principles that underlie an interdisciplinary approach and how will these be realised? Those of us who have been in the field of university education know how difficult it is to even collaborate across departments in one tiny campus, such as the Delhi School of Economics, let alone when it is spread across an entire university. Teachers and departments have very busy schedules based on a rigorous but largely inwardly-looking curriculum. How will all this change into multidisciplinarity where departments have to reframe syllabi, reorganise teaching, share resources, talk to each other as equals, and share the same vision? Expanding territorial boundaries in disciplinary frameworks in academia has never been an easy task. My problem with NEP 2020 is that its Implementation Plan is brief, inadequate, and does not provide the framework within which such radical changes have to be made, whether at the level of institutional changes, ways of imagining education itself, curriculum, syllabi, teaching methods, assessment, student and teacher autonomy, and so much else. We first need a detailed implementation plan that must be based on inputs from all stakeholders, teachers, students and administrators, before anything can actually start happening on the ground.

**MS: The coming year marks three decades of the first edition of *Life at School*, also the first ethnography on a school in India. Would you like to reflect on the journey of a book that has significantly shaped the way ahead for scholars of educational research?**

**MT**: *Life at School* was published at a time (1991) when there were no available ethnographies of schooling in India. It was therefore considered a landmark both for its content (the many modes of interaction at a popular boarding school run on Krishnamurti's educational thought) as well as its method. It was based on my doctoral thesis and was concerned with closely understanding what life at school was all about. Actually, Prof. Andre Beteille, who was one of my teachers at the Delhi School of Economics, asked me one day at JP's tea stall while waiting for tea: 'Meenakshi, you are setting out on fieldwork, what do you intend to do?' While I was fumbling for an answer and muttering something about Krishnamurti and the school, he asked me to just try to understand what the school was all about, saying, 'What is life at school all about?' This question stayed with me not only during my fieldwork but also when I was writing about it, and hence became the title of the book. I am indebted to Prof. Beteille for helping me understand our primary role as ethnographers: to first and foremost understand the community, society, institution as a whole, as

it were. What makes it tick? How do people relate to one another in different settings, contexts, scenarios within a particular setting? In other words, how is sociality constituted? This was the question I started out with and it helped me shape my fieldwork over the year I spent at the school. Once the work was published, it received some attention, not just from sociologists of education, but also from those interested in the work of Krishnamurti. However, I must add that the interest in doing ethnographies of schools did not emerge until much later. It is not a method that is easily understood, especially in Education departments in this country. The discipline of psychology dominates and sociology has a limited appeal in many of these departments. It was only much later, when students understood the importance of this approach in unravelling schooling processes, that some ethnographies started emerging. Some imitated *Life at School*; I didn't mind because I got to read some really interesting work on schools! A notable example is Anjum Sibia's slim volume on *Life at Mirambika: A Free Progress School* (NCERT 2006). Over the years, students at the Delhi School of Economics and elsewhere have started doing ethnographies of not just schools but institutions of higher education as well. This is a welcome trend because it helps us understand how such institutions work through the everyday lived experience of the participants within them.

A new introduction to *Life at School* was written before it was published in its second edition (2006) where I addressed many of the questions and concerns that had been raised in reviews and personal communications. I also conducted interviews with some students and key administrators in the school to understand the changing practices in a school that is remarkably dynamic and constantly changing, without losing sight of Krishnamurti's vision—in fact engaging with it in uniquely different ways. This helped me to understand that there can never be a static view of anything we set out to study. We must ensure that we are fluid in our movement of understanding our field and appreciate its changing contours, shaped by aspirations and goals that may deeply vary from what they were forty, twenty or even fewer years ago. As anthropologists, we must therefore keep our eyes and mind open to the possibilities and potential for change as our field is in continuous movement. We must let go of encapsulated time in research and be part of a fluid and moving temporality to enhance our engagement with, and understanding of, our field on a continuing and sustained basis.

**MS: What are the ways in which the ethnographic mode of inquiry can help us go beyond qualitative and quantitative methods for unpacking experiences and aspirations in secondary and higher education in India?**

**MT**: Ethnography is a method that anthropologists have perfected over the years through rigorous use as well as through efforts to understand what makes this method unique. There has been reflection on the experience of fieldwork, soul-searching, some might say, navel gazing, to understand what makes this method so special in our efforts to understand society. But how much of 'us' is invested in the method? Is it only our minds or also our emotions? How does all this allow for 'good' research? Such questions have concerned anthropologists over the last forty years or so ever since the publication of TN Madan and Andre Beteille's collection of essays in *Encounter and Experience* (1975), James Clifford's novel collection *Writing Cultures* (1986), MN Srinivas's notable essay 'Studying One's Own Culture: Some Thoughts' (1992), and so much else.

The ethnographic method helps us get under the skin, so to speak, of a culture, community, institution, or whatever aspect of society we undertake to study. There are many routes to understand what goes on in the field of education: we may examine statistical information, conduct surveys and interviews, probe institutional frameworks, pore over documents, archival material, and other literature, and also do ethnography. The 'doing' of ethnography enables rich insights into educational worlds that simply cannot be understood through other methods. It is the act of what we might refer to as 'involved' observation, participation in the life of the community, and sustained interaction over long periods of time—from 1 year to 18 months—that makes ethnography such an indispensable method.

The field of higher education in India has been dominated by quantitative research, with the inclusion of some kind of qualitative material and analyses of its outcomes, whether these are to do with academic or financial aspects, career placements for students, career advancement schemes, teachers and leadership issues, privatisation, campus politics, and so on. Only recently, analyses of caste, gender, ethnicity in higher education have entered the discourse of higher education. To some extent, these have helped us to understand the diversity of experience of students who enrol for higher education, as well as of teachers in the system. However, to understand their goals, aspirations, dreams and desires, more nuanced work is necessary. Ethnography offers that potential as its basic premise is sustained interaction with the participants on a regular basis, observation, interviews, documentation, and quantitative analysis if necessary. A slew of tools hold up ethnography which we must not make the mistake of assuming as a method for mere storytelling or romanticising the field. Understanding the pervasiveness of caste inequality in higher education for example through ethnography, provides us with an in-depth understanding of how individuals experience caste exclusion, or that the core of their identity is marked in such a special way, as well as how upper-caste students and teachers choose to work with caste inequalities and its reproduction in the system.

Ethnographies of institutions of secondary education in India have taken off but are still slow to develop as a major methodology in the field of higher education. Ritty Lukose's work (2009) on an undergraduate college in Kerala is perhaps the first ethnography of its kind, and with Nandini Hebbar's doctoral work on private engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu (2019), is significant in seeking to unpack institutions of higher education through the lens of identity, gender, sexuality, middle-class-ness, and prevalent socioeconomic realities. Craig Jeffrey's excellent ethnography (2010) on two undergraduate colleges in Meerut, provides us with many insights into educated young men's lives as they wait endlessly for employment or something meaningful to take over their somewhat mundane and dull lives. Ethnographies lay bare the souls of institutions, and their participants, if this is indeed possible. Through deep and sustained interaction with participants, interviews, involvement in their daily routine, understanding their aspirations, goals, anxieties, dilemmas in a complex and quickly changing society, over several months and maybe years, a picture emerges, from which one can delineate one's inquiry in a sustained manner. The formality of a researcher in place is not present; she must become a fly on the wall, so to speak, invisible and absent, and yet completely present, through all that is going on, at all times. The skills to interview, to listen to chatter and folklore, as much as to formal interview material, are an essential part of an ethnographer's toolkit. Listening to students' voices as they gossip in dorms, or teachers in the staffroom, is as important as recording classroom observations or formal interviews with key personnel. Writing-up is part of the method of 'ethnographic immersement'. There is no

separation between observation, understanding, writing…all happen in the moment of understanding. This is what makes ethnography such a unique method and indispensable to the understanding of educational institutions with depth and rigour.

**MS: You express gratitude to Prof. Beteille for steering some very important questions pertaining to the ethnographic endeavour in your work. How have Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein influenced your work? In the larger context of the sociology of education, would you comment on how their approaches have shaped the discipline?**

**MT**: Well, Prof. Basil Bernstein was one of the examiners for my doctoral dissertation. He was very critical in his review of the thesis. One of the points he raised was that I had failed to observe or record any conflict in the school I had studied. The thesis had focussed mainly on how the participants create and constitute meaning in school through their everyday interactions with people, ideas, and activities. It emphasised and demonstrated how participants brought their own perceptions into the picture, through their actions, whether this was through being teachers, students, laughter, resistance, talk, play, folklore, and so much else. Yes, I did neglect conflict and its overt manifestations which I did not actually observe. But it was there in relationships and in the underbelly of school life. These were addressed in the thesis through an understanding of how relationships actually develop in everyday life through forms of authority, hierarchy, and so on. Basil Bernstein however was deeply concerned about the structures that shape society, the politics of social class, privilege and entitlement, and how this plays out in the field of education. He taught me to pay more focussed attention to examining the structures as they penetrate school life, whether or not we expect them to. They are, in other words, inevitable to our experience of being at school or university. This is revealed to us most evidently through Bernstein's work on social class and language, the exercise of social control through pedagogy, the curriculum, and its transaction, through identity, through just being part of an unequal society that fails to allow equity in education. Bernstein deepened and sharpened my understanding of education in a more sociologically nuanced sense than I had been taught at the department in the Delhi School of Economics. Unfortunately, the sociology of education was not considered a respectable subject within the department and generations of students passed through its portals believing this and reproducing this belief. I am glad to see however, that this has changed in more recent years with the presence of many colleagues who have worked on, and written about, education in one way or another. Bernstein was acutely aware of this discrepancy in sociology departments across the globe and continuously egged me on to lift education from 'the bottom of the pile' and help make it a more interesting subject for graduate students. I endeavoured to do this and I hope the years of hard work have paid off in some measure with many more students in the department now working on different aspects of the sociology of education for their pre-doctoral and doctoral studies.

Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu are considered the 'gurus' of the sociology of education! Through their work, they symbolised, for me at least, the most significant voices in understanding the warp and weft of the tapestry of educational practice. They have shaped the sociology of education in hugely influential ways much before Michael Apple, Henri Giroux, Peter McLaren, and others came along! Bourdieu in his inimitable style brought in a refreshing dimension. Like Bernstein, he too has emphasised structures, the importance of social position in determining the ways the social and cultural reproduction takes place through education. However, what I have found most useful in the context of education, is his bringing together structure and agency in the

understanding of social reality. His argument is that studying the 'structuring structures' alone reeks of objectivism, while examining agency in itself results in subjectivism, and that the two somehow need to co-exist in our sociological imagination. This, to my mind, is how we must seek to understand educational practice. It is not enough to only talk about how power works, or how social control is exercised in and through education, but to also simultaneously examine how agency works and how individuals are not completely subjugated by the oppressive structuring structures they encounter in everyday life. Agency also takes everyday forms and it is these we need to uncover and understand in order to establish the significance of human potential and endeavour to work, actively or implicitly, against power. His argument is that power works insidiously through education, not showing its face, which is why we fail to recognise it as such and 'misrecognition' or 'meconnaissance', as he put it, therefore further reproduces that power.

Bourdieu has developed key concepts such as the different forms of capital, habitus, field, doxa and symbolic control that are the basis for understanding how society works. He is perhaps one of the few sociologists whose work is not limited to education; he understood its significance in the production and reproduction of knowledge (I am reminded of his excellent essay, 'The Thinkable and the Unthinkable'), of social relations of power, of the ways in which symbolic control works, and importantly, how we may find agency in the most improbable spaces if we allow ourselves to listen and hear the voice of subalterns in an effort to uncover the nuanced exercise of both power as well as of the human possibilities to offer resistance. It is a rich legacy that both these stalwarts have left behind for scholars, especially for sociologists of education who venture to explore the deep structures of everyday life in educational fields.

**MS: Thank you for an insightful and enriching interview, Professor Thapan.**