

Enslaved Saraswatis— Women Primary School Teachers

This article is based on interviews with teachers of 12 government, corporation and aided schools and 10 private unaided schools in the city of Delhi

“PLEASE don’t mention my name or the name of the school.” This was the request from every teacher we interviewed, without exception. Many teachers did not dare talk to us. Those who agreed to talk did so at the risk of losing their jobs, hence the necessary precaution of concealing their identities. If teachers, the purveyors of knowledge, live in such an atmosphere of terror, how can they develop in children that questioning spirit which is the essence of education ?

The first striking fact about primary school teachers is this fear in which they exist. The second is that they are almost all women— whereas at middle and high school levels, the proportion of men increases, and in the teachers’ unions nearly all the office bearers are men! How is it that even a profession where women are in the majority comes to be represented by men ? With these questions in mind, we undertook this study of primary school teachers and how they react to their living and working conditions.

We Can’t Ask Why Private, Unrecognized, Unaided Schools

One of the worst examples of private schools exploiting teachers on a large scale is a particular montessori school which has over 60 branches in Delhi and its suburbs. The school has classes only upto class seven after which children have to be admitted into other schools. This is difficult because this school is unrecognized and its certificate carries no weight. One evening, we by chance met some of the teachers when they were gathered at the school head office for “reappointment.” We wondered what this procedure was and later, we talked to two teachers who had both resigned and so talked freely.

“We get a consolidated salary of Rs 300 to 400. Many of my friends have been recently downgraded to Rs 325. This

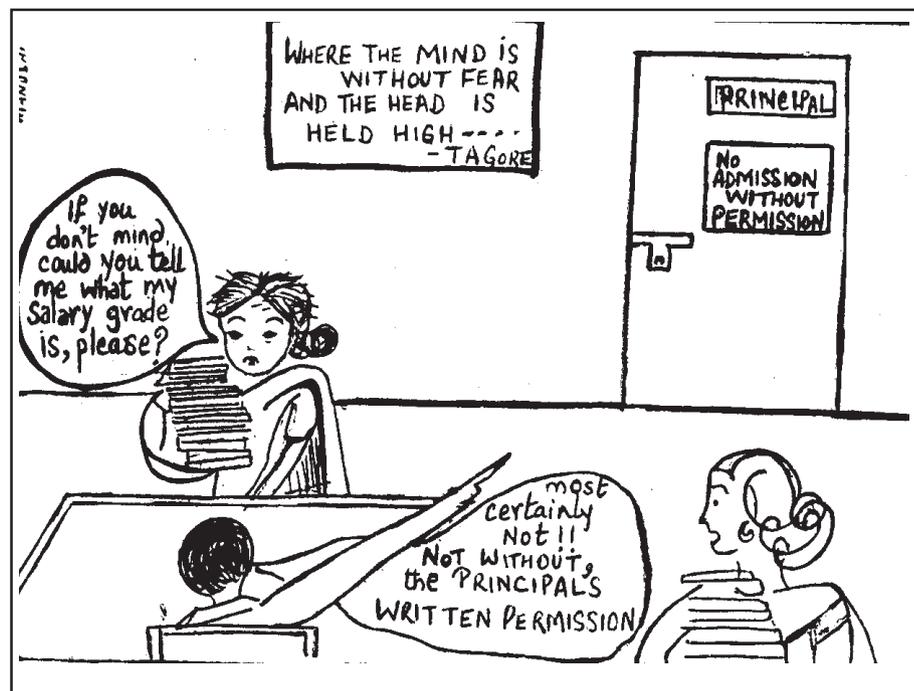
happened to me also. My salary was increased to Rs. 420 and then suddenly decreased to 400 and again to 365.”

“Were you not told why this happened?”

“No, not at all. We can’t even ask. If we ask, he will immediately say : ‘Madamji, you clear your account (that is, leave the job). I don’t want to hear anything. Go, Madamji, go.’ And he will call out to the superintendent: ‘Mrs S. clear her account.’

Permanent only means that they will be paid for the summer vacation. But they also have to work during vacations. They have to go to school by rotation throughout the vacation and stay there, attend to admissions, enquiries and so on.”

The plight of temporary teachers is best illustrated by that of the sports teacher: “Throughout the year, there is no teacher for games because there is no space to play games. But just a couple of



So naturally, we prefer to lose Rs 35 rather than lose the whole salary. We know that in other places they pay even less.”

Teachers are kept temporary for years together in this school. A temporary teacher can be thrown out at a moment’s notice. But what about permanent teachers? Can they also be dismissed without assigning any reason ?

“Yes, any time. Whenever he likes. Permanent doesn’t mean their job is secure. Nor do they get any extra pay.

months before the annual sports day, which is a big affair designed to advertise the school, an advertisement is put in the papers for a sports teacher. She has to do a tremendous amount of work. She has to go to different branches, take the children to the nearest park and stand in the sun all day, beating a drum and drilling the children. Finally, if sports day is on February 22, on the 23rd she is out on the streets.”

Temporary teachers are reappointed

every six months. "We are kept in fear and worry, wondering whether we will be re-appointed or not. There is no criterion laid down for reappointment. Even when appointing a teacher, he doesn't look at her certificates. In the interview I was asked only my father's name, address and occupation. I wondered whether I was being interviewed or my father!"

Usually fresh graduates, all untrained, are employed. "There is no appreciation for one's work, record or experience. All of us are just like sheep and goats. For example, I made charts for the whole school, I worked so hard but it was not at all appreciated. So why should we bother to do any such work? We don't bother..."

All branches of the school are in residential houses with no open space: "The classrooms are about half the size of this room (we were sitting in her drawing room 10 by 12 feet). There are about 40 children in each section of KG (some of the branches have three sections of KG), and about 35 in the higher classes upto class four. After that the strength decreases because parents start looking for admission elsewhere. In our branch, there was one toilet for 11 teachers and another one for the 200 children. You can imagine how dirty it gets. There is no staffroom. We eat our lunch in the classroom, joining up the benches to make a table. The working hours are 8:45am to 1:45pm. Teachers have to stay on an extra hour after that. There may or may not be extra work but the fear is there..."

During working hours, we are not supposed to step out of the classroom. And we are not allowed to go out of the gate, no matter what happens. Even if a *chappal* breaks, we can't go to the *mochi* who sits outside to get it mended. If someone comes from home with a message, we can't talk to the person. There is only one break of 20 minutes and we have to by rotation supervise the children during this time as well...

The school has a matador van to pick up and drop the children. But no teacher is allowed to go in this van—even though we are ready to pay for it. We are not allowed to step into it. . .

I am resigning because I want to take a teachers' training course. While teaching

in this school, we are not allowed to do any parttime job, not allowed to study further, even by correspondence course. Nor can we take tuitions at home. If he gets to know that anyone is studying further, she will be immediately dismissed...

Permanent teachers get 15 casual leaves a year and temporary teachers get one a month. If we take leave on Saturday or Monday, Sunday will also be counted as a leave. Every extra day we are absent, our salary is cut. There is no medical leave. I had an operation and was absent for three weeks so Rs 156 was cut from my pay."

She reacts sharply to our query about maternity leave: "The minute they come to know that a teacher is pregnant, immediately she is made to resign. This happens with every teacher—permanent or temporary. It happened to one who had been teaching there for eight years! There is no question of a pregnant teacher retaining her job..."

We are not given an appointment letter so we have no proof that we are on the staff..."

"Do you all ever discuss these problems?"

"We keep grumbling among ourselves but no one dares go and tell him. We know we'll only be insulted and lose our jobs. So we keep quiet when someone else is dismissed so long as we are not touched. Though of course it happens to each one in turn."

"Has there never been a Union?"

"Not even the U of Union! Let me tell you another interesting thing. There is a rule that no two teachers of the same branch should go anywhere together. We are not allowed to visit each others' homes. We are not even supposed to come out of the school together. We must leave one by one. Of course some of us break these rules but if we are caught, we can be dismissed. So those teachers who really need the job, don't dare take the risk. Even to invite your colleagues to your wedding, you have to take the principal's written permission. We are not allowed to step into another branch of our school. So to us the teachers of another branch are like teachers of another school. We don't even know where all the branches are, leave alone knowing the teachers. So if a teacher

is dismissed from some other branch, how would I get to know about it?"

Also, we have found that whatever we talk amongst ourselves somehow or other reaches the head office. Anyone who tries to take a bold step will be given a warning or harassed. She'll be told on next payday: 'So Madamji, you've made a lot of friends in this branch, have you? OK, you are transferred.' There were three women who were very good friends—all three were transferred, one to Rajouri Garden, one to Model Town, one to Safdarjung Enclave. That's the end of the friendship. How can they meet each other? On Sundays, there is so much work at home."

Her mother reminded her of one agitation and she said: "Yes, there was a signature campaign once. We heard that all the teachers, even the permanent teachers, were going to have their salaries reduced to Rs 300. We got very upset. One teacher typed out a letter saying that if this happened, all 400 of us would resign at once and all the branches would be empty. She was collecting the signatures but the principal got to hear of it so salaries were not reduced and the paper never went any further."

"Are there any male teachers in the school?"

"No, all are women. The only man is the principal. In every branch, one teacher is the 'in-charge.' She is paid a little extra and she has to supervise the others and report to the principal. Then there are four zonal in-charges for east, west, north and south Delhi. Over them is Ms S, a chief in-charge and over her is Mr A."

The children are charged Rs 50 per month plus transport charges. We calculated that one teacher is paid Rs. 300 whereas a KG class brings in Rs 2,000. When we asked why he does not get the school recognized, she replied: "Why should he? He'll have to pay each teacher Rs 900 whereas now he gets rid of three in that sum."

Teachers or Cats and Dogs?

Apart from such full-fledged rackets, the city is littered with tiny teaching shops which have names like "St Gilbert School" or "Ding Dong School." These are to be found in almost every backstreet, being run in residential houses. Teachers are

paid at the wage rates of domestic servants. Ms B told us about a cluster of such schools in Paschim Vihar. Ms B is middle aged, looks tired but is constantly on her feet. It was difficult to catch her for a few minutes and get her to talk. She is an MA in philosophy and has been teaching for nine years in a school in Imphal where she was paid Rs 400. She had to leave this job because her husband got transferred.

She tells us that in one part of Paschim Vihar there are four schools in the same block, all in fierce competition. "In one corner is Emmanuel Mission School and just opposite to it is Doon Public School. In one corner is Saraswati Shishu Mandir, a Hindi school and in another is West Delhi Public School. I first joined West Delhi Public. It is being run by a husband and wife in their house. They live in one room and the other two rooms are used for classes. Two classes are taken at a time in one room. They also take in children for day care. These little ones sit on a bed in the corner of the classroom ! There are about 40 children of two classes in a room and some of them are mentally retarded. It is very difficult to teach in such conditions. I left this school within five days. One day when we were talking, the wife said that she went to a child's house but the parents did not pay the fees so she took away a suit piece from there. The day I heard this, I left.

I walked into Emmanuel Mission school and they offered me Rs 200. They were always in need of teachers because people keep leaving as they find better jobs. This school has written on the board that it is recognized, but actually it is not recognized. It is also being run by a woman and her husband though they say the main school is at Kota and the Director is there. But I never saw the Director in the one year I taught there.

I asked for Rs 40 to pay my bus fare so they paid me Rs 240. When I joined there were 25 children but when I left there were 60. In a year, I saw six other teachers joining and leaving. Most of them were fresh out of school and were not trained. The man used to show off and speak very rudely to us. He was really nasty. If we wrote comments like "Poor" or "Why haven't you done the homework?" in the



Here is one teaching shop in a middle class South Delhi colony. This school is run in a three storey building on a 150 square metre plot. On both sides of the school are water tank manufacturing establishments, from whence issues a deafening noise throughout the day. The children play on the pavement of a busy road outside the school. The primary section consists of four classes—one in a verandah—caught between the hammering sound and the noise of traffic—and the other three in small rooms which run into each other so that children freely converse and move from one class to another while teachers bravely try to shout one another down and get heard by their students.

children's notebooks, he would scold us saying: "Why have you written this ? The parents feel very bad."

The conditions were just awful. They didn't let us sit down even for two minutes. At one time the principal was absent for 1.5 months so I and that man managed everything. I had to teach three classes at one time. The rooms were partitioned with plywood so if the other teachers shouted, one had to stop teaching. There was no ayah and teachers were expected to help the children put on their shoes and go to the bathroom. I refused to do this as it was not my job. I never used the toilet there because it was so filthy. The smell was awful and even reached the classroom. I would stay without a glass of water or going to the toilet for seven hours.

They had a rickshaw to fetch the children but sometimes the puller would not turn up so Mr T would take a scooter and go to pick up the children. So it would

get very late before school started. We had to do all kinds of extra work. Once, just two days before the exams, they suddenly asked me to set the paper and make copies of it for all the children. It was Puja time and I said: "I'm sorry, it is impossible for me to take any school-work home because there I am already working till 12 at night. So if you want me to do anything, I will stay back in the school and do it." He said: "You are not cooperating with me." I felt very bad, considering how much extra work I was always doing. Surely it was not part of my job to take three classes at a time!

I never got time to have lunch — all the time one had to be on one's feet, looking after so many children single-handed. Sometimes the young girls who came to help would snatch me away saying: 'What is this, Aunty? Come and have your lunch.' But as soon as we started becoming a little friendly, they would start making her life miserable so that she should

leave. If she was writing on the board they would come and criticize her: 'Why are you teaching in such detail and giving answers to all the questions? Just do two or three questions and finish it off. Doon School and West Delhi school are doing it like that'!

In March they told me to visit, all the houses in the locality just to advertise the school and ask people to send their children. They said all the other schools were doing this but I refused to do it. I am a teacher, not a saleswoman. So I took leave during those days and my pay was cut “

In spite of all this, Ms B takes pride in the fact that the children taught by her learnt fast and could write well. She has a sense of the dignity of her vocation: “Do you know why I left? They didn't have a Hindi teacher for many months— one child's mother used to come and take a few classes on an honorary basis. One day they were discussing this and Mr T said: 'Someone came for the post but we can't keep any cats and dogs.' I got very angry. I said: 'Do you think teachers are cats and dogs? What do you mean by using such language? In what way are you superior to us? If this is what you think of us, it is impossible for us to continue teaching here.' The next day the other teacher and I both applied in NM school (the school described earlier), got jobs and left.

In NM, we told the principal that we were getting Rs. 360 — another teacher had advised us to say this. But the principal there is very shrewd—he said: 'It is not possible for them to pay more than 200.' Well, in Emmanuel I used to be very hardworking and sincere. I used to sit up till after midnight preparing the lessons. But what was the use? They still said I was not cooperating. So when in NM I found the teachers gossiping, I also gossiped with them.”

About her daily routine, she says; “Don't ask, you will feel bad.” She has no domestic help, she lives at present with her teenaged son who doesn't lift a finger to help at home. She gets up at five in the morning and does not sit down for a moment all day. She does everything from marketing to washing clothes late at night

since there is water shortage these days. “Sometimes I manage to have my breakfast, sometimes I can't even have a cup of tea. Or I just put the tea under the fan to cool while I am getting ready so that I can gulp it down and go. I keep biscuits in my bag to eat at some time of the day in case I can't have a meal...Sometimes I have my evening tea only at 8.30 or 9 p.m.” And when they were moving house, she had to stay up till two to do the packing. Her salary is all spent on running the house, so she cannot afford any domestic help.

We Work Even When Ill Prestigious Unrecognized, Unaided Schools

There are also many highly prestigious English medium so-called “public schools.” These are privately owned, are unaided and charge exorbitant fees as well as huge “donations” at admission time. What most parents do not know, however, is that these schools get their higher sections from class six to twelve recognized, but keep the primary sections unrecognized so that they do not have to pay primary teachers the government grades.

We were not allowed to talk to teachers in these schools. The principal of one school told us to leave, and when we asked for just ten minutes with teachers, she said to her assistant: “Why don't these people understand when they are told once? Tell them to go.” The male principal of Central Academy said: “We don't have time for such *bekar kaam* (useless stuff).” Finally, on the pretext of getting our children admitted, we managed to get access to teachers in some schools and talk informally with them.

Ms X, who teaches in a school which has pretensions to progressiveness but keeps all its primary branches unrecognized, says; “I have been in this school for 13 years and my net salary is just Rs 630. No, I don't know what government school teachers get. What is the use of knowing it and desiring it? I am the only earning member in my family. I have never got a single increment. My basic pay still remains Rs 230. There is no question of promotion for us nor is there any job security. If the authorities get to know that I am talking to you like this, I

will be dismissed without an enquiry. Anyone can be dismissed at any time...”

In another branch of the same school, we met a teacher who looked as if she had been crying. Her colleague Ms M told us that she was suffering from acute sinus trouble. We asked her why she had not taken leave. Ms M replied: “Even to take our due casual leave, we have to get prior permission. Ms S got her attack in the early morning so she could not submit an application and she had to come. Today, I was just five minutes late in the morning and the headmistress rebuked me sharply. I felt like throwing my resignation letter at her and walking out. But then what will happen to my family? So I apologized and kept quiet.”

These prestigious schools are known for their extra-curricular activities and colourful wall posters and charts. The teachers have to labour overtime to make all this possible. They have to stay on after school everyday and also work on Saturday which is a holiday for the children.

In another such school, we were told: “We get eight casual leaves but we can take them only on producing a medical certificate. If we don't take casual leave, we can encash each leave for Rs 15.” Thus teachers, because they are so low-paid, prefer to work even when they are sick: “Because of the money I somehow manage to come to school even if I am ill. I recently lost my husband and I have to educate my children. How can I think of my health and take leave?”

When we asked about the basic pay scale and increments, we received the same answer in all such schools: “We don't know.”

“Tense And Frightened Like Small Children” Recognized Minority Schools

Ms J works in a convent school. When we went to meet her, we were feeling quite dispirited by the oppressive conditions in which teachers are working and the fact that they seem unable to fight their oppression in any way. But as Ms J spoke to us, we felt deeply inspired by her strength and courage which have developed over the years through the sheer necessity of resisting injustice. Ms

J told us about her experience as a teacher, a story of unrecognized labour and thus symbolic of the experience of most women: "I have been teaching for 30 years, as a primary school teacher. When I joined I was untrained. I educated myself with great difficulty, from my own earnings. Even after graduation, we were not given any increment. But we didn't ask because it is a convent, not getting a grant and we wanted to help in some way, we wanted to dedicate ourselves."

After completing my training, I taught higher classes for four years but I was still being paid at primary school scale. I didn't mind because I like to teach my subject and my teaching was appreciated by students and their parents. When the school applied for government recognition, it was my class which was used as a demonstration, my teaching got recognition for the school. But after that, just to humiliate me, the principal took away these classes from me and gave me primary classes again."

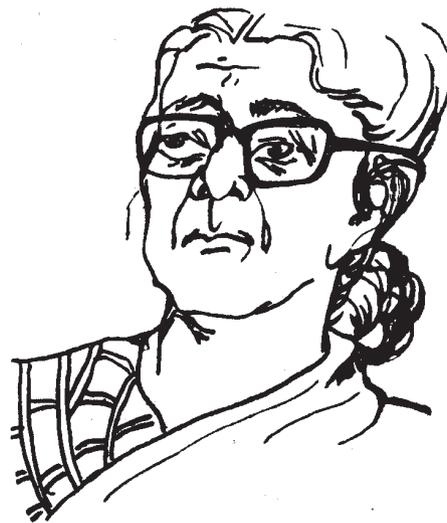
We were surprised and asked if this is often done. She tells us that it is a method constantly used to insult teachers. Some fifth class teachers who were not liked by the principal, were suddenly told to take KG classes and untrained nursery teachers were given the higher classes. But this injustice proved to be the igniting spark to Ms J's anger: "All my life I never used to open my mouth, I was a very quiet person because I had studied in a convent where we used to be rebuked if we tried to speak. But when I discovered that my classes had been taken away, I was terribly upset. I cried for days together. I went to the principal and requested her not to take my class away. But the only answer I got was: "We have decided it already. It's a new development."

Development which involves degradation of teachers? Another "development" is new-fangled ways of pretending to democratize the set-up: "Some days after this we were asked in a staff meeting whether we were satisfied with our work. I was the only teacher out of 80 in this branch, who dared to say that I was dissatisfied. The principal was furious. She called me and shouted at me: 'If you are dissatisfied, leave the school.'

I said: 'Madam, I have been teaching for 25 years. I am not going to leave, I will stay here.'

She breaks off the narrative to tell us the story of another teacher, a first divisioner who was similarly insulted: "She threw down her register, told them to keep their job and walked out. When you are young, you can afford to do that. But at this age where can we go? Our wings have been clipped."

It is clear from Ms J's account that most women teachers are kept in a state of absolute ignorance regarding their own working conditions. For example, inspite



of repeated enquiries, they are not shown their salary records. "We are not supposed to know anything. Whenever we ask the clerk, she says: 'Don't ask me, ask the principal.'" Thus teachers who are supposed to be givers of knowledge, are the victims of an institutionalized ignorance. Ms J is one of the few who, at great personal risk, insists upon informing herself. When we ask if increments are paid regularly, all she can say is: "I don't know about others. I know only about myself." But the authorities try their best to isolate teachers like her. They spread rumours against her and advise younger teachers not to mix with her. She is aware of this and purposely sits separately if she feels she is not wanted in a particular group: "If anyone wants to talk to me, they can." Yet her colleagues are inspired by her militance: "They all

come to me with their problems." But this feeling of support remains at a purely individual level. Each one relates to the others her own problem as and when she is unfairly treated. She sits and talks, cries and is miserable. The others sympathize but remain silent, until their own turn comes. Why is it that no solidarity manages to emerge? It is clear that a sword hangs over each one's head: "Our main problem is insecurity of job. We know that any time, any moment, such a thing can happen. We are all the time tense and frightened like small children. The school social worker should solve our problem first before those of the children!"

She goes on: "The nuns who teach are not paid for their work though the records show regular payment. Only a few who have dependents are paid—the money is sent straight to the dependents so no one knows how much it is. Nuns are made to do a lot of work—teaching, administration, supervision, hostel work. Any nun who is found 'non-cooperative' can be posted to some distant place like Manipur though nuns cannot be dismissed. Nuns cannot talk to us because we are supposed to be worldly people. So they cannot even sit in our staff room."

There has been a struggle in this school. Ms J tells us about it: "We held a signature campaign demanding an instalment of dearness allowance. The principal was very annoyed. She gave us long lectures on duty for the sake of duty. We had to apologize. But after a few months she 'voluntarily' gave us the proper scales." Thus they were made to feel that not their struggle but the kindness of the authorities got them their rightful due.

Minority Schools—More Freedom to Oppress

We spoke to Ms Y who teaches in a mission school for boys where all the primary teachers are women. Here too, insecurity is a major problem. Teachers are kept on a temporary basis for years together. No teacher dare express her anger even in front of her colleagues for fear of being reported. No one knows whom to trust. What are the favours held out by the authorities to make teachers cut at one another's roots and thus ultimately weaken

their own position? Ms Y tells us that the system of confirmation of service is absolutely arbitrary. There are no criteria laid down. Some teachers are confirmed within a year, many others are kept temporary. Their posts are readvertised and the principal confidentially informs his favourite candidates of the vacancy. Interviews are held without the knowledge of other teachers and the principal's candidate is selected. As for the "permanently temporary" teachers, every two years they are made to take a day off, on paper their services are terminated and then they are reappointed after one day. This is done to prevent them from having a legal claim to the job.

The teachers in this school have made an effort to organize themselves. Some years ago, 30 of them got together around the case of a teacher whose services were being terminated. They demanded that government take over the school. What would be the advantage of this? This is the first necessity to create conditions of minimal security so that self-organization becomes possible: "At least in government schools, teachers are not degraded and mentally terrorized as we are."

Ms Y worked very hard for the association but the government remained indifferent to the teachers' request and the association could not last long: "One by one each of us was harassed. And many of them were told by their husbands not to get involved in such activities. Many of the teachers are sole supporters of their families. They felt afraid, thinking that if tomorrow they are handed a letter, what would they do? All of them cannot afford to go to court." They are burdened both at home and at school. Ms Y tells us about one teacher whose husband does not work: "Her face is so haggard. She says: 'Ms Y, one of these days I am going to die.'" Conditions are no better for the non-teaching staff: "One librarian who had been working for ten years was suddenly asked to leave for no rhyme or reason. She had just got pregnant after 12 years of marriage and when she heard this news, she had a miscarriage."

As women, we are terrorized and punished like children within the family. It is clear that this attitude is carried over

into our workplace as well. How unfree the atmosphere of so-called "education" is was clear from Ms Y's reaction to Manushi. She was thrilled that such a magazine exists and said so again and again. But though it has been in the school library, she has never seen it there. The school librarian had told us that teachers did not take much interest in Manushi (the students are all boys). The reason is now clear to us—reading and absorption are just not possible in such a tension-ridden atmosphere.

In the school as in the family, women have to live and work hedged in by hundreds of unwritten rules—ranging from standing when the principal enters the room to getting teaching schedules signed every week to eating their lunch in a fixed place. And they can be taken to task for infringing any one of these rules. They have no way of knowing which rule is an established one and which a whim of the authorities because they are not given access to the actual written rules.

Most significant is the complete alienation of teachers — without whom no school can function — from the decision-making levels. Mission schools have only priests and religious leaders on their managing committees.

Minority schools are peculiarly oppressive because they have been given more "administrative freedom" which amounts to more freedom to oppress. They are exempted from all government interference and can thus tyrannize more freely the teachers who belong to the same minority communities whose interests these schools are supposed to be protecting! In these schools, teachers are never paid selection grade and there are no promotion avenues. They have to work overtime without payment for school functions, have to do a lot of administrative work and attend programmes in their vacations. They have to look after social work programmes which the school social workers are supposed to do. If any teacher dares protest, she is told: "This is a minorities school. Government rules are not applicable here. Why don't you go and join a government school if you are not satisfied here?"

Why should injustice be justified and cloaked by minority status? And why is the government indifferent to these glaring discriminations? The Education Act should be amended so that minority schools are not exempted from government rules and safeguards, and their teachers not deprived of these benefits.

Teachers or Beggars? Recognized, Unaided Schools

Sunday morning. Before going to see Ms N, who teaches in a recognized, unaided school, we were talking to her neighbour Mr Z about this survey. Mr Z interrupted: "If you want the facts, don't talk to married teachers." We were surprised—many teachers are married, why should they not be talked to? His reason: "The ones whose husbands are earning well are not at all interested in teaching. They only do it for extra money. Married women don't teach for a career. You should talk to the professional teachers." Why and how does a woman lose her right to a "profession" just because she becomes a wife? We realized when we met Ms N.

When we reached her house, the whole family was watching TV. She was standing at the table, busy stitching clothes. We began with the usual questions and got the usual depressing replies. Ms N is a trained graduate and has been teaching in this school for ten years. She had taught in another school for three years but left it after marriage.

Before 1975 she was paid a consolidated salary of Rs 250. Each teacher was paid a different sum according to the whims of the management. In 1975 the government closed down a few schools for not observing regulations, and since then teachers have been paid government grades in this school. On record, they work six hours a day and teach 36 classes a week. But in fact they have to stay an extra 1.5 hours on three days of the week. Also, no teachers are appointed to do relief duty so when one teacher is on leave, others have to substitute. This is the practice in all the private schools surveyed. Thus their workload comes to about 40 classes a week.

"Uptil two years ago we had no medical leave, only ten casual leaves. If we fell sick,

our pay was cut. And the principal was hesitant to sanction casual leave. He had to be informed a day in advance. But now we get medical leave. Maternity leave is given only to confirmed teachers. We don't get any leisure or time to read."

Since it appeared from the conversation that everything from permission to study further to permission to use the telephone is given or withheld at the "discretion" of the principal, and teachers are not even allowed to enter the school canteen, we asked her about staff meetings, "Yes, they are held but it is only a one-way procedure — from him to us. We rarely speak. If we try, we know that he will take it out on us in one way or another. Everything is done by a backdoor policy. There are no teacher representatives on the managing committee..."

...Yes, teachers do discuss all this. Sometimes there is a hot discussion but we have to be careful. Things reach the principal. His people are among the staff. After all, only those who report to him are given favours. He dislikes those who do not report to him and who are not flattery types."

And then the real reason for her own alienation from the decision-making process surfaced: "We don't have that much time. We have the household responsibility. Those who don't have so much..."

"Do you have a lot of responsibility?"

"Yes, naturally. I have five children. When I started this job, it was more difficult because they were quite small." We ask about her daily routine.

"I get up at 4.45 and prepare the breakfast, lunch, send the children to school. I leave the house at 7.30. At 2.30 I come back, make chapatis and serve lunch to my parents-in-law, then rest for an hour and then start the evening work. Also I do all these things— stitching, knitting, we have to do all this. And I have correction work also."

She speaks with a sense of the injustice of having to do "all this" but also as if it is inevitable. We suggest that maybe men should be made to do some of their own work. At this words pour out of her: "I agree with you, we should protest and fight for our rights but in many families,

A teacher in a municipal corporation school was terminated on the charge that she had deliberately concealed her pregnancy at the time of appointment. The Delhi high court reinstated her, saying that her pregnancy had no relevance to her appointment. The court said she could have been denied her salary but should not have been dismissed!

especially joint families, it is not possible, at least not at my age. Some husbands refuse to even take a glass of water themselves. Why do you think I left the first job? If I had stayed on, by now I would have been a principal somewhere. But my in-laws and husband were not ready to cooperate and look after the children. So I had to leave. I knew the children would not be properly looked after. I got my present job by chance. I had gone to admit my children, the principal noticed that I was educated and offered me a job. Everyone at home tried to stop me but this time I was determined. I was 35. I knew it was the last chance. I was feeling completely cut off. My husband doesn't understand my tastes..."

She tries to express how she felt inadequate as a person because she was not a perfect housewife: I didn't know stitching well. I used to feel bad about it. I felt I was useless. I even felt what is the use of this life—the whole day just in the kitchen, cooking, washing. But now I feel I am contributing something to society. If I can't stitch something, I can give it to the tailor and instead, I can read a book, prepare the next day's lesson. Even if I know that lesson, something can always be improved. I don't keep my money to myself, but I have the feeling that I am contributing something, I am not totally dependent." She breaks off abruptly as her son enters the room, smiles and asks him what is showing on TV. How have we women managed to preserve ourselves in spite of having been forced to play so many smiling roles?

For a woman teaching is indeed much more than the competition and self-glorification of a "career"—it is her struggle to preserve her self, to escape from soul-destroying drudgery for a few hours. Why didn't Ms N apply for a government

school job? "There is an age limitation. At that age I was just a housewife."

She can manage the job in spite of household pressures, because the school is very near her house. But there are other women teachers coming all the way from Gurgaon and Bahadurgarh in Haryana!

What kind of promotion avenues exist for teachers? "Almost all of them have to be in primary school all their lives." Ms N is the only teacher in ten years who has been promoted to middle school. She taught in middle school for two years at primary school pay scales. Now she is being paid the proper scale. But there is no further chance of promotion for her. No teacher in this school is paid selection grade.

She tells us that all the primary teachers are women but in middle school there are many men. This was the pattern in the school where she worked earlier too. When she begins to talk about the difference she finds in working with men, we begin to understand one reason why primary teachers are universally women and why so few of them are promoted to middle school: "The principal tries to boss over ladies more. He knows that most of us don't answer back. He thinks before saying anything to men teachers because he knows there will be a reaction."

Is it any wonder that a woman who has fought battles at home for the right to earn, should not wish to risk her job by answering back? If Ms N were to lose her job, she would certainly get no sympathy at home nor would she be able to find another job. On the other hand, one male teacher who was dismissed is fighting a court case against the school management.

But the male teachers are in a kind of silent conspiracy with the principal to keep the women docile: "I think he advises them not to speak in the staff meetings so that they do not have an effect on the whole staff. They go and discuss with him separately." There are other privileges attached to being a male teacher: "Most of them take up private tuitions. But ladies have less time. I have also been approached but I refuse." She smiles and regretfully gestures towards the neat room that is evidence of her labour: "When can I do

it?” When we ask about increments and provident fund, she assumes it is being paid according to government rules but she doesn't know the exact figures. But she does know how the owners of the school make their profits.

“Every year, teachers have to go from house to house and collect donations from parents. We have to maintain a full record of what each parent is doing. We have to go into all the details. It is not enough to write down that one father is dealing with cement. We will be caught at the staff meeting: ‘What does this mean? Is he a dealer or factory owner or what?’ We have to get these details from the children or from the proformas which parents fill up at time of admission. It is up to the teacher whom to approach— only businessmen or high salaried people also. There is a classwise competition and much depends on how much a teacher manages to collect. We have to go in groups of two from house to house. We have to do this in our own time, we are not paid extra. We are only paid for transport after filling in a voucher to say where all we have been.”

Again, it emerges that women are much more exploited to collect money for the profiteers: “Much more money is collected in the primary schools. The teachers are afraid to refuse. We used to do the collection very sincerely. But it is very embarrassing—particularly when the children in higher classes openly say: ‘Madam, why should we give money?’ They are paying fees of Rs 65 plus many extras. When I came to middle school, I was very afraid that I might not be able to collect enough, then one gentleman told me: ‘Why do you worry about it? If we don't want to go, we don't go. What can be done to you?’ Now there is a reaction among teachers because it is very degrading, so I think this system cannot last long.”

And what are all the “donations” used for? “It is supposed to be for building fund. The building is perpetually under construction. But actually what it is used for, teachers do not know.”

“Teachers Do Not Know!” Corporation And Aided Schools

Though most teachers in privately owned schools are ignorant about conditions in corporation and aided schools, they do believe that conditions there are better. The advantage of teaching in a corporation or aided school is the fixed pay scale and the relative job security. Since there is uniformity of scales and a single employer, it is easier for teachers in these schools to organize themselves. However, when we met the union leaders we found that they were all men and could give us contacts only with headmasters and headmistresses. They deplored the “inactivity” of women teachers and said that in spite of all their efforts they were unable to draw women into union activity. Why is this so when the vast majority of teachers in primary schools are women?

One positive of state employment is that heads of schools do not have the same kind of vested interest in defending the authorities nor can teachers be bought off with small salary increases to oppress their colleagues. Corporation school heads were willing that we should talk to teachers and some even went out of their way to help us.

The first thing that struck us about the 12 schools surveyed was their shabby condition. Ten of them have old ramshackle buildings with asbestos roofs which generate heat in summer. One of them is just a roof balanced on pillars, with no walls to protect from rain or sun. None of the schools have any toilets for the staff. Ms A told us: “We have no toilet at all in our school and it is a serious problem for us to remain for seven hours every day without going to the toilet. The male teachers have no problem— they can stand anywhere and relieve themselves. But can we do this?”

The number of children in a class varies from 35 to 58. Each period is 35 minutes long which means that the teacher cannot devote even one minute to a child in a class. These children come mostly from working class and lower middle class homes. Many of them are the first generation of schoolgoers in their families so they need extra attention whereas all the teachers can manage to do is keep them quiet or get them involved in some

kind of chorus shouting of lessons. There is no possibility of individual attention.

Teachers feel that the classroom strength should be kept at 20. This means that many more primary schools are needed if the education process is to have any meaning. It is noteworthy that the general opinion of corporation schools is that the teachers are lazy and don't care to teach. Thus many parents who cannot really afford private schools prefer to somehow send their children to third-rate English medium schools such as those described by Ms B rather than to a corporation school. Once again, it is the women teachers who are blamed for inefficiency rather than the conditions which make efficiency not only impossible but meaningless.

The teachers complained that they do not get paid their provident fund, leave travel concession or medical reimbursement because the bureaucracy refuses to move for a woman. “They know that we women will not create a racket as the men do, so the file does not move from one desk to another till you pay the clerks for their *chai pani*.”

“LTC exists only on office papers. No woman teacher has ever got it in our school. We have tried several times in vain. Now we have stopped trying—who has the time and energy to spend on these clerks?”

“We have no maternity reimbursement because they believe that our husbands are our caretakers and they should get it from their place of work!”

Women also suffer most when it comes to promotion. Promotion is completely arbitrary, based on the confidential report given by the school head. Obviously, this means that teachers who flatter and please the head will get promoted. The seniority lists are often tampered with. Teachers feel that the confidential report system should be abolished and promotion should be on the basis of seniority alone. One teacher was asked to comply with the sexual demands of the headmaster and when she refused he threatened to stop her increments and give her a bad report. Transfer is also used to harass teachers just as in some private schools. “Since 20

years I am teaching the same class," says Ms C, "Promotions are given at the whims and fancies of the management. I have not got a single promotion, not even selection grade." Increments too are given on basis of efficiency and are left to the discretion of the head and the management. A teacher has to maintain "good relations" with the head to get her increments.

In 1979 some women teachers got together and established a Women Teachers Committee. But unfortunately many women teachers do not even know of its existence. They respond to the idea in the same way as women teachers in all categories of schools do when asked about their pay scales and increments: "I don't know." Why this seeming ignorance and indifference?

Dual Employment — Still Economically Dependent

We found that most women teachers not only have no economic independence so that their job becomes just another terrible burden for them, but their work routine leaves them literally without time even to read the newspaper, let alone becoming active in self-organization. The relationship of most women to their paid employment is that of merely signing their names at the end of the month so that their husbands get another income. In one case both husband and wife work in the same school. The woman does not receive her pay cheque. She just signs the register and her husband collects the cheque. She does not know how much she is paid. She is not given any money for her personal expenses. She comes to school with her husband and has lunch with him so he does the spending. But he keeps Rs 200 as pocket money. When asked what he does with it, she says: "He is a man. He has the right. How can I ask him?" Most teachers hand over their salary to husband or mother-in-law and are completely dependent on them for subsistence. One says: "In case of dire need, I ask my husband for more money but he just points to his mother. When I ask her she says that my petty income is spent on food, but she can lend me the



In one prestigious public school for boys, teachers take five classes of 40 minutes a day, and there are 52 children in each class. This means that in 200 minutes they deal with 250 children - less than a minute a child.

money and deduct it from next month's pocket allowance." Many teachers are just given exactly calculated bus fare daily and are rebuked if they incur any extra expense. The job thus becomes another instrument of humiliation, a forced bonded labour. It in no way contributes to the woman's sense of independence or freedom.

Even when a "good" husband hands over the entire salary to the woman, it is she who has to manage the budget in the face of rising prices. By handing over his salary, the man escapes this burdensome responsibility, and the woman invariably ends up, like Ms B, cutting out her personal needs even to the extent of doing without domestic help.

As one put it, when asked about the women teacher's committee: "Who has the time for all that? We have to rush home to do our household chores." The moment the bell rings, the school is empty as teachers rush for the unreliable DTC buses. Teachers in corporation schools are posted with no concern for the distance they may have to travel to work. Some travel for a couple of hours each way

every day. Of the 12 schools surveyed, only one gives free transport to its staff.

Confronted with this reality, it was not difficult to sympathize with the reasoning of one unmarried teacher who, when asked what she would do if her husband told her to leave her job after marriage, said: "I will be happy. I tell my mother that when she searches for a match for me, she should not tell them that I am working." When asked why she did not want to continue her job, she said: "All the day you work outside and then you come and work at home. And on top of that, the male member will come and say: 'Bring tea for me.'

Why? Just as he is coming home tired, are you not also coming tired? Why should he try to boss over you? It is better then not to do a job at all."

It is natural that under such conditions a woman views her job as supplementary to her "real career" of being a domestic drudge. The family too discourages her from taking her profession seriously. This was well illustrated by one girl who told us how her parents react to her work: "I am the first girl working in my family. They

don't like it. If I complain about conditions at school, they constantly tell me: 'Why don't you leave the job?' Whenever other people would tell my parents that our principal is not a good charactered man, they would tell me to leave the school though I assured them that I was not being harassed in any way. But they say: 'Even if it is not true, people talk about it. Why do you want this job? You don't need to work.' The day I left the job, my mother said: 'Today is the happiest day of my life—you have left your job.' "

For a man, losing a job would be seen as a catastrophe so he has the incentive to fight for his rights but women are made to feel that they would have higher status if they worked only at home.

Many private schools implement government grades of payment on paper, so as to get into the "recognized" category. This is how one prestigious school run by a retired army officer in South Delhi circumvents the law. The teachers are paid full salaries by cheque in order to show a clean record on paper—but the school then forces each teacher to make a regular monthly "donation" to the school of anything from Rs. 100 to 200 !

Work Hazards

Why are all primary teachers in most schools women? One reason teachers gave is that male teachers have been found molesting small girls. We were told the incident of one little girl who was taken to the toilet during an examination and molested. If this is so, how does it become safer for middle school girls who are aged 10 to 16? And what about women teachers' safety? They are very hesitant to talk about this particular work hazard faced by all women in male-powered society. We were told of one municipal corporation teacher who refused the headmaster's sexual advances and was threatened. She managed to get herself transferred. Many also told us about their experiences in trying to get jobs. One went for an interview and the principal came round the desk and touched her cheek. She pushed his hand away and left immediately, thus giving up her chance of getting the job. She could afford to do without it since her husband was well-off but what about

women who desperately need it? Another woman told us about her sisters' experience: "As soon as she went into the room for the interview, she found it was very dark. The principal asked her: 'Shall I close the door?' She walked out of the room, saying: 'Yes, close it.' My other sister refused the principal's advances so he got a dislike for her and rebuked her in front of the whole school..." Ms B also told us her experience: "The first time I went to the head office to get the report books signed, I didn't know the procedure. When I went in, the principal was sitting there. I was standing at the other side of the table. He told me: 'Come this side and shift the books as I sign them.' I started doing this. I had found that in this school not a single child

can write a correct sentence in class four, so I told him their poor result was not my fault as I joined only recently. He said: 'I know, I know, you joined the other day

A primary school teacher's scale laid down by Delhi Administration is 330-380-560. She starts at Rs 330 and gets an increment of Rs 10 a year so that after five years she gets Rs 380. After this she gets an annual increment of Rs 15 and after 12 years, gets Rs 560. After this there is no further increment—the pay stagnates at Rs 560.

with that girl. I didn't like her, I liked you.' And he kept touching my hand while I was shifting the books. I didn't like this. What does he mean by saying this? I have also heard from other teachers that he is not a safe man. And what does he mean by keeping these girls till 9 or 10 o'clock at night on the reappointment day? But teachers do not talk openly about their experience—they may talk only to their very close friends..."

Struggle at both Workplaces

Because women carry the double burden of paid and unpaid labour, government take-over would not be enough to ensure dignity for us in our work. Government take-over would be a step forward in that it would give teachers relative job security, a fixed pay scale, and save them from the worst forms of discrimination visible in private schools. Also, it would make it easier for teachers to come together with common demands against a single employer—the government, rather than as at present, a host of employers.

But since our workforce is not just the school or office, but far more importantly, the family and home, our battles for justice will have to be fought simultaneously in both our workplaces. We have to demand that housework and childcare be seen as the responsibility of society, not as the "duty" of each individual woman towards her family.

According to labour laws, all industrial establishments which employ 20 or more women under one roof are supposed to provide childcare facilities. Why should women working in schools, colleges and hospitals not be given such facilities, just because their labour is not defined as "industrial."? According to a recent supreme court judgment, universities have been declared to be industrial establishments. Schools should also be brought under this category so that women do not have to give up their jobs when they have children. Only when women are fully involved in their professions can we begin to question our position in these professions and demand that we not be relegated to the lowest levels in every sphere (teachers women, management male dominated; nurses women, doctors mostly men; steno-typists women, executive mostly men etc) and demand that we be equally involved in making all the decisions big and small, which affect our work, and our lives. □