

Md Aftab Alam. *Everyday Life at a Minority School: An Ethnographic Study*. Alter Notes Press, 2021, 187 pp., ₹700. ISBN: 9788194993186 (Hardback).

This book, titled *Everyday Life at a Minority School*, is an ethnographic account that explores the socio-cultural dimensions of a minority school—an Arabic school located in the old part of Delhi. The book is divided into nine chapters that carefully discuss aspects ranging from school ethnography- issues of selection and accessing the field to different curricula concerns and contestations contributing to understanding school as a social institution; hence, the book provides a slice of the social life of the Anglo-Arabic school (AAS).

The author begins with a discussion of the idea of conducting ethnographic studies. The first three chapters are introductory and describe the purpose and significance of the study. The first chapter builds the context for the readers and discusses the schooling processes and its cultural ethos. AAS, being the oldest minority (Muslim) institution, holds a strong historical value. It attracts a large number of students from the Muslim community who have played a prominent role in the functioning of the institution from its inception and still continue to do so. Through its legacy, the school captures the lives of the Muslim community by transmitting the values to different generations of learners from the same family that continue to be part of AAS.

The second chapter deals with different aspects of conducting school ethnography- tools of data collection, site selection, and issues related to access. Being the warden of the newly constructed boys' hostel helped him gain access to the inner functioning of the school. However, at the same time, Alam further discusses the reactions of different school stakeholders, such as teachers, who looked at him with suspicion and referred to him as '*Management ka aadmi*' (a person who works for the management) challenges encountered during the process, and negotiations made to sustain in the field. Thapan (1987) similarly observed that, during her research, she was regarded with suspicion by the school teachers, who believed she had been appointed by the school management for an inspection.

The fourth chapter, "Everyday Life and Occasional Happenings," delves into the everyday aspects and commonplace occurrences within the school's culture. It explores the

significance of routine activities and rituals, such as morning assemblies, recess break celebrations, and annual events, highlighting their importance to various school stakeholders. The author contends that these activities are more than mere routines; they express the school's beliefs and values (p. 61). The chapter also reflects teacher-student interactions during examinations and evaluations (pp. 63-65). Additionally, it provides an in-depth examination of hierarchy, surface-level interactions among stakeholders, and issues like group dynamics and clubs, painting a comprehensive picture of the Anglo-Arabic school's educators (pp. 66-69). However, more extensive use of verbatim quotes, field data, and thick descriptions would offer readers more profound insights into the school's complexities and realities. According to Geertz (1973), this thick description is at the heart of social anthropology, through which researchers understand how people think, feel, imagine, and perceive their world. Numerous scholarly works (Willis, 1977; Thapan, 1986; Dalal, 2014) have employed the method of thick description in their research investigations.

The fifth chapter helps readers look into the worldview of learners at the Anglo-Arabic school. Through this chapter, Alam captures minute details about the students' world, their perceptions about life, career aspirations, choices, challenges, coping abilities, etc. The chapter also discusses students' aspirations, participation in different co-curricular activities, leisure time involvement, and perceptions about sports activities.

Apart from Delhi, the school also attracts students from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, who see the school as an entry point to higher educational institutions like Jamia Milia Islamia, Aligarh Muslim University, etc. The author further delves into learners' career aspirations and job expectations that will allow them to transcend class boundaries and achieve a respectable position in society. It reflects what Dalal (2023) calls a utilitarian objective of education, i.e., education being perceived as a pathway to an improved life, offering the potential for a successful career and respect in society. The chapters also unravel the contradictions and dilemmas learners face regarding the school. While they look forward to their admissions, the school's stress on the Urdu language over English leaves them concerned about missing out on opportunities for success in life.

Chapter Six, Teachers' World, provides an opportunity for readers to enter into the teachers' world-recruitment policy, modes of selection (pp.106-107), their reasons behind joining the Anglo-Arabic school, and the challenges they faced in everyday professional life, especially with the students and the management of the school while completing different academic and non-academic roles that were assigned to them. Through case studies, the chapter discusses the aspects of teacher dynamics, their interactions, and their relationship with other colleagues. Various factors in their professional lives, for example, their position in the school, date of joining, regionalism, performance, and gender, contribute significantly to the hierarchy

and conflicts within the school, which not only leads to emotions of despair, disappointment, and dissatisfaction among the teachers on the individual level, while also impacts the social processes of the school and its functioning.

However, the author blames the teachers and shifts all the onus on them for the shortcomings in the institutional structure instead of calling the state agencies to assume responsibility for developing competencies among the teachers for the dynamic nature of educational needs. Dalal (2023) also contends that the above agreement and perceptions about teachers overlook the nuanced scholarship and the literature that views an integral component of the system as more like a 'meek dictator' (Kumar, 2005) rather than placing the blame on them.

The book also made only a passing reference to the issues of gender and caste. It failed to make an in-depth engagement with the intersectionalities of the above social categories, which could have led to a more profound examination and discussions that are integral to the everyday reality of social dynamics within an educational institution. The book further contends that teacher assessment should be an important parameter for their promotion. This approach further reinforces the behaviouristic and 'diagnostic' approach to assessment and learning (Dalal, 2023).

Chapter Seven, aptly titled "Student-Teacher Interaction: Formal and Informal," zeroes in on the dynamics between teachers and students in formal and informal settings. The chapter leverages classroom observations to offer insights into formal interactions within the school, and it effectively fulfils its goal of addressing informal interactions. It delves into the various strategies employed by teachers for classroom management and student control, including authoritarian techniques like calling out students by name and using intense gazes, which Hammersley (1977) categorizes as 'direct selection'. The author also presents instances of physical force being employed by teachers to assert authority and manage student behaviour. These classroom observations further provide nuances of how teachers not only control their students but also provide guidance to them in making-decisions related to life and careers.

Interviews with parents and alumni examine the complex relationship between the school and the community, revealing mutual apprehensions. Parents express doubts about the school's educational quality, while the community sees it as their property and is concerned about diminishing standards, teacher behaviour, and historical infrastructure. Teachers, in turn, view parents as uninvolved. The author concludes by urging the community to reflect on parents' tendencies to blame the school without taking responsibility for their children's education.

The book concludes by discussing the major themes and issues that emerged during the study. The author summarizes the significant findings and argues that, despite various issues and

dissatisfaction among the school's stakeholders, this institution symbolizes hope and a dream for some students who aspire to study at AAS. The author also hopes to see a new dawn with the new management taking initiatives such as establishing a new library, science laboratory, and botanical garden to foster scientific interest among the learners. The book also provides diverse implications for researchers and policymakers involved in the field of education.

However, it is essential to understand that nothing exists in a vacuum, and religion cannot be viewed as a standalone category. It often intersects with other factors, such as caste and gender, influencing the perceptions of different people. Similarly, while delving into the worlds of teachers and students, the book engages with these complex factors only at a surface level rather than providing in-depth analysis or deeper engagement with these factors that directly shape our social realities.

By attempting to capture the uncapturable, and examine social structures, relationships, and institutions, this book makes a successful contribution to the field of Anthropology and education. It sheds light on the social dynamics within the minority school in India, including issues of power, social hierarchies, and community relationships. It further enriches the field of Anthropology and education by delving into how students at a minority school navigate their identities in relation to their cultural background, ethnicity, and the broader societal context. The book also stresses how the educational environment contributes to the formation and expression of student identities. Therefore, this book provides a rich source for anthropological analysis, exploring the intricate connections between culture, society, and education within the context of a minority school. It offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of students and educators, shedding light on broader issues of diversity, equity, and cultural resilience in the realm of education.

Overall, the book is an enriching work and an exceptional resource for anyone interested in studying the nuances of the social and educational realities of minority groups in the country. Especially in current times, when they are not just fighting for their right to education but also striving to establish themselves as rightful 'citizens' of democratic India.

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Manuscript received on: October 27, 2023
Manuscript accepted on: December 22, 2023