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**Shifting Curricula, Shifting Selves:
Three Generations of Learning and Unlearning in a Himalayan Alternative School**

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Abstract

This paper analyzes learning and non-learning among three generations of students who attended a culturally specific school that emphasizes engaged citizenship through social justice work. Founded just prior to India's independence, the residential program was designed to train a new cadre of women leaders in the rural Himalaya. After the later expansion of government education in the region, the school evolved to serve especially marginalized girls who received scholarships. Engaged citizenship through social justice work continued to be a central focus. However, the program accommodated the government curriculum so that students could take the high-stakes standardized exams required of pupils at conventional schools. Educational reforms after liberalization have compelled yet a third shift, and girls now must take alternative high-stakes exams that encode them as pupils who have not attended a conventional school. Through the prism of students' experiences, I explore the ways that models for culturally specific, community-based schooling can provide avenues for achievement, the construction of educated subjectivities, and engaged citizenship.

“A Big Problem”

I’m seldom left on my own in rural Himalayan India, even now. So, when years ago on a sunny, frozen December late afternoon, our household’s two mothers ambled through my door without knocking, offering a steaming tumbler of chai just as I was coaxing a kerosene burner to heat the kettle, this sent no ripple across the day’s surface. Dusk was a customary time in winter to find myself on the receiving end of advice, stories, and lectures. The topic, too, was unexceptional. One mother was an assistant teacher in the local publicly funded primary school, renting two tight rooms next to mine with her daughters and husband, and the other was a farmer whose family owned the modest mud plastered brick home. The teacher groused about the tedium of record-keeping that engulfed time best given to actual teaching, a burden the world over, then settled into what I’ve come to know as a regional refrain,¹

*Listen, so many girls do badly in school or have to leave school! They have too much work to do, especially village girls. They cook, take care of yet littler ones, fetch fodder, wood, and water, and work in the fields. They are awake day and night, and during harvests they don’t come to school at all. It’s a big problem here.*²

“What about boys?” I inquired, still new to a project that I did not yet imagine would unfold in various directions over more than a decade. “Boys, boys! There is no trouble like this for boys. They don’t work at home.” This comment on the gendered division of household labor was tossed down with relish just as the farmer’s teenaged son sauntered in and interrupted with his easy grin, “What are you saying? I work!” A dismissive riposte cut through his jest, “*Aré*, look at you! Your mother and sisters do the work.” This was true enough, on most days, from the first predawn strokes of the hand broom across the floor above my room by his eldest sister to the final checking of the water buffalo and cows by his mother, after most of the household had laid down to sleep. Be this as it may, educated rural boys who have been cut a break at home and encouraged to focus on their studies, like their sisters who do stay in school, must negotiate rote learning and curricula typically rather removed from local Himalayan realities, ways of knowing, and language. Upon graduation from high school, and even area colleges, they are

¹ I have translated all quoted speech from Hindi, sometimes mixed with Kumaoni, a regional language, into English.

² I conducted fieldwork in the state of Uttarakhand, which I shall describe in more detail. According to the 2011 census, at 79.6% the literacy rate for Uttarakhand was higher than the all-India rate of 74.04%. The gendered literacy rate for Uttarakhand was 88.3% for males and 70.7% for females. The difference between urban and rural literacy rates was not significant for males in the state, but was marked for females, with an 80.02% urban literacy rate and a rural literacy rate of 66.79%. 69% of the state’s population resided in rural areas during the census period. Literacy indicators and gaps have steadily improved during the last two decades.

unlikely to find stable employment in the region, despite robust growth in India's economy. Years later, the youth quoted above secured employment only because family members eventually pooled resources to open a small shop that he tended. Disparities in education based upon gender, class, and urban-rural location—succinctly identified by the teacher as a big problem—but also upon caste, ethnicity, religion, and the perceived irrelevance of much of that education for non-elites combine to inform an enduring narrative of crisis.³

Such contextually shaped iterations of crisis have animated vexed debates over school failure and success among national leaders, policymakers, intellectuals, educators, parents, and students across the globe. In India, where I've been involved in long-term ethnographic fieldwork, these shifting debates have a complex colonial history. British administrators and anticolonial nationalists alike were centrally concerned with educational crisis and reform, and with the whole process of shaping colonial subjects and citizen subjects, respectively, through the medium of education. Participation in colonial English schooling by Indian elites did not preclude them from drawing upon their training to articulate nationalist critiques of British rule and its education systems. Their critiques have some continued resonance. Jawaharlal Nehru, who would later become India's first prime minister, argued as an independence activist that colonial education

...was so limited as to offer few openings for a professional career (...) The unemployed graduates and others formed a pool from which the government could always draw; they were a potential threat to the security even of the employed. (Nehru, The Discovery of India, 1946: 328)

M. K. Gandhi broadly agreed, but went beyond Nehru's political economy orientation to critique the production of a negative consciousness by colonial education. In 1921 he insisted,

I am firmly of the opinion that the Government schools have unmanned us, rendered us helpless and godless. They have filled us with discontent, and providing no remedy for that discontent, they have made us despondent. (Gandhi, Young India 1921, in Gandhi 1953: 3)

When filled with discontent, we anthropologists typically seek to provide useful ethnographic nuance to debates on crisis in education, often through critical analysis of teaching,

³ Craig Jeffrey (2010) provides a creative ethnographic analysis of the cultural politics of waiting that take shape among aspiring male lower middle-class youth who face chronic under- and unemployment in north India.

learning, and non-learning in dominant educational spaces. Drawing inspiration from my work in rural India and from Teresa McCarty's (2012) call to interrogate crisis narratives by attending to constructive educational experiments in marginalized locations, I wish to engage these issues from a different direction. Educational institutions clearly can and do work with state apparatuses to play a key role in reproducing unequal social orders in India and elsewhere,⁴ but this does not preclude counter-hegemonic educational interventions to nurture human capabilities and challenge entrenched inequalities.⁵ The difficulty lies in bringing these interventions and their potential to destabilize crisis narratives into view, but without losing sight of powerful state educational priorities that serve wider political and economic agendas.⁶

This paper contributes to this project an analysis of the historically sedimented practical and subjective school effects that ensued in the lives of students who attended Lakshmi Ashram, an independent school that provides a set of alternatives to conventional structures of publicly funded education in rural Himalayan India.⁷ Founded just prior to independence, the residential program emphasizes engaged citizenship through community social justice work, and was designed to train a new cadre of regional women leaders. For girls in a remote region without post-primary schools, the program originally provided not only access to education, but also an alternative to government curricula that offered few points of entry for rural pupils, even those from relatively prosperous families. After the later expansion of government-funded education in the region, the school evolved to serve especially poor, marginalized girls who received scholarships. Engaged citizenship through social justice work continued to be a central focus. However, the program accommodated the government curriculum so that students could take the high-stakes standardized exams required of pupils at government schools, and thus claim a role in an increasingly competitive society.⁸ Recent educational reforms have introduced yet a third

⁴ Please see, for example, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), Kumar (1991), and Willis (1977).

⁵ Please see, for example, Majumdar and Mooij (2011).

⁶ Jeffrey et al (2007) and essays in Chopra and Jeffery (2005) document the importance of attending to state priorities when analyzing contradictory schooling experiences and their implications for structures of inequality in India.

⁷ I draw upon long-term fieldwork conducted during different periods, from the early 1990s to the present. This fieldwork has also informed a recent monograph (Klenk 2010) that explores intersections of gendered subjectivities, development, and social activism through an ethnography of Lakshmi Ashram, but it does not address the implications of the ashram program for a critical anthropology of education, the central focus of this paper.

⁸ Recognized schools are affiliated with a limited number of School Education Boards in India. Schools use curricula, syllabi, and textbooks created by the board with which they are affiliated. These prepare students to take high-stakes standardized exams, also crafted by the board. Materials used across boards are similar, which creates a high level of academic standardization in the Indian system.

curricular shift, and girls now must take alternative high-stakes exams that encode them as pupils who have not attended a conventional school. This paper examines the implications of the educational intervention at Lakshmi Ashram in the wider context of education and inequality in India. It concludes by suggesting that Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia can provide a useful conceptual tool for analyzing how marginalized students at culturally specific, experiential schools craft avenues for achievement, the construction of educated subjectivities, and new forms of political agency.

National Education in India: A Very Brief Introduction

First a few words to situate Lakshmi Ashram in wider educational trends. Gandhi and Nehru were among the most distinguished proponents for two visions of national education in independent India. Although Nehru is typically portrayed as a modernizer, and Gandhi as anti-modern, this is a misleading dichotomy. Both were modernizing figures who articulated anticolonial agendas in debates about the reconstruction of the postcolonial state and its educational systems. They were interested in using education to create modern, disciplined subjects as the basis for a modern, disciplined nation. Nehru endorsed the modernist agenda embedded in British education, and believed that Indians could benefit from this type of education if it was reformed so as not to serve the needs of a colonial administration. Gandhi, however, did not think that the British educational system could benefit Indians. He proposed *Naī Tālīm* (Basic Education) in 1937 to challenge the objectives of the colonial state by incorporating educational practices into daily life, rather than limiting them to the classroom. Basic Education schools were designed to nurture the all-round development of the self ("mind, body, and soul") rather than provide narrowly focused academic training.⁹ They were meant to be vocational and integrated into village life, while also providing tools for rural people to connect their lives, struggles, and aspirations to India's wider national community.

Indeed, scholars such as Nita Kumar and Anne Grodzins Gold have argued that colonial education in India pitted "education" against "culture," which contributed to an antagonistic

⁹ Gandhi (1951) provides a description of Basic Education. Gandhi (1953, 1962) provides a more extended analysis of his shifting ideas about education. Essays in Carter and Kumar (2010) explore the application of Gandhian ideas in contemporary peace education. For readers more familiar with educational scenarios in the global North, Matthew Crawford's *Shop Class as Soul Craft* (2009), for example, seems to articulate well with the gist of Gandhian Basic Education ideals regarding the value of holistic learning through applied work, as does John Herzog's paper, "Reflecting on Compagnonnage," for this conference.

relationship between schools and communities, and shaped the basis for the so-called “two-tier” postcolonial education system.¹⁰ This system is broadly characterized by the poorly funded, understaffed, vernacular language-medium government schools that emphasize rote learning and are attended by most pupils on the one hand, and by the expensive, privately funded English-medium schools attended by upper-middle class and elite Indians on the other hand.

Unrecognized alternative and community schools blur the tiers,¹¹ but have been critiqued for corruption and lack of quality control. Even so, in a context where meaningful school access, broadly conceived, continues to be limited for the poorest and most marginalized youth, these institutions can play a vital role.

Lakshmi Ashram

Lakshmi Ashram, a gendered educational experiment in Gandhian modernity located in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, is one such institution. It was established in 1946, just prior to independence, as a residential school for rural women and girls from relatively poor families. In keeping with the practical orientation of Gandhian ashrams, Lakshmi Ashram’s central mission was to create a new kind of postcolonial womanhood in a region where girls had little access to formal education and were married during their early teens or before. Situated high upon a hillside, above the village household described at the beginning of this paper, the school’s time-smoothed flagstone terraces overlook swatches of field and forest scattered among villages along the Kosi River valley. The nearest marketplace is in a small roadside town that hosts a modest tourist trade, about a twenty-minute trek from the school. Although settled in the midst of a network of villages that it serves, Lakshmi Ashram is also distinctive in its determinedly Gandhian orientation.

Uttarakhand separated from the state of Uttar Pradesh in 2000, after a popular struggle to gain autonomy. Much of the hill state’s population is Hindu and lives in agricultural villages. Opportunities for paid employment have historically been limited, and rural households have generally combined subsistence agriculture with male labor migration to north Indian cities to

¹⁰ Please see Gold (2002) and Kumar (2000).

¹¹ They are also blurred by the ever-expanding use of private tutors and coaching courses, and by less expensive English-medium schools favored by non-elite pupils, which hold out the promise of social mobility, but where little instruction actually occurs in English. It is not unusual for families of comfortable and extremely strained means alike to make enormous financial sacrifices for their children’s education, in hopes of ensuring upward class mobility for them.

make ends meet. Women and girls typically do most of the daily agricultural chores, and rural girls from remote areas continue to receive less schooling than boys. Uttarakhand is also known for its popular movements, which usually coalesce around issues of economic justice and natural resource sovereignty, and have often featured women as notable participants and leaders.¹²

Sarala Devi, one of Gandhi's British followers, established Lakshmi Ashram with the active cooperation of local nationalists. It has continued to retain a high profile among social and environmental activists in the region and beyond. The ashram was the first institution in the region designed specifically to educate rural young women and girls, and was set up to train them to become community activists who would redress gender inequalities and establish economic self-sufficiency in their villages. After Sarala Devi's departure in 1967, the ashram has been managed by women from Uttarakhand, many of them ashram graduates, and usually about 50-75 students are in residence. The school is partially self-supporting, as I shall discuss below, and has also received funding from European sources for student scholarships.¹³ The comprehensive program follows the Gandhian ideal of collective living and applied learning. It has an emancipatory agenda geared to engage multiple intelligences and ways of knowing, and diverse rates of individual development in the service of civic participation and incremental social change. Students learn new skills, unlearn the common sense of entrenched social inequalities, and come to see themselves and the world in new ways. Encouraging the formation of new oppositional subjectivities—which can open new modalities of social belonging and participation as democratic citizens, but can also create challenges down the road—is a salient contribution of the program to the lives of its pupils.

New subjectivities are nurtured through a curriculum that is academically, socially, and physically challenging. Students ranging from seven-year-olds in class one to older teenagers in high school spend a small part of their day in conventional academic classes,¹⁴ and together with their teachers also grow much of their own produce using innovative organic techniques, keep a dairy, collect wood to fuel cooking fires, prepare their own food, do all of their own

¹² Gururani (2002) analyzes the gender dimensions of popular movements in Uttarakhand. For further analyses of popular movements in Uttarakhand, please see, for example: Guha ([1989] 2000); Linkenbach (2007); Rangan (2000).

¹³ *Lakshmi Ashrams Vänner* (Friends of Lakshmi Ashram), an informal Danish group of nurses and folk high-school teachers, has coordinated foreign donations for Lakshmi Ashram since the late 1960s.

¹⁴ These classes do prepare students to sit for nationally recognized standardized government board examinations, as is discussed in greater detail below.

housekeeping, eat as a community, practice yoga and Vipassana meditation¹⁵ together, and learn to spin, weave, and sew. Students, teachers, and staff are organized into eight annually assigned *toḷī* (work teams), each with a senior student *mantrī* (minister/leader) and a staff member or teacher. Teams are responsible for different categories of work crucial to the ashram's daily survival, and specific daily tasks are distributed at the morning gathering on the main verandah. Students plan team efforts with light adult collaboration; rather than rely only on adult teachers, elder pupils also guide the youngest girls. It is commonplace for substantial work to be completed at a relaxed pace during scheduled periods, often with the sort of playful goofing around and companionable gossip that might characterize recess at my son's US middle school. Seriousness comes later, when each *mantrī* gains public speaking confidence as she reports her team's daily activities before the entire school community at the evening assembly, often responding to suggestions, comments, and perhaps also critical feedback from peers and staff. The attentive respect and analysis accorded to the mindful, innovative completion of farming, cooking, and other tasks characteristic of rural life builds student independence and self-esteem, but also quite directly challenges the dominant constitution of real knowledge as something to be measured by classroom performance and exams. Rather than dismiss the rural skills and everyday frames of meaning pupils bring with them from home, the holistic curriculum engages and builds upon localized knowledge even as it exposes students to wider, universalistic frames of knowledge.¹⁶

Arts, crafts, personal reflection, and community organizing are also central to the curriculum. Along with learning to spin, weave, embroider, knit, and sew—all skills that can be used to produce crafts for market—students and teachers keep diaries; they draw and paint, and they write poems, stories, and reports for handmade school magazines. The girls perform Hindu folk dramas for village audiences and participate in original rural theater centered on social issues including domestic violence, alcoholism, and unequal treatment of boys and girls. Music and dance are also favorite activities. Students are encouraged to be creative in communicating social justice issues with a light, humorous touch through the arts, in order to initiate community

¹⁵ Vipassana is a non-devotional form of Buddhist meditation focused on the breath.

¹⁶ Krishna Kumar (2009) argues that the tension between localized knowledges that render life meaningful for children, and the universalistic frameworks of knowledge emphasized in modern schools must be creatively engaged in flexible ways for the successful education of rural pupils. He points out that the commonplace practice of ignoring local knowledge in the classroom alienates marginalized primary school students and exacerbates their "failure."

dialogue. As older teenagers, they travel with teachers throughout the region and beyond, and learn to become community organizers by initiating forums on issues ranging from gender inequality and rural poverty to fuel and fodder scarcity and depleted water resources. A strong focus on the arts and applied political engagement, grounded in students' social worlds and practical skills, forges an innovative articulation between the home and school, self and world, information and understanding.

In keeping with Gandhi's emphasis on holistic learning in *Naī Tālīm*, academics fit into the curriculum as one type of learning nestled among others, rather than as the centerpiece. Girls are neither scolded nor praised for academic performance. Classes are held only for a few hours in the afternoon, with periods of the day also set aside for homework. After a group news assembly following lunch, students gather by grade level in the same rooms where they sleep together at night, and sit on the floor for lessons with a teacher. Most ashram teachers have not received specialized training in advanced high-school subjects like Sanskrit and science, so the girls do not typically excel in these subjects. Social science, history, and Hindi are popular among high school students and teachers, and a few students have told me that they enjoy mathematics. Most are more enthusiastic about the practical and arts components of the curriculum than they are about academics, and several enjoy working in the modest computer lab installed in 2009. There is far more interaction and collaborative problem solving among students and teachers than I observed in local government school classrooms, and less scolding, but a conventional hierarchical pupil-teacher relationship is more evident in academic classes than in other ashram spaces.¹⁷

Sarala Devi, the ashram's British founder, adhered to Gandhi's critique of government education and did not prepare her students to take nationally recognized board exams. Instead, she crafted her own curriculum, made her own lesson plans for standard subjects, and taught the earliest students herself. In the later 1960s, after her departure, graduates became vociferous in their complaint that because they lacked nationally recognized government board certificates of graduation, their achievement was undocumented and thus unrecognized in wider society. Although they expressed appreciation for the "strength and courage" instilled through their

¹⁷ The ashram provides formal classroom instruction through tenth grade. Some students depart after they have completed their class 10 board exams, but others stay to study independently for their class 12 board exams, and receive tutoring from resident teachers. A few remain as staff, and some staff members have studied independently for BA and MA degrees, which also require standardized exams.

unusual education, lack of board certificates hampered their ability to claim a role in an increasingly competitive social world. Employment had not been at issue for the earliest ashram graduates, many of whom sought to be volunteer community activists (*samāj sevikā*) while simultaneously assuming roles as rural wives, mothers, and farmers in households that produced much of what was consumed. Like their village sisters who had not attended the ashram, the earliest graduates encountered little opportunity for employment in any case. However, later graduates joined households whose production could not keep pace with consumption, an effect of poverty, the fragmentation of landholdings, and new aspirations in an increasingly market-based rural economy. They were keen to combine social justice work with paid employment, and wished to pursue new opportunities in teaching, health care, microenterprise, and community development. The lively debate about the viability of introducing the government academic curriculum is significant because it highlights core features of the innovative ashram program: the creation of an intellectual space in which all forms of knowledge were open to critical reflection¹⁸ and a commitment to democratic process.

A vexed decision was taken to adopt the standard government academic curriculum and prepare a second generation of girls to take board exams, but within the context of a wider program that remained very much in tension with the values and ethos of urban, industrial modernity emphasized in government materials, and the whole practice of measuring knowledge through high-stakes exams. For a few decades, girls visited a local government school to take the state board standardized exams, and collectively performed similarly to their peers in village schools, contributing their tenuous testing skills and generally mediocre scores to an entrenched narrative of “crisis.” Their “difference,” which I shall discuss in more detail, registered not at all in terms of outcomes measurable by high-stakes tests.

With the state neoliberal push for greater accountability and standardization among board affiliated schools, a third shift in the ashram academic curriculum took place about three years ago, among a third generation of students. Under a new policy, students pursuing nonstandard curricula at alternative and unrecognized schools like Lakshmi Ashram, and those studying independently at home, could no longer sit as private candidates for the nationally recognized Uttarakhand Board exams. These students were required to shift to the National Institute of Open

¹⁸ My point here is in dialogue with Krishna Kumar’s contention that the opposition between universalistic and localized frames of knowledge would be resolved “(i)f we were to see the school as a place where all forms of knowledge come in for critical reflection” (2009: 209).

Schooling (NIOS) exams, and receive a certificate of graduation encoding them as pupils who had not attended a conventional school. NIOS now provides the ashram's textbooks, which differ little from those for the Uttarakhand Board curriculum. Exams are given in various regional centers each year, and accommodate students studying "privately" (on their own or at unrecognized schools) in the high-stakes standardized exam structure. For struggling students, the NIOS system has the advantage of flexibility. Passes and failures are granted by subject rather than grade level, so passes in each subject stand, and it is only necessary to retake exams in failed subjects. Still, students and parents are anxious that the NIOS certificate of graduation will become a stigmatized marker of rural poverty, further entrenching inequality and exacerbating the marginalization of hill youth who have not attended conventional schools from opportunities for stable employment.¹⁹

By integrating diverse literacies (literacy as conventionally understood and assessed by high-stakes exams, but also applied vocational, aesthetic, and psychosocial literacies), the ashram curriculum challenges what counts as knowledge, and explicitly breaks down teaching/learning and education/schooling dichotomies. This provides youth with space for horizontal collaboration with teachers in non-academic spaces, so that they may, ideally, become engaged in the adult social world, take real risks, and assume real responsibilities. Students from especially poor families who otherwise would have had limited access to post-primary education, have likely been married in their teens, and engaged in farming for their in-laws, instead become teachers, nurses, NGO staff members, and community organizers who are also typically fully involved in village and family life, often including farming. Over the years, graduates and students have emphasized to me the many ways that they consider themselves to be "different" from their village sisters, especially with regard to greater confidence in speaking and to experiencing less "shame" (*śaram*) than girls raised only at home. More recently, a cosmopolitan urbanite who had relocated to Uttarakhand as a community development professional commented, "You can always tell if a hill woman is from Lakshmi Ashram. There's something...*special*...about them." Over the years I've also learned to identify ashram women unknown to me when they appear in rural forums and village gatherings. There is

¹⁹ This is captured in an anxious post to Alternative Education in India, an English website pitched to the concerns of relatively elite families, "Like it or not, there is a stigma attached to the National Open School system. As far as my children's teachers and peer group are concerned, NIOS is meant for dull laggards who cannot cope with the normal school system" (http://alternativeeducationindia.net/parent's_stories.htm). It is not unreasonable for marginalized Himalayan parents to worry that this stigma will also affect their children.

something about the way they carry themselves, about their clear, perceptive questions (and especially their willingness to ask them in public settings), and about the confidence with which they speak. This is not to say that students simply capitulate to program expectations; they also take delight in naughtiness. Mischievous high jinks are as much a part of school life at the ashram as in other social spaces shaped around—and by—children and youth. As a graduate gleefully pronounced after sharing anecdotes of rule (*niyam*) breaking, “We had stamina and courage!” She explained that because ashram students were especially brave, including ingenuity in circumventing some school rules, they were more likely think for themselves, and to go off on their own to work in villages or elsewhere, as she had done, than were youth raised only at home.

Development professionals might find little to superficially distinguish ashram graduates from ordinary villagers, and might express concern about their mediocre academic achievement (which, as I have said, typically differs little from that of similarly located peers at rural government schools), about the level of physical work performed by the children (somewhat less than the workload at home for most), about the teachers’ humble qualifications and salaries, and about an alternative curriculum that no longer qualifies students for the state board certificate of graduation. Still, many ashram graduates have quietly—or not so quietly—gone on to lead remarkable lives. Some have refused or postponed marriage for the sake of new possibilities; others have arranged their own marriages. Several have devoted themselves to social justice work, sometimes establishing their own institutions and taking on unconventional community leadership roles. Together with fellow villagers, ashram graduates worked to form movements protesting extra-local timber extraction (the well-known Chipko Movement) and strip mining, as well as the construction of a large dam (Tehri dam). They contributed to the movement for the separate state of Uttarakhand. Ashram residents and graduates have been at the forefront of organizing a new campaign to reforest local hillsides, protect the region’s rivers, and raise awareness about the impact of climate change on the glaciers at the sources of major rivers in the region.

Although culturally specific and localized, Lakshmi Ashram has always engaged critically with imperialism and globalization.²⁰ Its program has critiqued aspects of modernity and provided an enduring alternative to educational programs that emphasize industrialization

²⁰ This paragraph is a lightly edited version of a passage that appears in Klenk (2010: 9).

and rote learning, considered by Gandhi to be legacies of imperialism. However, ashram pedagogy is a complex blend of Gandhian ideals with developmentalist and feminist ideas circulating at global levels. Ideals of sustainability via material simplicity, economic self-sufficiency, and selfless dedication to serving one's community, in the context of the agrarian lifestyle common to the region have always been central. Yet, the ashram subverted Gandhi's patriarchal ideas about women, which located them primarily in their homes as dutiful "mothers" and supported their sustained political activity mainly as renunciate "sisters."²¹ Women teachers encourage students to question conventional marriages arranged by their families, and teach them to become decision-makers and leaders outside the household, even as married mothers. In a region where women do not usually leave home before marriage, the residential program provides an unusual non-kin based network. The ashram connects with wider conventions of national education by embracing scientific (and technocratic) ways of knowing via the government academic curriculum used in classes, and a developmentalist understanding of stigmatized womanhood as a measure of so-called "backwardness." However, this is embedded in the wider context of a holistic Gandhian program that critiques industrial modernity, engages local ways of knowing, and incorporates multiple literacies. Through their efforts to craft new selves and change their locality for the better, some graduates have shaped careers that improved the material circumstances of their lives and communities. Some have also mapped new oppositional subjectivities and new possibilities for civic participation.

Implications for a Critical Anthropology of Education

As I have indicated, the educational scene in India is hobbled by a two-tier structure with colonial roots, and by an enduring legacy of poverty in some sectors of the population, which persists even in the midst of tremendous economic growth and new opportunities for the middle class and elites.²² Independent alternative schools like Lakshmi Ashram are obviously not a structural "fix" for education in India or elsewhere, especially in the context of neoliberal reforms, which include globalized demands for "accountability" through an emphasis on measures such as high-stakes testing. Indeed, India's new Right to Education (RTE) Act seeks

²¹ Sujatha Patel argues that Gandhi's construction of women articulated with entrenched patriarchal ideologies to place distinct limitations on their subjectivities, such that they were to choose dutiful motherhood in their own households or renunciate sisterhood for the sake of the nation (1988).

²² For readers interested in higher education, Ritty Lukose's (2009) ethnography provides a fascinating analysis of how non-elite college students in Kerala navigate "consumer citizenship" in this context.

to bring unrecognized schools into conformity with national guidelines, and there are some valid motivations for this.²³ The Act deploys rights discourse to place education in a legal framework and redress inequalities by making elementary education compulsory. However, as Manabi Majumdar and Jas Mooij argue, the framing of education as a uniform right in order to remedy educational disparities presents distinctive challenges (2011: 182-85). The legal requirement for education to become every child's entitlement cannot be realized in the absence of steps to address intersecting inequalities that affect school participation, including poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, patriarchal social norms, and so forth. To retain marginalized youth and energize their communities, compulsory universal schooling must also be flexible, and carefully crafted to connect students to a wider world by building upon, rather than dismissing, diverse identities and ways of knowing.

The holistic, culturally specific—and even idiosyncratic—educational and developmental experiences offered by Lakshmi Ashram and kindred programs elsewhere have wide implications for this complex project. These counter-hegemonic programs are not without flaws. They may be difficult to “scale up,” they may not significantly alter graduates' prospects in a wider political and economic context, and some may be still more precariously staffed and housed than publicly funded schools. Yet, they can enable fragile students to address profound questions about themselves and their social worlds, while taking seriously the material constraints of their lives and the realities of their psychosocial milieux. They can offer to diverse, marginalized youth a set of practical and academic skills, but also vital possibilities for self-fashioning and positioning that foster curiosity, empathy, resilience, a sense of connection, and the determination to engage in shaping their own society, often against tremendous odds. Lakshmi Ashram students are not Gandhi's despondent youth; they have their hands raised. Most crucially for democratic citizenship, they are creative thinkers who question the world around them and are able to establish an independent point of view.

Mikhail Bakhtin, a school teacher himself for a time, formulated the concept of heteroglossia to express the tendency for context, with its contingencies and surprises, to have primacy over text, with its official, systemic forces, in steering the meaning of everyday talk and

²³ Parliament passed the Right of Children to a Free and Compulsory Education Act, or Right to Education (RTE) Act in 2009, and it came into effect in 2010. Among other features, it establishes norms for schools serving 6-14 year old students.

experiences.²⁴ Where text and context collide, Lakshmi Ashram students are able to bring new subjectivities and perspectives to bear upon their experiences, and thus, now and then, elude the tangled “big problem” of economic and educational crisis spun about their lives. That this may go undetected when measured by standardized exam results, now differentiated under the NIOS scheme to index the marginality of these students, need not obscure the nuanced capabilities that they have developed. Gendered shifts in youth subjectivities, and the principle of heteroglossia, are thrown into sharp relief by alternative programs like Lakshmi Ashram. Both can provide viable conceptual frames for critical ethnographic work in publicly funded educational settings as well, where youth and teachers struggle to negotiate discourses of failed educational systems and foreclosed opportunity, to inhabit new structures of marginality and possibility in the context of neoliberal reforms, and to forge new types of political agency.

²⁴ Please see, for example: Bakhtin (1981: 263, 271-27); Casey (1993); Holland and Lave (2001: 16); Holquist (1981); Morson and Emerson (1990: 36-40).

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The conference, organized by Kellogg Faculty Fellow and Professor of Anthropology Susan Blum, witnessed inspiring discussion and collaboration between leading scholars of education from several disciplines and nations.

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