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Fearful Childhoods: Life at a Residential School in Delhi

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Abstract

The paper attempts to examine how the emotional world of children is shaped by their everyday experiences at a residential school in Delhi. The school caters exclusively to the needs of poor Dalit children. The ethnographic fieldwork and survey data of this work could identify fear as the dominant emotion of children, reflected in their daily routines inside and outside the classroom. Children are active agents in meaning-making, so the genesis, nature, and magnitude of fear vary. The study reveals a significant difference between boys and girls, indicating that gender plays an important role in the children's emotional world. Also, the home-school continuum was visible in the emotive expressions of children. The school has not created adequate curricular, pedagogical, and infrastructural spaces to engage with children's fears at school. This research highlights the need for educationists, policymakers, and researchers to recognise and address the prevalence of fear factor in growing children, as it can significantly impact their social and emotional well-being.

Keywords: Children, Caste, Gender, Residential School, Fear, Resistance, Agency.

Introduction

Schools play a vital role in the overall development of children, not only by imparting academic lessons but also ensuring their social and emotional growth. They serve as a structurally controlled environment where children learn essential life skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication (Wentzel, 1998). A supportive and inclusive school environment helps children feel valued, safe, and understood, which boosts their confidence and emotional stability (Oberle *et al.*, 2014). Positive relationships with teachers and peers foster a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of

isolation, contributing to better emotional regulation and social skills (Wentzel, 1998). Schools also provide opportunities to develop coping strategies and emotional resilience through structured activities and guidance (Bla *et al.*, 2011). Conversely, negative experiences such as bullying, academic pressure, or lack of support can lead to increased anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Espelage and Swearer, 2003). Therefore, a properly nurturing school environment is key to building emotionally strong and resilient individuals for the future.

Moreover, residential schools profoundly impact early childhood development, influencing children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth. While some residential schools provide a structured and nurturing environment that fosters independence, discipline, and academic growth, others have been linked to emotional distress and developmental challenges due to separation from family and limited emotional support (Dockery, 2010). Early separation from caregivers can disrupt attachment patterns, leading to increased anxiety, emotional insecurity, and difficulty in forming trusting relationships (Bowlby, 1988). Furthermore, it is possible that the rigid structure and institutional environment of some residential schools can suppress emotional expression and creativity, affecting social-emotional development (Colquhoun and Dockery, 2012). Therefore, while residential schools can offer educational and social opportunities, the absence of a nurturing and emotionally supportive environment can negatively affect a child's emotional stability and long-term development.

The historical and social realities of caste-based discrimination deeply influence the ethos of schooling for Dalit children in India. Schools often reflect broader social hierarchies, where Dalit children face exclusion, unequal treatment, and limited access to resources (Balagopalan, 2014). Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and affirmative action, Dalit children frequently experience segregation in seating arrangements, teacher-student interactions, and access to extracurricular opportunities (Thorat and Newman, 2010). The internalisation of caste-based hierarchies within schools can lead to low self-esteem and educational underachievement among Dalit children (Deshpande, 2011). However, alternative schooling models, such as those rooted in Ambedkar-propagated values and Gandhian principles, have aimed to create more egalitarian learning spaces, empowering Dalit students through critical thinking and social awareness drives (Teltumbde, 2011).

Studies on schooling in India have provided valuable insights into the intersection of education, social hierarchy, and cultural reproduction. Scholars such as Krishna Kumar (2005), Mukhopadhyay and Mukunda (2017), and Thapan (2006) have examined how broader social inequalities shape the structure and functioning of schools.

However, these works often overlook the nuanced and complex social relations within school spaces, which cannot be delinked from the larger social context or, specifically, the children's home environment.

Recent research has challenged earlier approaches for their insufficient attention to the intersectionality of gender, poverty, and caste in shaping schooling experiences. For example, Yunus (2020) argues that we must move beyond a simplistic understanding of access and outcomes. Instead, we should first critically theorise how gendered childhoods are produced within specific socio-economic and patriarchal contexts. This perspective calls for a deeper examination of how structural inequalities are perpetuated through everyday schooling practices, urging for a more nuanced approach to understand how they intersect with one another and shape children's experiences in education.

Kumar (2005) argues that the Indian education system reflects colonial legacies and social stratification, where the curriculum and pedagogy reinforce existing power dynamics. His work highlights how textbooks and classroom practices reproduce dominant cultural narratives, often marginalising the experiences and knowledge of Dalit and Adivasi communities. Bhargava (2014) explores the role of teachers and school administrators in shaping student outcomes, noting that caste and gender biases are embedded in teacher-student interactions. However, her study primarily focuses on institutional structures rather than the day-to-day micro-dynamics of caste and social interaction within the school setting.

Mukhopadhyay and Mukunda (2017) critically analyse the schooling experience of marginalised communities, particularly Dalit and Adivasi students, arguing that mainstream schooling often fails to account for students' diverse cultural backgrounds. They highlight how the curriculum promotes a singular, dominant cultural identity, reinforcing exclusion and limiting the scope for critical thinking and social mobility among marginalised students. However, the study focuses more on curriculum design than everyday power negotiations within classroom settings.

Thapan (2006), in her ethnographic study of a girls' school in Delhi examines how schooling becomes a site for constructing gendered identities. She highlights how school management practices and teacher-student interactions reinforce traditional gender roles, despite the rhetoric of empowerment. While Thapan’s work offers a rich analysis of gendered socialisation within schools, it overlooks how caste and class intersect with gender to create complex hierarchies within the classroom.

Despite these valuable contributions, much of the literature tends to treat social categories such as caste, class, and gender as static and isolated variables, overlooking

how they intersect and shape daily interactions within schools and outside. Peer dynamics, teacher favouritism, and parental involvement are often reduced to simplistic binaries of inclusion and exclusion. These limit the understanding of power and resistance in school spaces, where students and teachers constantly negotiate their identities and social positions. Future anthropological research must adopt a more intersectional lens, capturing the' fluid and contested nature of social relations within the schooling context.

Mukhopadhyay and Mukunda (2017) critically analyse this research gap, arguing that existing studies focus predominantly on curriculum, pedagogy, and school management while neglecting the complex interplay between children's social locations, power dynamics, and institutional structures in shaping fear. They emphasise the need to examine fear beyond authority figures and exams, considering how children's interactions with school environments, including human and non-human elements, contribute to their emotional experiences.

The study seeks to fill this gap by emphasising children's voices and recognising them as active participants in shaping their school experiences. Rather than being passive recipients of education, children constantly navigate, question, and reshape the structures imposed on them within schools. Our research builds on Thapan's (2006) perspective, highlighting the role of student agency in schooling.

Schools are dynamic spaces where identities are continuously formed and reformed. Children actively engage with their school environment, influencing it as much as it influences them. They shape their educational journeys while schools attempt to guide their growth and prospects. Some students benefit from this process, while others struggle, and the impact remains minimal for some. However, their experiences are central to understanding what schooling truly entails. Focusing on children's perspectives, this study explores how they interpret and respond to the structures around them. As reflections of tender minds, they have a value of their own.

Additionally, drawing on Foucault's (1978) conceptualisation of schools as mechanisms of surveillance and discipline, this study considers how fear is normalised within school spaces, not merely through physical coercion but through subtler forms of regulative control mechanisms. Burkitt's (2014) relational theory of emotions further supports our approach by emphasising how emotions are socially and historically embedded rather than isolated psychological experiences.

Against this theoretical backdrop, our study looks at fear as a complex social construct, shaped by children's interactions with human and non-human elements in

school spaces comprising classrooms, corridors, playgrounds, animals of various forms, and even ghost stories associated with specific spots. In this context, emotions are understood relationally, rather than as isolated individual experiences. Emotions are deeply connected to broader social relations, histories, memories, and perceptions of the self and others (Burkitt, 2014). As Blaisdell *et al.* (2022) mentioned, 'emotions are tied to the wider patterning of social relations, including histories, memories, habits, and perceptions of self, others, and the world. (p.1)

Muris *et al.* (2000) studied the sources of children's fears at night, like being afraid of the dark, monsters, or being alone. These fears are common, especially in young children, and often start at home. The way parents act when their child is scared—like giving comfort, telling stories, or ignoring the fear—can make a big difference. If parents support and reassure the child, the fear may go away. Nevertheless, the child may become even more scared if they do not take the fear seriously. Although this study is not about schools, it helps us understand how fears that begin at home can follow children into other places, like school. In residential schools, where children stay away from their families, these fears can get worse. Dark hostels, empty hallways, and not having someone to comfort them can make the children feel even more afraid, just like they did at home, or even more.

By bringing children's voices to the forefront, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how school spaces contribute to fear and how students actively engage with, resist, and reinterpret these experiences.

The school where the study was conducted has a rich history of providing social welfare benefits to weaker sections of the community. It was initially started in 1966 within a hostel building established in 1944. Recognising the growing need for committed educational facilities, a separate school building was constructed on the same campus in 1973. Even today, the school continues to operate with the support of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. At the time of fieldwork, 88 students enrolled, supported by fifteen staff members, including the warden, teachers, ayahs (caregivers), a cook, a peon, and a security guard.

The students, primarily from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, stand for the school's original mission of supporting marginalised communities. Most children belong to families residing in Delhi and Ghaziabad (Uttar Pradesh). Their parents are primarily engaged in such low-income jobs as drivers, daily wagers, factory workers, and sanitation workers in and around Delhi. Their socio-economic condition profoundly influences the children's schooling experience and is behind many of their everyday realities, making it a crucial context for the findings.

The fieldwork provided rich insights into how systemic inequalities and vulnerabilities continue to influence the experiences of marginalised children in school.

Methodology and Data Collection

The data were collected using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The Fear Survey schedule for Children-Revised (FSSC-R) was used to identify the common fears among children who participated in the study. Although there are some limitations, yet FSSC-R is the most commonly used self-reported schedule designed as a normative instrument to identify children's fears and social fear sensitivity (Ollendick, 2006). The findings have been further scrutinised using qualitative methods like participant observation and in-depth interviews with the children, school teachers, and hostel wardens to capture children's everyday lives. The children in this study are perceived as key agents of knowledge construction. Forty-one students, including fourteen boys and twenty-seven girls, participated in the fear survey. Further, eight boys and five girls agreed to participate in in-depth interviews. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants of this study. Consent was obtained from the hostel warden for the children aged between eight and twelve. The fieldwork, carried out by the first author, started in February 2020 and was completed in September 2021 amid intermittent school closures owing to the COVID-19 situation in Delhi. Multiple visits and interactions with children and school staff helped complete data collection.

This study used the FSSC-R to assess children's fear constructs. Children were given the schedule and were asked to mark the three most dominant ones in the order 1 to 3 among a list of eighty fear items. The schedule has eighty stimuli or situations, and a point is allotted to each choice; 'none' represents 1 point,' some' represents 2 points, and 'a lot' represents 3 points. After that, the mean of the total scores from the responses made was calculated, and the items with a score of more than 2 were earmarked as they indicated the presence of common fear among children. This was followed by identifying children whose fears were significantly higher on FSSC-R and who volunteered for further interaction. Further interactions included collecting 'fear stories', inducing them to make sketches of them, and helping them become familiar with conversation methods so that they could express themselves freely about it and engage in detailed conversations around it. Data were analysed using qualitative methods. In addition, other institutional processes and physical environments were studied and analysed to see if they could be the potential fear factors.

As revealed by some specific cases, encounters with fear often start at home in forms more in tune with prevailing social practices. Though they continue to grow inside

the school environment, especially in residential schools where children spend most of their time, their forms may not be the same. After all, their context and sources would be different. The study focuses on how schools play their part in instilling fear in children's minds. It tries to establish that fears that begin at home cannot be treated differently as they become part of children's total experience of everyday life, including that of school. However, the rigidity with which the differential character of boys and girls is maintained at home, following the male and female line of status distinction, cannot be operative in the school. Their interaction with the sources of fear in the school environment appears more direct, often with some peer group advantages working in their favour.

In a nutshell, the study focuses on tracing fear/s in the lived experiences of children at a residential school in Delhi, where the main thrust is on children and their activities, which are shaped by the functioning structures, processes, and interactions within the residential school. Naturally, teachers, their pedagogic practices, and official curricular processes do not constitute the central focus of this paper.

The School and the Hostel: The Trajectory

The 58-year-old residential school is spread across a large campus. The campus has several buildings connected via a network of concrete roads. During the day, people throng some of these buildings, which bustle with sounds that die out as the night approaches, turning these buildings into dark and desolate spaces. The children are prohibited from venturing into some of these buildings, even during the daytime. The students only navigate between five major sites routinely: the hostel mess, school premises, hostel site, playground, tracks and spaces lying between the sites.

The School

This primary school is a one-storey building, about 50 meters from the children's hostel. The school has three teachers for 88 students. In addition to three classrooms, one library, and a teacher's room, the school contains a staff restroom. The building also has a small student playground at one extreme and two toilets, which remained out of use during fieldwork. Consequently, during school time, the students had to walk to the hostel from school to use the toilets at their respective hostels. Within the campus are buildings housing some offices, which remain more or less out of bounds for the children.

The Hostel

The dormitory-style student's hostel is an old structure fenced with barbed wire. There are four buildings, two on each side of the road. There are two hostel buildings: one for

the boys and the other for the girls. The working staff includes a hostel warden, two A*yahs* (caretakers), two cooks, one cook's assistant and two *Safai Karamchari* (sanitation workers). For children, there are restrooms adjacent to both hostels. The hostel also has a small playground with children's swings, seesaws and merry-go-rounds. As entry to the girls' hostel is strictly prohibited, researchers could only access the boys' hostel for the present work.

In the boys' hostel, one room accommodates five boys. Every room was well-lit and had basic amenities such as a ceiling fan, two tables and chairs. Children store their belongings, like books and clothing, in the steel trunks they have brought from home.

The hostel building is painted on the outside, but the paint on the room walls was chipping, making it dull and damp inside. The only water cooler in the hostel was not functioning correctly, making it challenging to fill bottles. As a result, the children had to walk for about 60 to 100 meters to fill their water bottles from the hostel mess. The campus premises did not have adequate lights at night, making the passage from the hostels to the mess hall appear gloomy. The lights provided in the mess during dinner time were also dim. In the absence of bright lights and plenty of dark patches in and around the campus, the campus wore a strange look, engulfed as it was with gloominess gradually entering into one's existence.

Daily Life of a Student in the Residential School

The day of every resident student starts with waking up to reach the mess at 7:30 am for breakfast before offering morning prayers. The breakfast menu includes *poha* (flattened rice*), paratha* (fried stuffed flat bread), sandwiches and a glass of milk. While the students sit on the floor with a steel plate in front of them for food, two to three girls from classes four and five distribute the food. If the containers are heavy, the boys would lift heavy containers or furniture. A gendered division of work seems to operate, wherein boys are selected to lift heavy items and girls are made to serve food. According to the girls, it is only in the school that boys get to work in the kitchen. As one of the girls remarked on his brother, who studies in the same school, '*Ghar main to ye kuch kaam nahi karta wahan ye Raja beta hai, yahan sab akad nikal jaati hai*' (He does not at all work at home; he is a king there, and he cannot throw tantrums here).

After breakfast, students head to their hostel to start the regular school day, ready in school uniform and standing in a queue with heavy bags on their backs, accompanied by Ayah or Guard. When the school ends, students return to the hostel after lunch. Upon return, students are allowed one hour to play, where gender differences are evident. The boys enjoy playing their games such as *Gilli Danda* (tipcat*), Kanche* (marbles) and *Lattu*

(spinning top), while the girls get themselves engaged in indoor games such as *Antakshari* (sing-along) and Ludo. Children (primarily boys) also play in the park on the ride slides, swings, see-saw, and merry-go-round. Girls play hopscotch, and boys spin tops. At 3 p.m., children attend classes with volunteers from colleges who help them complete their schoolwork. After finishing their work, children continue playing until dusk.

The hostel warden marks the attendance of all the resident children in a register. Holding a cane in her hand, the warden awaits the children to return from play by calling the individual child's name, to which they respond 'yes ma'am' or 'present'.

Before leaving for dinner at 7 p.m., the children are required to finish their pending homework. On their return to the hostel, the children utilise their spare time playing within the premises. Upon asking the reason for not playing outside, they expressed that the lack of proper street lights turns the campus very dark, making them feel uncomfortable. Therefore, they prefer indoor games like Chess, Ludo, or other card games. As they are expected to go to bed by 9:30 pm as per hostel rules, the ayah takes a round, turning off the lights in each room.

From the everyday routine, one can see how a typical day of hostel children is structured around school work, food, play and homework, which they navigate between the hostel, school, mess and playground. Access to these three spaces is regimented and regulated within the official time frame. The routine is to be followed strictly, and the school staff, the ayahs, guards, and the warden ensure compliance with the routine and exercise control over limited access to spaces. The overall hostel ethos is marked by strict adherence to the time and space allotted. The children must comply with these rules, which give rise to the 'idea of a good child' and 'fear' of consequences to be faced in non-compliance with the prescribed rules. Kumar (2005) explains how the order that the teachers maintain in present times does not extend to the more significant issues of 'societal morality' for creating critical citizenry. He argues that the concept of knowledge is restrictive in defining 'order' in our education system. The following sections unfold the layers of these emotions and show how high standards of discipline are aimed at creating 'punctual, passive, obedient' students. It is also reflected in the classroom teaching and other aspects of schooling.

Classroom, 'Epistemic Authority' and Discipline

As the teacher enters the classroom, the students rise from their seats and greet the teacher in a chorus, 'Good Morning, Ma'am' (when she is a lady). Mostly, the classes appear to be teacher-centred as the teacher decides what the lesson will be from the

textbook, simultaneously maintaining the context and pedagogy of the classroom. Ultimately, the whole exercise turns mostly into the teacher's monologue, reducing classroom teaching to a one-person show, where the teacher speaks more, and students seldom get to speak or express their views. A typical class begins with a recapitulation of the previous day's class and the introduction of the ongoing class. The teacher mostly resorts to a lecture mode or dictating notes. Often, the teacher also makes students read from the textbooks, wherein one student reads aloud, followed by the teacher explaining the text. The classes usually end with giving homework or small tasks for the students, which the teacher checks the following day in the classroom.

The students also develop a liking or dislike for certain teachers. Most students liked the English teacher as she seldom scolded or reprimanded any student. Similarly, the Maths teacher was disliked by most of the students for her strict disciplinarian nature. Students shared that the Maths teacher would not hesitate to punish students in case of refusal to abide by her instructions, and they found her less helpful when they could not solve the mathematical problems. The teachers, however, made light of the students' assessment.

The classroom ethos may be marked as 'respecting the teacher' as an adult authority and an 'epistemic authority'. The teacher as 'epistemic authority' means he or she remains the ultimate authority in deciding the content and pedagogy of the class (Sarangpani, 2003). Respecting adult authority means 'maintaining discipline', sitting quietly, sitting straight, not laughing or talking when the teacher is present in the class. There is a shared understanding among students on the meaning of being 'obedient' and 'compliant' concerning classroom behaviour. There is also a fear of getting reprimanded if they do not comply with these norms. Once again, the teacher invokes a sense of 'authority' to be implemented among children without any protest. The fear of teachers largely emanates from the subject taught; mathematics continues to be the subject of fear more than languages. The nature of the subject as the cause of fear is also reflected in examination results, scoring in school tests, and the ease with which the homework can be completed. This was also revealed in the FSSCR Survey, where fear of failure and criticism emerged as the most common occurrences among boys and girls. While school officials were predominantly responsible for producing the ethos of fear in classrooms and hostel spaces, other types of fear could be identified during conversations with the children. The following sections examine and discuss these fears at length.

Fear: Its Nature, Genesis, and Related Narratives

The initial survey analyses indicate the presence of five broad patterns of fear: fear of

failure and criticism, fear of the unknown, fear of injury and small animals, fear of danger and death, and fear of getting sick. The following sections discuss these fears in detail:

Fear of Failure and Criticism

Fear of failure and criticism included associated fears such as 'giving an oral report', 'getting punished by the mother', 'looking foolish', 'getting sick at school', 'being teased', 'being called upon by the teacher', 'getting poor grades', 'my parents criticising me', 'having to eat some food

I do not like', 'failing a test', 'having my parents argue', 'having to put on a recital', 'getting a report card', 'having to wear clothes different from others', 'getting punished by my father', 'making mistakes', 'taking a test'.

Figure 1: Drawing of a Child Related to Fear

Scrutiny of the responses provides a glimpse into how children associated fear of failure and criticism vis-à-vis adult authorities at school and home. This is also indicative of how children construct their idea of 'self' from others' perspective as they marked items like 'looking foolish', 'poor grades', 'criticism', 'failing a test', 'wearing clothes different from others', 'taking a test', 'being teased' as factors that shape an individual child vis-à-vis others. During the drawing and telling session, an eight-year-old boy drew a picture that depicts his fear in the classroom.

The following dialogue between the first author and the child Ankur illustrates this process as he tried to explain what he intended to depict in the drawing:

A: I am in the classroom.
Furthermore, this is our classroom.
R: Who are these individuals in the picture sitting on the bench?
A: They are my classmates.
R: Then, where are you?
A: I am on the left side, standing in front of the class.
R: Who is the other person?
A: He is our math teacher.
R: Why are you two in front, and not the others?
A: He is asking me for the class homework that I did not complete.
R: So, what is happening here?
A: He is scolding me in front of the class mates.
R: Only scolding?
A: Yes, showing me as an example to other students that if they do not bring their homework, this is how they will be punished too. He is humiliating me in front of the whole class.
R: Okay? What do you think? Is he doing the correct thing?
A: No, he should have given me a chance, at least. I promised him several times that I would not repeat this in future, but he did not listen.
R: Does it happen in your real life, or is it just an isolated case?
A: It has happened in real life with me.

What emerges is that Ankur is 'feeling humiliated' before his classmates. It is also evident that this incident has left an indelible mark on his mind. In the subsequent discussion with the researchers, he emphasised that the classroom is a significant space

for building self-image. If teachers or any other school authority ridicule a child, it would be an act of lowering/tarnishing a child's image before other children.

Girls identified fear factors: ' getting punished by parents', 'being teased', 'criticism of parents', and 'getting punished by the teachers'. Of these items, girls fear 'parents' argument' and 'getting punished by the mother and father' most.

These factors were discussed in detail during interviews, where girls held their families to be the primary source of fear. They shared that in their everyday life, they had to remain cautious about not exposing their bodies in public, restrict their movements, and even in their thinking, guard themselves against all types of provocations. Parents and every adult member of the family kept a vigil on maintaining these aspects, which, according to them, matter most to a girl child. They hardly lost any opportunity to correct them, scold them even on minor issues such as how to walk, speak and behave if a guest visits their home. They complained that the boys and menfolk in the family did not have to face such an ordeal. To penalise girls on the ground that they do not fit into the family's image or its untested reputation seems to be the prerogative of the males.

Aadya's narration of her experiences at home may be an example. Like many other female students, she is a ten-year-old girl who prefers to stay in the hostel rather than at home. Among several experiences she shared during her interviews, the following one echoes the sentiments of many of the school girls. She said, "There are several norms in the family which are made exclusively for girls. Many of these norms remain unsaid, meaning the girls are expected to know them without posing any questions. For instance, if guests visit our home, I am the one who is expected to offer them water. Furthermore, it is not only guests, I am expected to be available to everyone in the family if they need water, tea or anything else. I cannot even think of refusing them. If I dare to do that, they would get annoyed and scold me for not fulfilling their demands on time. I am used to hearing phrases like, '*Kahan marrgayi*?' (Where the hell were you?)

Another girl, Komal, who was nine years old at the time of the research, expressed her anguish at being subjected to discriminatory practices by her family. She narrated how it was almost normal for her and her mother to eat only after the rest of the male members of the family finished their meal. Her brother had the privilege of eating meals with their father and grandfather. She could only have the opportunity to eat with all the other family members on her birthday. Moreover, she said her brother was never reprimanded, "*Bhai ko kuch bhi nahi bolte*".

Like Komal and Aadya, many girls narrated their experiences of waking up early and helping their mothers with household chores while their male siblings continued to

sleep till late. Constant subjection to such blatant discriminatory practices is sufficient to break one's confidence level, making one more apprehensive and vulnerable. This probably prepares the ground for being more susceptible to a fear complex due to an alien feeling. The fear of expected punishment from the adults for the refusal of girls to accept the gendered norms only aggravates this feeling among them. Girls' inner feelings may find an opportunity to express in a more standardised situation, giving a slight advantage to either boys or girls.

This was also evident from the situation prevailing in the hostel mess and the dining area. The place mirrored the interpersonal dynamics of children in the form of friendship and rivalries. In addition to this, gender patterns also emerged during the food distribution. For instance, the food collection from the kitchen, distribution, and other dining-related activities were based on gender dynamics. Girls would serve food while the boys would lift heavy containers. However, girls were happy to see that boys were expected to carry out an equal number of tasks related to running the mess, from which the latter was exempted at home. Moreover, girls found fewer mobility and peer group selection restrictions than at home. Mess, in particular, is also the space where both boys and girls freely interact, unlike in the hostel, school, and home.

Students' dynamics with the school and hostel authority also emerge more starkly here. The majority of the boys were afraid of teachers, wardens, *ayahs*, and other school staff. Boys complained that teachers often rebuke them verbally and punish them physically. However, the teachers and wardens frequently refuted these claims and asserted that corporal punishment is banned in school, and therefore, the question of punishing any student does not arise. Expressing their discontent, boys complained that girls seldom receive any punishment or admonishment. They found the school authorities biased towards girls. This can be elaborated by citing the example of two children, Rahul (10) and Riya (08), who are siblings but have different experiences at home and school. While Rahul yearns to return home, Riya prefers the hostel over home. In Riya's words, "*ye ghar pe raja beta hai, yaha ane pe sab nikal jata hai*"(he is treated like a prince at home, but here in school, he gets a reality check).

An analysis of children's responses suggests that children fear punishment by school authorities. Paradoxically, this fear of punishment was stronger among boys who associated their fears with their experiences and academic performance at school. This further indicates that boys are expected to be more serious about their education. This perhaps syncs with the gendered expectations that socialise young boys to become the potential breadwinners of their families when they grow up. Academic performance at school is viewed as preparation for their future adult roles. Boys complain that the girls

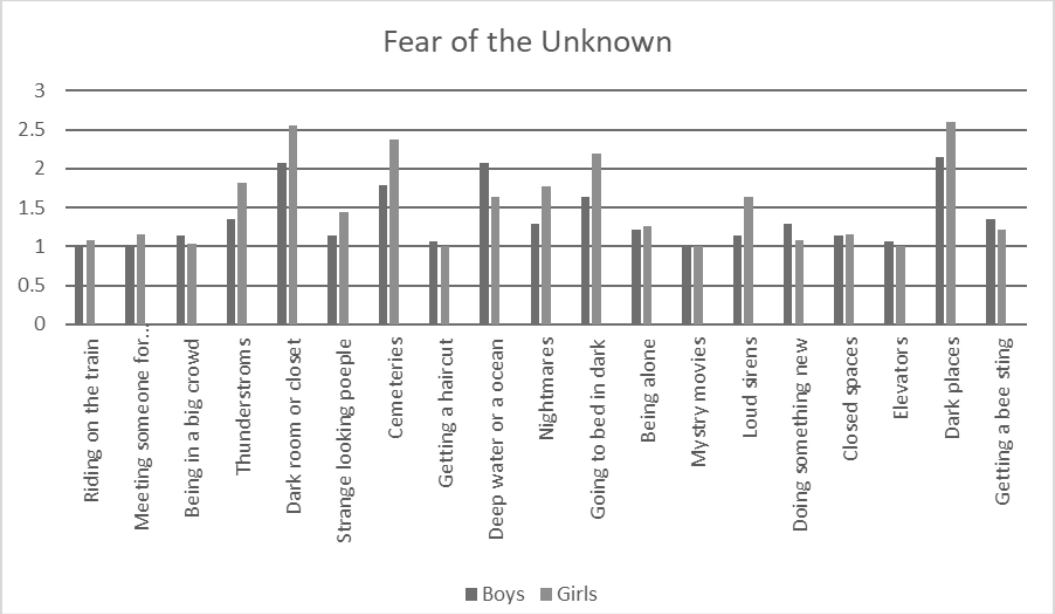
are treated differently and preferentially. The discussion also shows that girls are more afraid at home than at school. Also, they feel happier at school, where they receive fair and equal treatment with their male classmates, which is not the case at home. Besides the fear of examination and school authority, children have other kinds of fear.

Dark Spaces and the Fear of the Unknown

The second dominating fear among children was the fear of the unknown. Their experiences of the events they faced, things they were unfamiliar with, happenings appearing rather strange to them or being exposed to unaccustomed situations, images, and mental reflections could infuse fear in them. One can prepare an exhaustive list of them. Those applied to the students of this residential school were: 'riding on the train', 'meeting someone for the first time', 'being in a big crowd', 'thunderstorms', 'dark rooms or closets', 'strange looking people', 'cemeteries', 'getting a haircut', ' the picture of deep water or ocean', 'nightmares', 'going to bed in the dark', 'being alone', 'horror movies', 'hearing about mysterious objects', 'loud sirens', 'doing something new', 'closed spaces', 'elevators', 'dark places', 'getting a bee sting'.

For boys, the 'fear of dark rooms or closets', 'deep water or the ocean', and 'dark places' were three dominant causes of fear. In addition, a few also marked 'going to bed in the dark', 'fear of cemeteries' and 'fear of being stung by a bee' as the factors that could generate much fear in them.

For girls, the fear of the 'dark rooms or closets,' 'going to bed in the dark,' and 'dark places' were dominant triggers of fear. One of the interesting findings is that children associate darkness with a specific time at night. Apart from these, some girls also identified themselves with the 'fear of cemeteries.' These four fear factors were markedly dominant among the majority of the girls. The girls shared two additional fears: 'apprehension about train travel' and fear of 'thunderstorms.'



There were commonalities and differences between boys and girls concerning fear of the unknown. The fear, like 'fear of being stung by a bee', was more common among the boys, maybe because of their frequent outings in the open, whereas 'apprehension about train travel' and fear of 'thunderstorms' apply mainly to the girls. However, fear factors like 'dark rooms or closets,' 'going to bed in the dark,' 'dark places, ' 'going to bed in the dark, ' and 'fear of cemeteries' were common for all the children.

One can see that it is 'dark' and 'darkness' that trigger frightful emotions in children, whether in a dark closet or going to bed in the dark or dark places. Further investigation into these fear factors revealed that these children were raised in homes and neighbourhoods, which were well-lit and had no problem with power-cuts. The vast campus of this residential school comprises many buildings for offices, which are eventful during the daytime but desolate at night. The campus at night wears a deserted outlook, and some patches of darkness amid well-lit spaces create a mystic atmosphere, making it appear strange, if not unreal. Possibly, it affected children's minds. Some of them had expressed that as part of growing up, their parents always instructed them to refrain from venturing into dark spaces and to return home before it turned dark. Darkness to them symbolises insecurity, and a dark space is full of ominous characters.

Expectedly, this fear of 'darkness' carried the fear of the unknown. They believed 'darkness' was the house of ghosts and objects producing strange noises at night. The fear of ghosts was a common fear among all the children. It emerged in one of

the narratives of a seven-year-old Kiran who is now afraid of sleeping alone. When she was at home, she would sleep with her mother. She recalled seeing a ghost when she was five years old and was at home. On the fateful night, Kiran woke up in the middle of the night to realise that she was all alone on the bed in her room. She was terrified to find that her mother was not beside her. Since it was dark and half asleep, she saw a shadow approaching her, frightened her, and screamed for help. The shadow left her trembling and screaming. Her mother came rushing when she heard her scream. After this incident, she was afraid to sleep alone and tried to avoid darkness in every possible way. The incident had left a deep impression on her mind. She also believed that there were ghosts in the hostel, who would emerge during the darkness at night. She complained that everyone in the hostel knew of her fear and made jokes about it.

Another eight-year-old child, Riya, narrated an incident she had experienced in the hostel in the previous year. As she narrated, she woke up around 11 pm when everyone was in deep sleep and felt the need to go to the toilet. The toilets were outside the hostel. Since it was dark outside and she could barely see anything, she tried to wake up her friend. When no one woke, she left the hostel room alone and headed towards the toilet. After a while, the entire staff and students woke up to her screams. Everybody rushed to her and found her trembling in fear. She felt the presence of someone standing outside the toilet in the dark. As the security guards switched the lights on, he found a dog near the toilet. This incident created so much fear in Riya that she never stepped out of her room at night without her friends.

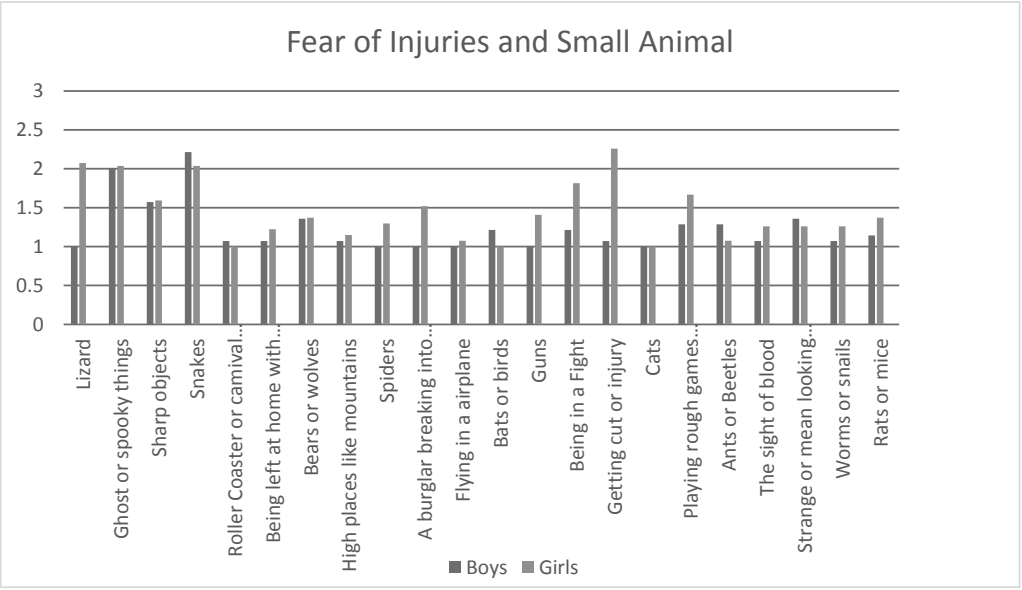
There is no reason to believe that the school as such was responsible for making students believe in ghosts and supernatural entities. However, the students shared that the school had not taken steps to allay children's fear of ghosts and darkness, and comfort them with factual knowledge. The fears of animals such as lizards and snakes can be traced to diverse sources like the media, their homes, and peer groups. The statements of one of the children that 'all the snakes can eat humans' and 'lizards are more poisonous than snakes' are examples of children developing their perceptions of the non-human world, following their association with the diverse sources. One cannot overlook the peer groups' role in reinforcing these fears among children. These fears were also present among children across the age groups. The trend raises a pertinent question about how children's fear develops in a larger social context. Additionally, the deserted campus of the school, including the hostel, and the darkness surrounding it only increase the intensity of fear among children for the unknown.

Fear of Injury and Small Animals

Fear of injury and small animals remained the third reason for fear in children. The schedule had items such as ‘lizard’, ‘ghost’ or ‘spooky things’, ‘sharp objects’, ‘snakes’, ‘roller coaster’ or ‘carnival rides’, ‘being left at home with a sitter’, ‘bears or wolves’, ‘high places like mountains’, ‘spiders’, ‘a burglar breaking into our house’, ‘flying in an aeroplane’, ‘bats or birds’, ‘guns’, ‘being in a fight’, ‘getting cut or injury’, ‘cats’, ‘playing rough games during recess’, ‘ants’ or ‘beetles”, ‘the sight of blood’, ‘strange or mean looking dogs’, ‘worms or snails’, ‘rats’ or ‘mice’.

Boys marked a fear of ‘ghosts or spooky things’ and ‘snakes. While two boys expressed extreme fear of ‘ghosts or spooky things’, five shared their fear of snakes. There were individual responses for the fear of ‘bats or birds,’ ‘ants or beetles,’ and ‘strange or mean-looking dogs.’

Conversely, girls stressed their ‘fear of' lizards,' ghosts or spooky things, ‘snakes, and 'being cut or injured.' Eight girls marked 'a lot' for 'lizards' and 'ghosts or spooky things,' while six marked the ‘fear of 'snakes.' Thirteen girls showed a strong aversion to being cut or injured. A few girls marked fear items like 'being left at home with a sitter,' 'being on a flight,' and 'playing rough games during recess. '



The findings show that all children have a fear of ghosts and snakes. The boys discussed how snakes could swallow an adult human alive. Upon asking the source of this

information, they stated that the Hindi cinema films and folklore depict snakes as monsters who are evil and human-eaters.

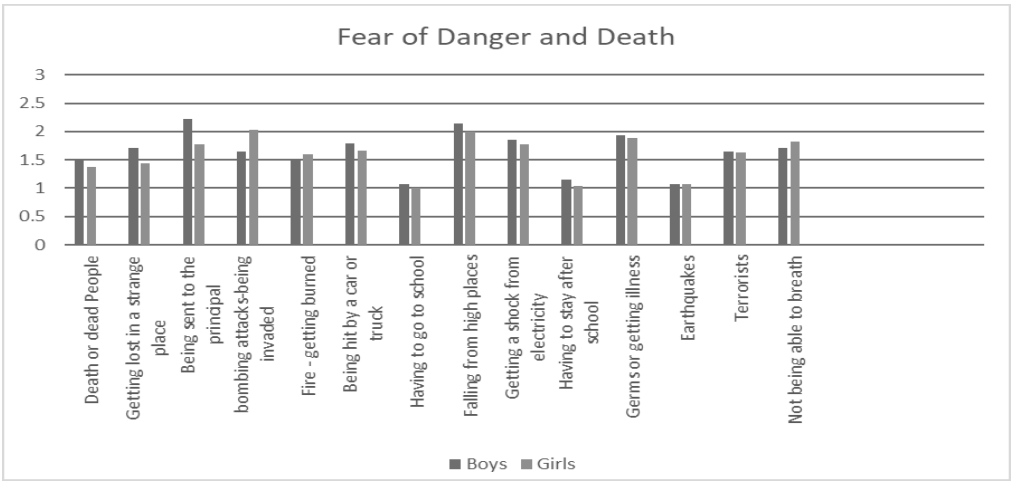
While the fear of ghosts and snakes equally applies to boys and girls, ‘offensive smell’ and ‘filthy look’ (as described by girls) evoked fear in girls only. The latter could be understood more as an aversion than fear. Girls also shared that they are scared of physical pain caused by injuries, minor cuts, or bruises. Boys feared more from ‘dog bites’ and ‘getting injured during play’.

Fear of Danger and Death

Fear of danger and death is the fourth aspect of the FSSC-R. The situations and stimuli that are associated with these factors are: 'Death or dead people', 'getting lost in an unfamiliar place', 'being sent to the principal', 'bombing attacks- being invaded', 'Getting burned', 'being hit by a car or truck', 'having to go to school', 'falling from high places', 'getting a shock from electricity', 'having to stay after school', 'germs or getting serious illness', 'earthquakes', 'terrorists', 'not being able to breathe'.

Boys indicated 'a lot' only for two of the four situations under this fear factor. Those are possibilities of ‘being sent to the principal’ for wrongdoing and ‘falling from high places. Five boys marked 'a lot' for these two fears. Three of the boys also reported fears of germs and serious illness.

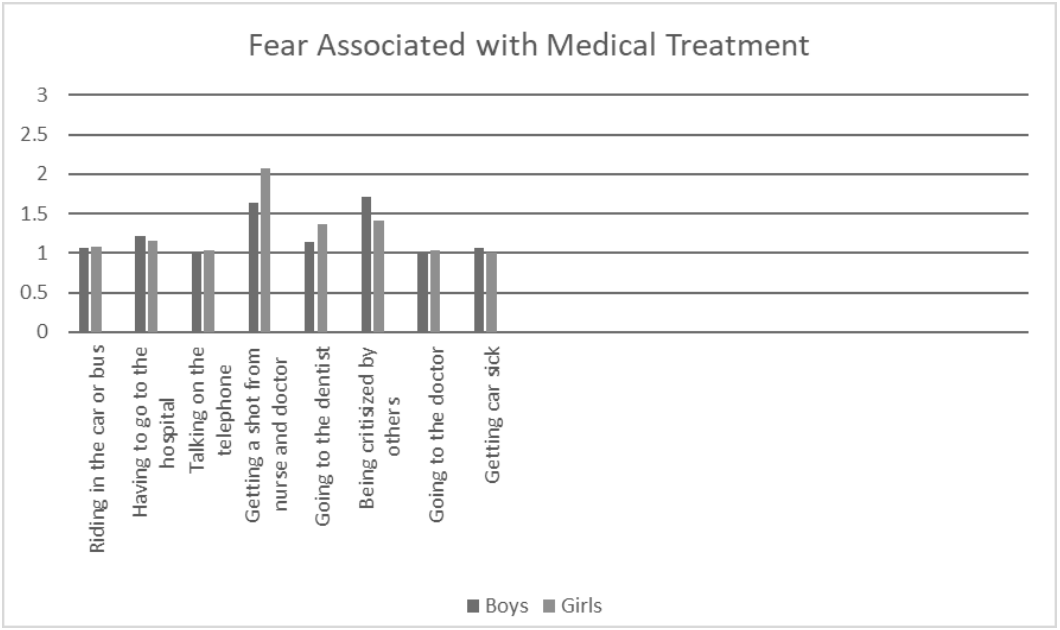
It is significant to note the presence of such fears among girls, such as 'bombing attacks on being invaded' and 'falling from a great height’. Four girls reported 'a lot' in case of 'bombing attacks-invasion'. One girl reported a ‘high’ degree of fear of falling from heights, while twenty-five girls rated their fear of this category as 'some'.



Fear Associated with Medical Treatment

The final component of the FSSC-R is fear related to medical causes, directly or indirectly. The fear items that come under this factor are: 'riding in the car or bus', 'having to go to the hospital', 'talking on the telephone', 'getting a shot by a nurse and doctor', 'going to the dentist', 'being criticised by others', 'going to the doctor', 'getting car sick.'

Only one boy reported 'a lot' of fear of being criticised by others, and one reported 'a lot' of fear of being injected by a nurse or physician. On the other hand, one-third of the girls reported 'a lot' of discomfort when receiving an injection from the nurse or doctor. There were no other circumstances or stimuli for which girls could have reported 'a lot.'



The majority of girls were terrified of needles administered by nurses and doctors. Few boys also shared this dread. The majority of the children reported experiencing pain from being pushed with needles. Kunal, a 9-year-old boy, was once taken to a public hospital where the physician recommended that he receive an injection. Kunal was very scared and refused to get injected, but as his father promised a chocolate as a reward, he agreed reluctantly. He experienced excruciating pain and discomfort after getting the injection, and the soreness of the injected spot lasted for three days. Since then, he has been scared of injections for medical treatment.

Discipline, Fear and Children's Resistance

Children often behaved as fear-stricken when the school authorities were around them. During many interactions with students, it was observed that they had internalised the presence of the school and hostel authorities as a cause of fear. Even at the time when the process was ongoing, the mere sight of any school official would abruptly stop their activities or discussion.

As the duration of school is four hours, the children are required to spend more of their time in the hostel than in school. More formal activities like teaching and learning are carried out in the space meant for the school. In the hostel, there is more scope for regulating and disciplining the resident children, and as such, they are subjected to strict codes of behaviour that they need to fulfil. During interactions, boys expressed their wish to return to their homes after attending the school. They were upset that they could only visit their families during long holidays. In an emergency, children have to depend on their peers for help, and if the problem is severe, they would be compelled to report it to the warden or any other hostel authority. The food served in the hostel mess was the other thing that made them unhappy. They also expressed disgust about the unhygienic conditions at school and hostels, especially the filthy toilets at the hostel and school.

The boys feel happy whenever their parents visit them at the hostel. They also look forward to returning to their homes during festivals and holidays. They also expressed that their only source of happiness in the hostel was their friendship built on trust. While the students articulated various emotions, the emergence of fear overshadowed all others, asserting its prominence in the collective expression of their experiences.

A disciplined child avoids any action or behaviour that can invoke punishment from the school authority. The students have a shared understanding that specific actions like incomplete homework, inability to answer questions asked by the teachers in the class, fighting with other children, and causing distractions to the ongoing class are the traits of an undisciplined or erring child. However, the degree of punishment varies from scolding/verbal reprimands to physical punishment. In extreme cases, parents are called to meet the school authorities, and in worst cases, erring students are suspended for a few days. The common perception of the children is that boys are punished more than girls. Incomplete homework may result in verbal reprimand of boys, while the teacher would give only a mild warning or extend the submission deadline in case of girls.

Humiliation experiences create bitterness in students' minds. This prompted a ten-year-old child, named Kunal, to hatch a plan to flee the school. He shared that since

his admission to the school, he had difficulties adjusting to the school environment and hostel life. He would often not complete his homework as he started losing interest in studies, for which teachers would scold him frequently. In one such instance, a teacher yelled at him in front of the entire class. Kunal felt extremely humiliated and decided to flee the school and reach home. He hatched a plan to escape the hostel after lunch, convincing one of the hostel boys, who was senior to him by two years, to accompany him. After finishing their lunch, both children headed towards the main gate. The guard was busy eating his lunch then, which helped them exit the campus, avoiding his notice. They boarded the bus at the nearest bus stop, which terminated at the Inter-State Bus Terminal (ISBT), Kashmiri Gate. Since it was the time when many children returned home from school by public transport, their presence in school uniform did not raise any suspicion among the passengers. Being school children, they could freely ride in public transport. Kunal and Shiva reached the ISBT without much difficulty. They planned to change to another bus for Ghaziabad, as they were both residents of Ghaziabad. Kunal narrated how they both decided to explore the market area at ISBT, and while roaming, they came across a bustling clothing store from which they stole some t-shirts and jackets. They both changed their clothes to take another bus to Ghaziabad. However, it was Shiva who was afraid of returning home. Kunal was confident that he would not be punished once he reached home. He was confident because "*mai ladka hun, ladko ko daant te nai hai*"(I am a boy and no one scolds a boy in my family). He also admitted that since the demise of his mother, his family has become soft and sensitive to him. No one would scold him at home. On the other hand, Shiva said he has an elder brother who gets scolded at home almost regularly for his faulty behaviour. He did not think it would be different in his case.

Shiva's fear of getting punished caused both children to return to the hostel after about four hours. Until then, nobody among the school staff noticed they had fled. However, it was their return that caught the authority's attention. The warden summoned them to her room, locked the door, and reprimanded them. Shiva was expelled from the school. Kunal did not receive a suspension as everyone believed he was innocent, and it must have been Shiva, his senior, who would have provoked him to flee.

While the girls preferred the hostel over home, most of the boys wanted to leave for home after school. Although there are common fears among boys and girls, fear of punishment, reprimand, and humiliation is higher among boys. Moreover, more boys reported experiencing punishment than girls. In addition, boys are also made to follow the same norms as girls, which could mean eating with everyone, getting equal time to play, and doing an equal proportion of work in the mess and hostel under the supervision

of the school authority. Consequently, the male privileges extended to the boys at home get nullified in the hostel, making them lose the superiority they used to enjoy. At the same time, it shows a step towards creating a more gender-inclusive space. The message that the school and society need not equally apply to all in all situations is not meaningfully explained to these children, further creating in them a feeling of being discriminated against, while remaining fearful and alienated in the residential school environment. Foucault's work (1978) could show how school buildings are mechanisms for regulating and disciplining bodies and an apparatus for surveillance. This regulation of bodies is not made by physical coercion alone, but also by normalising surveillance and regulation to make them effective.

Discussion

The paper attempts to discuss how the emotional world of children is shaped by their everyday experiences at a residential school in Delhi. The school under study caters exclusively to Dalit children. As an outcome of the study, fear has emerged as the dominant emotion among children, reflected in their daily routines inside and outside the classroom. Taking children as active agents in meaning-making, the genesis, nature and magnitude of fear among them are expected to vary.

This paper highlights and attempts to fill the gap in the existing literature that heavily focuses on curricular, pedagogical and managerial aspects of schooling in shaping fear among children. There is a need to study power dynamics and varied contexts where a child is located, and which significantly affect their experiences vis-à-vis fears. Also, it raises concerns about how the paucity of research in examining fear emanates from the complex interplay of individual experiences and institutions playing a significant role in mediating these experiences of fear (Mukhopadhyay and Mukund, 2017).

It is in this context that our present research is located. We attempt to bridge this gap in the existing research. We undertake schooling processes to capture children's voices as active and meaning-making agents in varied social, cultural, political and historical contexts. We have been continuously 'negotiating, strategising and modifying' the imposed structures in schools. The present study ventures into fear by delineating the 'common-sensical' perceptions reflected in children's voices. It explores the complexities of their interactions with human and non-human worlds in generating or mitigating fears. It is also an attempt to examine the role of school spaces, causing fears of various types among the children, some of which, though specific, have their roots at home.

The paper's findings suggest that children experience three significant types of

fear. These were fear of darkness, fear of adult authority and fear of punishment. The study also revealed differences in the sources of fear between boys and girls. While both boys and girls reported fear as their predominant emotion, the origins of fear took a gendered course. Boys tended to experience fear related to their experiences and academic performance at school. However, they found freedom outside of the school environment. On the other hand, girls expressed fear stemming from constraints within their family environment. They found a sense of freedom or escape at school, which provided a break from familial expectations and regulated life at home. Children were not against the authorities at school and hostel regulating and disciplining their behaviour, but the treatment should be fair. The boys perceived that the school authorities were stricter with them.

Research also shows that children had internalised the idea of a 'good child'. This good child is a 'disciplined child' who avoids any action or behaviour that can invoke punishment from the school authority. The students have a shared understanding that specific actions like incomplete homework, inability to answer questions asked by teachers during classes, fighting with other children, and distracting the ongoing class are the traits of an 'undisciplined or erring child' and might attract punishment. However, the degree of punishment varies from scolding/verbal reprimands to physical punishment. In extreme cases, parents are called to meet school authorities, and in worst scenarios, students are suspended for a few days.

This correlates with the second fear observed dominantly among the boys, which revolves around the fear of punishment by school authorities. According to the children surveyed, boys are punished more frequently than girls. They cited instances where incomplete homework led to verbal reprimands for boys, whereas girls received milder warnings or were granted extended time for submission. Consequently, boys' fears are particularly associated with the residential school environment, as their experiences in both the hostel and school suggest. These experiences often involve verbal and physical abuse as forms of punishment. However, school authorities refuted such claims, asserting that punishment is prohibited within the school premises.

For girls, the primary source of fear was the role of adult authorities at home. Girls discussed that their everyday life is marked by the regulation of their bodies, their movements and their thinking. Parents and every adult member of the family keep a vigilant eye on these aspects of a girl child as to how to walk, speak, and behave if a guest visits their home. They complained that the boys and men in the family do not face these situations at home. Girls, on the contrary, are penalised if they do not fit in their family's image of a perfect girl child.

While the boys expressed that their fears were associated with their experiences and academic performance at school, the girls' fears were related to the family. Girls admitted to having experienced a better life at school than at home. The probable reason for the gendered experiences of both girls and boys lies with the family structure, which on the one hand seems to be more oppressive or prohibitive for the girls in conformity with the family traditions, for the boys, it provides more freedom and more privileges than they could expect in the residential school.

School and class are significant spaces for creating and nurturing self-image. If a child gets ridiculed by teachers or any other school authority, the children construct it as an act of lowering/tarnishing a child's image before other children. This finding may interest educational practitioners and policymakers engaged with the gender gap in school education. This school creates more opportunities for the girls to experience freedom and learn. The girls claimed that they enjoy school more than home, where they experience discriminatory behaviour at the instance of patriarchy more than the boys do.

The third fear among children was the fear of darkness. This was a common fear among the girls and boys. Despite some differences, most of the children were scared of dark places. One of the interesting findings is that children associate darkness with a specific time of night. One can see that dark and darkness trigger frightful emotions among children, whether in a dark closet, going to bed in the dark or dark places. This fear of 'darkness' also carried the fear of the unknown. They believed that 'darkness' houses ghosts and strange noises. Almost all the children shared the fear of ghosts and snakes.

A further investigation into these fear factors revealed that these children had been raised in homes and neighbourhoods that were well-lit and had no issues with power cuts. Children expressed that as part of growing up, their parents have always instructed them to refrain from venturing into dark spaces and to return home before it turns dark. Therefore, they all construct that darkness transforms space and time as unsafe. This shifts our attention to the role of infrastructure and reflects on the role of school spaces in creating certain emotions in children. Furthermore, this can significantly impact their idea of safe/unsafe spaces. The present school has a large campus comprising many private office buildings. These offices are unrelated to the school and share the same campus as the school. During the day, some buildings remain busy with people, bustling with sounds that die out at night. As a result, these buildings turn into dark and desolate spaces. Although the children are prohibited from venturing into these buildings even during daytime, they look like haunted spaces at night.

What transpires is that the role of the school as a crucial space in shaping children's emotions should be critically analysed. The present school is a Gandhian school opened exclusively to cater to the needs of the scheduled caste children. For both Gandhi and Ambedkar, freedom from fear was one of the chief aims of education for children. Ambedkar, in particular, pressed upon this need by syncing his educational ideas with John Dewey, for whom education was meant to shape the individual personalities, in this case, Dalit children, invigorating them with confidence, free from all types of fear. So far, the school has not adequately addressed the issues of fear among its children. As a result, vital issues like recognising children's voices and reorienting the school's approach towards them remain unattended. If there is an air of mistrust and misconception between the tender-aged children and school authorities, the latter should come forward to mitigate it and, if possible, remove it once and for all. This research also makes a case for educational practitioners on the role of education in dealing with the fear and its causes among children in a residential school, which, if left unaddressed, may have profound implications for the socio-emotional well-being of learners who have just made their debut, and more so, in the context of children from the marginalised communities.

Conclusion

Education has the potential to serve as a transformative institution that not only creates space for knowledge construction but also enables social and emotional well-being, which has added significance for the marginalised communities. The findings of this study underline the importance of creating healthy educational environments that prioritise emotional safety and address the fears children carry from their familial and social contexts, which are allowed to grow unabated in the context of a residential school, taking new forms.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this study.

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