CONSTRUCTING INDIGENOUS CHILDHOODS
Colonialism, vocational education and the working child

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Key words:
childhood, child labour, colonialism, street children, vocational education

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Through interrogating our prevailing understanding of childhoods of the poor in the Third World as 'traditional', this article attempts to make apparent the significant break that colonialism signified in these lives. It does so through locating a Calcutta street child's vocational education experiences within a historical understanding of the workings of colonial education policies. The effort in the article is to highlight the effects of these policies on the street child's cultural narratives as well show how these narratives are imbricated in the creation of the national modern.

The increased recognition among scholars that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has privileged and idealized western concepts of childhood has augmented efforts to recognize multiple childhoods within local cultural constructs (James and Prout, 1997; Niewenhuys, 1998; Panter-Brick, 2000). In her introduction to *Children and the Politics of Culture*, Sharon Stephens (1995: 7), anticipating the difficulties in defining 'culture' warns, 'The culturalization of childhood should not be bought at the cost of an awareness of the complexities of cultural definition in a postmodern world'. She states that instead of elaborating upon western constructions of childhood in terms of gender, race and class differences and then comparing these to the childhoods of diverse cultures, there is a need to study the global processes that are transforming the very idea of gender, race, class and of childhood itself (Stephens, 1995). In developing her concerns further, this article focuses on the importance of incorporating historical processes affecting non-western childhoods within 'culturalist' attempts to understand multiple childhoods.

The attempt in this article is to highlight the irreversible and constitutive influences of history on constructions of indigenous childhood, thereby bringing to light the impossibility of understanding local cultural constructions of childhood as isolated from history. Understanding *culture as contingent* is indelibly tied to understanding *culture as subject to the workings of*

power, both in its productive sense as highlighted by Foucault (1977), and in its repressive abilities through the use of force. This contingency of culture also incorporates Gramsci's ideas on hegemony and the challenges it poses to defining culture as shared by all members of a society (Dirks et al., 1994). By hegemony, Gramsci referred to the continuous struggle in which particular social groups engage to win over, ideologically, the consent of other groups to their ways of thought and practice.

This contingency of culture is linked to the histories of modernity, colonialism and capitalist expansion. A majority of the countries in the Third World are former colonies of Europe, and therefore the multiple childhoods we seek to study have been affected by the significant break that colonialism, modernity and the spread of capitalism engendered in these lives (Boyden, 1997). Although the move to recognize multiple childhoods is an attempt to move away from the functioning of the western bourgeois childhood as the hegemonic ideal, how does the fixity we assign childhoods of the poor in the Third World ignore the disjunctions that the history of colonialism has produced in these lives? Is the ethnocentrism evidenced in earlier descriptions of Third World children as the 'other' adequately addressed within these culturalist narratives?

In this article I locate a Calcutta street child's experiences with vocational education within a broader historical framework of colonial and postcolonial discourses on formal education and the poor. I use Foucault's (1977) understanding of discourse to refer to the way knowledge and meaning about a certain topic, at a particular historical juncture, are produced. The cultural narratives of *manush* and *khatni* within which this street child frames his experience have been mediated by colonial educational discourses and the effort in this article is to provide a brief narrative of this history in order to point to the ways in which culture is transformed by history, by the workings of power. I begin my discussion with an interrogation of some recent work on marginalized children in the Third World to underscore the ways in which the recognition of multiple childhoods may reinforce the idea of these childhoods as non-modern and outside history. The next section of the article provides an ethnographic narrative of a street child's experience with vocational education. In analysing the child's narrative, I devote the next two sections to exploring how colonialism, through establishing a modern education system and in transforming children's work into wage labour, constitutes a major disjunction in the lives of the poor.

Childhood as a social construct: some epistemological considerations

The idea of childhood as a social and historical construct was first developed in the work of Ariès (1962). He revealed how the emergence of the modern conceptualization of childhood as a distinct stage of life was tied to the rise

of bourgeois ideas of the family, privacy and individuality between the 15th and the 18th centuries. Although other historians (de Mause, 1976; Hanawalt, 1993; Pollock, 1983) have disagreed with certain of the points made by Ariès, there has been no disputing the constructed nature of childhood. Building on Ariès' work, James and Prout (1997) understand childhood not as biological immaturity, but as certain ways in which cultures interpret this immaturity and the meanings they assign to it. Their recognition of childhood as a social construct allows for the idea of multiple childhoods, as embedded in local cultural constructions, to prevail. It thereby provides a strong critique of existing work on children in the fields of developmental psychology and its construction of a singular figure of 'the child'.

Studies on children in the Third World, within this culturalist framework, attempt to understand these childhoods within their own economic, social and cultural realities without imposing upon them the normative referent of the western ideal. This allows us to circumvent a transition narrative when we analyse the lives of poor Third World children. By this I mean that through this framework we can understand Third World childhoods without a constant comparison of what it would take for these childhoods to be consistent with the western bourgeois ideal. However James and Prout (1997) in discussing their emergent paradigm tend more towards a certain cultural relativism that views these indigenous 'cultures' as static. Their culturalist paradigm fails to include, as an essential component, an analysis of the transformations that colonialism and modernization have brought about in these indigenous non-western 'cultures' of childhood. The workings of power, in terms of the ways in which these indigenous cultures have been historically represented and mired in the creation of the 'other', also fail to find any discussion in their paradigm. This 'culturalist' paradigm thereby allows for a certain essentialist, non-modern understanding of these cultures to prevail; in effect allowing for the bourgeois western construct of childhood to continue to reign as the 'civilized' ideal.

Understanding childhoods of the poor in the Third World

We largely divide Third World childhoods into those of urban middle-class children, in whose lives we recognize the influence of western childhoods, and the childhoods of the poor, which we tend to view as unaffected by these western material and cultural markers. Thus, while we acknowledge the role played by modernization, westernization in the construction of urban bourgeois childhoods in the Third World, we often invoke *tradition* to classify childhoods of the poor. For example, Baker and Panter-Brick (2000: 161), while pointing out the limitations of the discourse on abandonment in understanding the lives of the *khates*, or street children, in Nepal, draw a distinction between, 'the traditional childhood currently experienced by a majority of the poor and a largely urban middle-class childhood that tends towards the dominant Western model'. What distinguishes the traditional from the

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modern in discussing Nepali childhoods is that within the former children have to assume, 'work responsibilities at an early age both within and outside the house' (Baker and Panter-Brick, 2000: 165). Given that the hegemonic moral discourse on children idealizes the bourgeois separation of the child from labour, does the invoking of tradition to categorize children working at an early age allow for cultural neutrality, as intended by the culturalist paradigm, to prevail?

Through using tradition to describe the cultures of the poor, these get viewed as ahistorical, essentialist processes, and a 'them' and 'us' binary opposition persists, which offers only a depoliticized understanding of these lives. While studies of European childhoods can invoke a history of transformation from a non-bourgeois past, this historical narrative is absent in enquiries into Third World childhoods. For example, Blanchet (1996) in her work on *kangali*, or marginalized children in Bangladesh, invokes *samaj* (society) as a cohesive set of cultural practices to explain the discrimination that these children experience. The way Blanchet uses *samaj* as an absolute reality facilitates the naturalizing of certain traits to the culture being described. Her work is characteristic of studies of Third World children in its view of indigenous traditional cultures as autonomous, unchanging units. It fails to incorporate the workings of power, both in terms of the constitutive role of history in these cultures, and the politics of representation within which such descriptions are constructed. This allows for an unmediated view of these lives to prevail in which the traditional/modern binary is embedded even when not explicitly used.

In my research with street children in Calcutta, the culturalist paradigm gave me the discursive space to circumvent and critique the hegemonic narrative of a bourgeois childhood. But it failed to provide me with tools to analyse these children's voices as framed within certain historical transformations that have affected these lives. Being devoid of schooling and requiring hard labour for survival, these street children's childhoods could be categorized as traditional or premodern. But this categorization would ignore the ways in which their lives have been greatly affected by the formation of modernity in India during colonialism. Even though their lives are marked by the absence of a certain material wealth that a modern childhood embodies, their histories have been transformed by the significant break that colonialism, the capitalist mode of production and modernity engendered in India.

In analysing the Indian nationalists' negotiation of the colonial state, Partha Chatterjee (1993) discusses how the formation of an Indian modernity is indelibly tied to anticolonial nationalism, and therefore differs in significant ways from western modernity.[1] According to him, the nationalist construction of a 'modern' national culture, that is however not western, would hold true in the formerly colonized countries of Asia and Africa as well. His work raises some important points, which can serve to enhance our

existing understanding of childhoods in the Third World. These are that the formation of modernity in these countries is negotiated and contains significant differences with western modernity, and that this national modern exercises a hegemonic ideological role even in the absence of a certain modern material wealth in the lives of the urban and rural poor. Recognizing this would not allow us easily to reduce the childhoods of the middle class and rich as imitating the bourgeois western ideal. And it would force us to study childhoods of the poor, not as premodern, but as significantly influenced ideologically (if not materially) by the formation of modernity under colonialism. The history of colonial education policy is crucial to the ways in which the street children I researched in Calcutta articulate their subjectivities and frame their worldviews. And their narratives, as the following section highlights, cannot be understood without analysing this particular history and its continuing impact on these lives.

Deciphering a street child's narrative on vocational education

Enrolling street children in vocational education schemes is a common strategy adopted in programmes that work with them, which finds official sanction in government documents on education (Ministry of Education, 1986). The exigencies in these children's lives allow for a combination of non-formal education and vocational training to pose as the commonsense solution to these lives. As a researcher I spent 15 months with a group of street children in Calcutta between 1992 and 1995 studying these children's experiences with literacy and their self-constructions as learners. The children lived in a residential site, consisting of two sheds, located on a railway platform in one of the city's busiest railway stations. Begun in 1989, the site provided services exclusively for boys, a large number of whom had left their lives of poverty in the villages, to make a better living in the city. After years of wandering around different locations in the metropolis, they have now come to call this site home. Although it had at least 100 boys registered with it, varying in ages from 4 to 16 years, they did not all reside at the site at any one time. The site provided them with shelter, food, non-formal education, rudimentary health services, counseling services, lockers in which to store possessions and facilities for bathing. The boys often left for varying periods of time to visit their families in the villages, to earn a regular income selling vegetables at a nearby wholesale market or to take up seasonal jobs in other cities.

At the site, vocational education was considered ideal for older street children who, because of their age, were more difficult to enrol in formal schools. The established understanding of a vocational education programme among both the staff and the boys was that these programmes required minimal literacy and would teach and equip the children with income-earning skills. These usually included carpentry, training in motorcycle

repair, making leather goods and plumbing. Although the particular organization at the railway station did not have facilities for vocational education, it often sent the older boys to various programmes around the city, some of which required a residential stay, others a daily commute.

Nevertheless, most of the older boys seldom completed their training at these vocational education programmes. They had various reasons for not remaining, which ranged from the food and freedom being inadequate in residential programmes, to a lack of interest in the particular skill being taught, or a fight with someone at the programme. In addition to these reasons, the older street children often felt that vocational education was just a formalization of manual labour and therefore viewed this training as inessential.

I provide in what follows a detailed narrative of Bauna's experiences with a vocational education programme, to highlight the need to locate these narratives within larger discursive and historical practices that are integral to the construction of their particular worldviews. Bauna was a child labourer who had worked at selling milk, making tea, selling vegetables and rag-picking to support his mother and younger brother, who lived on a platform at the railway station. Having turned 16 recently, Bauna was a perfect candidate for vocational education because he was not particularly interested in pursuing formal schooling and was viewed by the staff as wasting his time and growing older with no skills with which he could gain a living. He was enrolled at a residential site for vocational education where he was to be taught carpentry in a course that lasted for 3 years, at the end of which the organization would provide him with the tools and some start-up money to set up his own business.

Bauna was enthusiastic about this vocational education programme when its details were explained to him by the staff. Although he had no particular interest in carpentry, he expressed a desire to enrol. Three weeks after he joined this programme he dropped out. When I asked him why he had decided to leave he said,

> I decided to go to the Howrah centre because I heard that it was a large school that would teach me carpentry skills. Although I don't like carpentry that much I still decided to go because I thought that I need to make something of my life, learn a skill as I am growing older. When I went the staff and the boys were friendly. I did not fight with anyone. I treated them with respect and followed the routine at the centre. Our mornings would start with our cleaning the yard and our living space, after which we would be given breakfast and then sit down to study for a few hours. This studying was something that I had already learnt at the Sealdah site, just reading some books in Bengali and doing some maths. This was not difficult as I knew it from before. Then we would have a bath and then eat lunch after which we had to go to the carpentry workshop and begin working with wood. I enjoyed this at first, although it was hard work and all of us would joke about how much work it was. But day upon day of this routine with no permission to leave the centre made me think I was in a jail. Moreover they would not give us any money for the work we were doing. After all, the centre was selling what we made to raise money. But we would not see any of

this. We were just told that they were putting our earnings away in a bank and that after we completed our course we would get double the amount of money we earned. But if I don't see what I have earned how will I know that they have doubled it? All this made me tired of being in this centre. I had thought that by going to the centre I might have a chance of getting a job, having my own business and moving away from a life of *khatni*, but what I experienced at this centre was only lots of hard work. What is the point of going to a school to learn a job that needs you to work only with your hands? I can learn this on my own by working with someone as an assistant and moreover I will earn a regular income while learning in this way.

How do we make sense of Bauna's rejection of vocational education? I should like to circumvent an explanation that focuses on the psychology of the street child and his need for immediate and tangible gains, although I am aware of the role this might have played in his decision to drop out. Instead, I should like to focus on the attitudes to schooling and manual labour that his narrative reveals. As a child labourer, Bauna was aware of the hardship involved in training informally as an assistant. He was also reminded several times by the staff that the organization would set him up with a shop and his own tools after he completed the training. Yet he made the choice to leave. Not because of the 'hard work' involved in carpentry in particular, since he continued to show an interest in it stating that, 'I can learn this on my own by working with someone as an assistant'. Rather, he believed that attending a school to learn this trade should reduce the intensity of labour involved in the job. The school's failure to live up to this expectation then made him reject this training because he did not feel that he needed to 'go to school to learn a job that needs you to work only with your hands'. Bauna's rejection of vocational education is thus tied to his underlying belief that formal training should serve to reduce the labour involved in a job and conversely that a job which is all manual labour requires no formal training.

Since the Government of India ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, street children's programmes in India have devoted their energies to enrolling these children into formal schools. The discursive practices of the street children's programme at the Sealdah railway station privileged formal schooling as a means through which the street child could become a *manush* (a human being) whose future, spent in an office, would be free from manual labour (Balagopalan, forthcoming). Like several other older children at this educational site who could not be easily enrolled into formal school, due to the age-specific grades, Bauna framed his future in terms of a life of *khatni*, a life of intensive manual labour. The binary of *khatni* and *manush* discourses, discourses present in the wider, modern Bengali society and its complex colonial history, are those within which these children frame their experiences.

We could interpret Bauna's narrative on *khatni* as exemplifying a 'traditional' childhood in India. His belief that manual labour requires no training could be attributed to his traditional 'Indian' childhood experiences in

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which work is integral to the child's maturation experiences. Work, as inherent to the definition of 'Indian' childhoods, would provide an essentialist core of tradition when compared to the western modern ideal of the protected child. Moreover, his childhood of work would operate as a specific case that is illustrative of the prevalence of the caste system in India as detailed in orientalist accounts of Indian history, in other words, caste, with its rigid hierarchies and its debasement of certain groups, as constitutive of the very identity of India. The 'traditional' social institution of caste creates a rigid division of labour based on the opposition between purity and pollution (Dumont, 1988) within which *manush* as the discourse of the upper castes and *khatni* as the *dharma* of the lower castes can be understood. The upper-caste reluctance to do work that involves manual labour, a dirtying of one's hands, creates the hierarchy between *manush* and *khatni*, as well as the derision with which *khatni* is viewed (as requiring no skills) in Bauna's rejection of vocational education. However, to limit our reading of Bauna's narrative within the realm of the 'traditional' would be to ignore the mediation of these *cultural* practices under colonialism and its capitalist mode of production. While we do recognize the influence of these in the creation of urban bourgeois childhoods in the Third World, we leave unexamined the significant disjunction produced by colonialism and capitalism in the lives of poor children in the Third World, through continuing to view these lives as 'traditional'.

In recognizing the 'politics of culture', Sharon Stephens (1995) challenged the idea of culture as holistic and self-referential, thereby allowing for the idea of culture as a constructed category, a mediated process influenced by the workings of power to prevail. In challenging the idea of 'traditional' childhoods, I am utilizing her awareness of the contested nature of representation to elaborate upon the disjunctions that colonialism engendered in the lives of poor children in India. Stephens's attempts to politicize what we often take as natural and self-evident about children and their childhoods have greatly influenced my rethinking of my own work with street children and through thus the traditional–modern binary opposition of globalized childhoods. Instead of the possible viewing of childhoods of the Indian poor as those mired in caste hierarchies and its division of labour, I attempt to show how particular policies of the colonial state helped institutionalize and put into circulation our current discursive understandings of the *manush–khatni* divide.

Colonial education policy and indigenous education

Although it was the East India Company Act of 1813 that first allowed the governor-general, the highest colonial representative in India, to direct a surplus of 1 lakh of rupees (£10,000) to the education of the natives, it was not until the Dispatch of 1854 that these educational initiatives included the

provision of mass primary education for the poor. The years in between were devoted to creating 'a class of interpreters' who would function between the state and the masses; interpreters who, in Macaulay's words, would be, 'a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' (Macaulay, 1972: 249). This was accomplished through adopting policies that focused on providing a modern liberal education to a few of the colony's indigenous elites in the apparent belief that,

> . . . by raising the standard of instruction among these classes, you would eventually produce a much greater and more beneficial change in the ideas and feelings of the community than you can hope to produce by acting directly on the more numerous class. (Kumar, 1991: 99)

This 'filtration theory' found great support among the newly educated Bengali middle class, the *bhadralok*, since the superiority of the West in the field of science and statecraft made them desirous of this education (Acharya, 1995). In the material domain the success of the West was to be imitated, and therefore a system of education that focused on the sciences of the West flourished in the schools and colleges set up by both the state and the private finance of wealthy elites. This colonial education policy would in the early 20th century be contested by Indian nationalists. But this was more for its slow diffusion among the masses rather than for the liberal contents of its syllabi, which was opposed only by Mahatma Gandhi at the First Conference on National Education in 1937.[2]

The colonial state's support of an education policy that favoured the elites was achieved through deliberately neglecting the vast network of vernacular schools that had existed in Bengal since the 11th century (Acharya, 1994). This two-tier network included *patshalas*, which were community-based schools for the lower classes, and the Sanskrit schools or *tols* set up for the upper-caste Brahmins and the upper classes. The precolonial education system was one that was based on excluding the lower castes from the Sanskrit learning of the *tols*. Within the dominant precolonial social framework of caste hierarchy, Sanskrit and Arabic-Persian learning was the exclusive domain of the upper caste/classes and it was believed that a person learned in these should not engage in manual labour. Based on this one could interpret the *manush–khatni* divide as an uninterrupted continuation of a precolonial tradition. But this would fail to incorporate the role *patshalas* played in providing an education for the lower classes. The Adam Reports on Indigenous Education in 1837 records 100,000 schools, and details the independent nature of these *patshalas*, their primary responsibility to the community and the control the teacher exercised over what was to be taught as well as in determining when a child had adequately learnt a particular subject matter (DiBona, 1983). Governor-General Moira while deciding against including village teachers in the government's payroll, recognized

that 'the humble but valuable class of village school-masters . . . teach the first rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic for a trifling stipend which is within reach of any man's means' (Nurullah and Naik, 1951: 64).

Though the poor were not allowed entry into the Sanskrit *tols*, they were able to create their own parallel, separate schools – the *patshalas*. Their lives, even though they involved *khatni*, did not employ the same definition of *khatni* as evinced in Bauna's narrative. For Bauna, *khatni* is a life devoid of formal schooling, while in precolonial times a life that involved *khatni* had been part of a *patshala* education. It is in fact with this modern system of education that the space within which the lower castes were able to function independently, by combining education with learning a trade, is dissolved.

The 'filtration theory' had a debilitating effect on these *patshalas* and, in 1854, the colonial state began to assume bureaucratic control of them as the best means through which a uniform modern system of elementary education for the masses could be achieved. The colonial bureaucracy introduced teacher-training, linked aid to the use of government textbooks and a predetermined syllabus, as well as introducing a centralized examination system to determine scholarships for students (Kumar, 1991, 1992; Nurullah and Naik, 1951). These measures to create a modern educational bureaucracy undermined the independent functioning of the *patshalas*, reduced the role of the teacher to just another functionary and displaced the community-based content of what was taught in these schools. The new system of schooling introduced a curriculum designed to create a modern, professional bureaucracy that was alien to the everyday lives of the poor and constructed their lifeworlds as backward and in need of transformation.

The introduction of this new, modern, centralized education system constituted a significant breach for the masses and, 'proved to be as *necessary* for the upper classes, particularly for the newly formed bhadralok class, as it proved to be *irrelevant* to the lives of the lower classes' (Acharya, 1989: 113; my translation and emphasis). Through introducing the same type of education for all, the curriculum that became standardized was one that largely reflected the backgrounds and interests of the upper castes/classes. Although it invoked the ideology of an equal education for all, this new system in effect served to marginalize existing forms of knowledge of the poor and failed to provide them with a discursive space within which their lives of labour could be viewed with dignity. As the interests of the upper classes/castes in effect are privileged in this uniform modern system of education for all, what prevails as the discursive ideal is the concept of becoming a *manush* whose life is devoid of hard labour. *Khatni*, within this ideal, is constitutive of individual failure, an inability to make it within the formal education system including the job prospects it offers, and is therefore synonymous with a life of hard, manual labour in which schooled skills are no longer viewed as necessary It is this prevailing binary – which is very much

an outcome of a modern system of education which the colonial state establishes – that Bauna's narrative draws on in his rejection of vocational training.

Factory schools, vocational education and the poor child

We can further elaborate upon the discourses of *manush* and *khatni* – within our framework of the disjunctions posed by colonialism in the lives of the poor – through problematizing the nature of children's work. Child labour is the dominant image that signifies the loss of childhood among poor children in the Third World. Bauna's unwillingness to undergo vocational training can be read as reflecting traditional cultural practices that socialize children to the world of work at an early age, and therefore regard any formal work-related training as alien and unnecessary. But doing this would be to discount the ways in which the history of colonial capitalism in India transformed children's household work (an integral part of early childhood socialization practices) into wage labour. In precolonial India, children worked in the household economy and it was only with the advent of capitalism, as introduced by the colonial state, that their work was drawn into the production of capital in the form of wage labour. In the late 19th century, when factories, mines and tea plantations in India began setting up factory schools to train working children to be more efficient workers, legislation was already underway in England to abolish child labour and enforce compulsory schooling for all children. In the colonies, however, capital continued to utilize children's labour, while simultaneously putting into circulation discourses on the unwillingness of parents to send their children to school and on vocational education being the commonsense solution for poor children.

The earliest industrial schools were begun in an apparent effort to separate children from their working parents. However, in reality a utilitarian imagery of a skilled and docile workforce guided the creation of these industrial schools, which were being set up in order to train the children of labourers to take up skilled employment. Dr Saisse of the East Indian Railway Company justified setting up industrial schools at the collieries in Giridih, stating, 'the adult workman [is] too old to learn, but [it is] hoped by educating their children to effect a substantial improvement in the intelligence of the next generation and to instil into them some form of discipline' (Bureau of Education, 1918: 20).

The Company maintained four grades of schools: elementary, lower primary, upper primary and industrial. This last school combined learning in mathematics and mechanics with practical work on the shopfloor. However, these schools turned out to be unpopular among the labourers, which forced the Company to enforce compulsory attendance in 1893 for all boys between 5 and 12 years of age, through the use of security guards. In addition, the

Company also introduced a stipend with increments for every extra year the child stayed in school. But, in spite of this, only 52 of the 1758 boys who attended primary school remained in the industrial school (Bureau of Education, 1918). The colonial bureaucracy was supportive of industrial schools and viewed the Giridih school as a good example of,

> . . . technical instruction of a low grade that can be given to youths if only they are literate, and that this instruction increases the intelligence and exactitude of their work in a very great degree, making them worth far more in wages, and enabling their employers to effect economy in supervision and to turn out better work. (Biss, 1921: 35)

A similar need for a skilled workforce that would understand instructions in English – and thus not be easily influenced by interpreters, whom the officials viewed as inciting 'worker unrest' – led to the creation of a joint school in 1904 at the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Perambore, Madras. Teaching at this school was restricted to conversational English. Industrial classrooms were fitted with various machines used in different parts of the mill, with their English names printed on the foot of these machines to familiarize children. Half-timers at the mills attended the school but, despite the incentives offered for attendance, it was unable to attract more than 50 percent of these boys.

The colonial administration framed this lack of attendance within their already existing discourses on the lassitude of the natives, and their 'disastrous contentment'. This was combined with poor parents frequently being blamed for not being more ambitious about their child's future. In a school set up in the tea plantations of Darjeeling by the Church of Scotland Mission, a plantation official attributed the low attendance to the fact that the poor, 'are contented with their condition in life, very many individuals save money which they invest in cattle and such like forms of wealth, and they think what satisfies them will be good enough for their children' (Bureau of Education, 1921: 14). Similar views were shared by members of the 1908 Indian Factory Labour Commission, which justified its decision to delay the introduction of compulsory primary schooling for child workers stating that parents, 'did not wish their children to feel themselves above manual labour' (Bureau of Education, 1921: ii–iii).

Despite the expansion of modern primary education, these factory schools were allowed to exist and to tailor their teaching to create intelligent workers out of labouring children. In England, meanwhile, the development of a comprehensive education system after 1870 was achieved through laws that enforced compulsory education and banned child labour. Yet the colonial state continued to justify children's work in the colonies. In addition, efforts were undertaken to direct the interests of poor students towards the pursuit of a trade after elementary schooling. Ideas on what type, or combination, of education was most suitable for the poor came to be widely discussed in the early 20th century. Proposals for trade schools to follow up the

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work of primary schools were considered by the Calcutta Corporation at various times. The Mendicancy Committee Report of 1920 recommended that the government of Bengal should establish 'industrial schools' for children (*Calcutta Gazette*, 1926). The Biss Report (1921: 35) on primary education in Bengal proposed a standardization of technical instruction in order to provide firms with, 'suitable and willing human material from the country under properly regulated safeguards'. The Corporation made arrangements with the Calcutta Engineering College to enrol an annual quota of pupils from the Corporation's free primary schools into a special artisan section. It is interesting to note that, in England in 1887, socialists and labour representatives testifying before the Cross Commission – appointed to enquire into the working of the Elementary Education Acts of England and Wales – strongly objected to any kind of vocational education in elementary school, stating that the working class, 'do not desire it at all. . . . They feel that it is a waste of time, and that it will interfere largely and prejudicially with the general school work if it is introduced' (Simon, 1965: 125).

On the other hand, the reasons why the Calcutta Corporation did not consider introducing vocational education at the primary school level were quite contradictory. The Corporation reasoned that, as 'one school will have to provide for a clerk's as well as a blacksmith's son, vocational education at the primary stage would be imparted more for its cultural than purely vocational value' (*Calcutta Gazette*, 1926). Thus, while a clerk's son had no need of vocational skills. other than to enhance his cultural knowledge of a craft, the blacksmith's son required it because a discourse had already been constructed around his desire to earn an income immediately and his being unsuitable for higher education. In his book *Schools With a Message in India*, Daniel Fleming (1922: 4), a member of the commission set up to review the work of missionary schools, commented that a cultivator's son needs 'a working ability to read and write, a knowledge of arithmetic according to native methods, so that he can follow his accounts with the village shop-keeper and landlord'.

Therefore, while the colonial state ascribed to itself ideals of bourgeois equality to distinguish itself from native society, with its caste hierarchies and feudal relations, these were in effect made use of by the colonial capitalism for its own ends. The precolonial, caste-based occupational skills needed to be transformed into those of a modern 'worker' in order for the colonial capitalists to generate profits. A limited formal schooling for the poor followed by vocational/industrial training provided the best means through which to actualize this. These interests naturalized discourses about poor children needing to work and about their parents' lack of interest and apathy. Precolonial caste hierarchies and exclusions instead of being transformed, within a modern comprehensive education system, were in effect formalized through the colonial state's construction of vocational education as ideal for poor children.

Post-independence education policy largely reflects its colonial foundations, with the rhetoric of universalizing elementary education being written into the national education policies of successive governments for the last 50 years. Gandhi's Basic Education scheme would have greatly influenced the discourses of *manush* and *khatni* through its design to have all children in a community engage in learning a productive craft that affirmed the knowledge base and everyday realities of the lower castes. However, Gandhi's ideas on education failed to receive any substantial state support, since they challenged the wisdom of the new nation's ruling elite, whose interest in scientific progress and material advancement was far removed from the lives of the poor.

Although the idea of equal opportunity through merit-based enrolment into institutions of higher learning still underlies India's education policies, there now clearly exists in the country a two-tier elementary education structure, which has a variety of English-medium private schools for the middle-classes and the rich from which children are likely to perform much better than from the government network of vernacular schools in which the poor enrol. The elementary school curriculum has not been modified considerably. Formal education continues to signify a disjunction between poor and rural children's daily realities and the knowledge deemed worth knowing in school.

Conclusion

To emphasize aspects of the precolonial in order to critique modernity is not to sentimentalize the premodern past. Instead, the effort is to highlight certain hierarchies, exclusions and an absence of mobility – all characteristic of the premodern – as continuing in myriad ways within modern discursive practices. This is evidenced in current campaigns to recognize the rights of marginalized children in the Third World through successfully integrating them into formal schools. In India, the schools being set up to accommodate these children are grossly inadequate, one-room, one-teacher establishments, which are promoted and run by the state with the overwhelming support of children's rights organizations. These organizations justify their endorsement of these schools within a rights discourse that juxtaposes the 'saving' that formal schooling embodies, against the children's former lives of exploitation. This implicit faith in the ability of formal schooling to transform these lives is similar to the colonial state's view of the modern education system as inherently more just and civilized than the precolonial system of *tols* and *patshalas*. But, as this article has attempted to highlight, the possible solutions to these lives lie neither in the unproblematic privileging of a bourgeois western childhood, nor in an ahistorical understanding of 'indigenous childhoods'. Rather, it is through recognizing the ways in which the representation of 'indigenous' and 'modern' childhoods as discrete categories

continues to serve the project of modernity as constructed in the European imaginary, that we will be able to invoke both the premodern and the history of the modern in the Third World, to critique the global circulation of a modern western childhood as the hegemonic ideal.

Notes

1. Partha Chatterjee (1993) in his discussion on Indian nationalism provides a framework within which the negotiated nature of the national-modern as constructed by the nation's elites is highlighted. According to him anticolonial nationalism divides social institutions and practices into two domains – the material and the spiritual – and consolidates its sovereignty over the spiritual realm long before it begins its political contest with the colonial state. While the material domain (of economy, statecraft, science and technology) was that in which the West had proved its superiority and the East was required to emulate, the spiritual domain bore the 'essential' marks of cultural identity and maintained its distinctness and distance from colonial reform efforts. This distinctive spiritual essence did not mean that Indian 'traditions' were left untouched by the nationalists. It is in fact within this inner or spiritual sphere that nationalism undertakes the project of constructing a 'modern' national culture that is however not western. It was within this inner domain that the nationalists take up the task of 'modernizing' middle-class Indian women, not in ways that were identical to western women, but through selectively deciding what aspects of modernity they wanted the new Indian woman, the *bhadramahila*, to incorporate, and what markers of spiritual essence they wanted her to maintain. This obviously affected the ways in which children and childhood came to be understood. The new patriarchy although confined to the middle class prevailed as the hegemonic narrative thus affecting the creation of lower-class subjectivities as well.

2. Gandhi's opposition to colonial education was part of his critique of western civilization and its failure to uphold the principles of truth and non-violence as its scientific and material advancements were based on 'plundering other races'. His scheme of Basic Education proposed that children should learn a 'productive handicraft' as a compulsory school subject. His proposal was aimed at reducing the alienation that the poor experienced in school and attempted through his scheme to make children self-reliant as well as to make these schools self-sufficient through the sale of craft products. For a detailed discussion on Gandhi's Basic Education programme, see Acharya (1997) and Kumar (1991).

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