

Silk, School, Special Economic Zones:
The reconstruction of childhood, education, and labor in Kanchipuram, India

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Introduction

124. The number stayed with me long after I had left the INDUS Child Labor Project Office¹ in Kanchipuram (in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu) in 2009. The latest count of child labor in the district, I was taken aback. A little over a decade ago, a Human Rights Watch (HRW) Report -- evocatively titled *Small Hands of Slavery* (HRW 1996) -- had estimated that between forty and fifty thousand children worked on the longstanding and world-renowned silk handlooms of Kanchipuram, their slave-like conditions of work crying out for swift and saving global intervention. From fifty thousand child workers to 124 – a mere fraction! The astounding success, perhaps, of the “no work, more school” mantra, as a state official described national and transnational efforts to “combat child labor through education”?²

Yet, as I had discovered for myself in the preceding months in Kanchipuram, state classrooms and neighborhood schools in the area bore little sign of the influx of forty to fifty thousand children from the looms. Indeed, other reports – including a survey undertaken later under the aegis of INDUS – suggested a number in Kanchipuram closer to three thousand rather than the sensational forty to fifty thousand that the HRW had raised a warning about.

Fifty thousand to three thousand; fifty thousand to 124. Was the drama of the numbers a powerful story about of a powerfully effective and efficient set of transnational interventions in Kanchipuram that, according to many in the child labor ‘policy community’ in India, represented ‘best practices’ worth emulating? Did the numbers, in their vastly differing scale, reveal the mundane reality of large-scale educational projects, fraught with definitional conflicts and data

¹ Henceforth referred to as INDUS

² The dominant global policy framework INDUS-IPEC (2010).

constraints? Or did they, in fact, conceal some wider transforming magic: the “blessings of civilization”³ represented by education, evoked as much in present-day human rights and international development frameworks as by colonial projects of yesteryear? It was in pursuit of an answer that I returned to Kanchipuram for extended fieldwork in its historical weavers’ neighborhoods in 2011.

In the first instance, whether fifty thousand or three, *where* were these children now, targeted for over a decade by transnational “rescue and rehabilitation” efforts? “Mainstreamed” in government schools by projects like INDUS, as a means of enforcing their “inalienable right to education and childhood” (INDUS-ILO 2006a), were the rescued children on their way to achieving the economic returns and the empowering promise of education? After all, district officials were chomping at the bit to declare Kanchipuram “child labor free”⁴; and INDUS itself had been brought to a successful close in 2009, its “dream of a child labor-free society” now helmed in Kanchipuram by the Indian state’s National Child Labor Project.

In the year 2000, when Millennium Goals and millennial projects were rife, INDUS – IND-US – came into being via a Memorandum of Understanding between the governments of India and the United States – just a few months after the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, inspired by China, announced a new scheme for Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in the country. Thus, even as Kanchipuram was being rendered a child labor free area, vast tracts of land in its vicinity were being taken over by the state and turned into SEZs: deliberately deregulated zones – deemed a “foreign territory,” in fact – for the purposes of attracting foreign investment and

³ Infant schools

⁴ An application to this effect was made by the local district administration, led by the District Collector, to the State Child Labor Monitoring Cell in 2006.

promoting exports. In 2006, even as INDUS was in full-swing in Kanchipuram, with Project officials and policemen “raiding” weavers’ neighborhoods, their vans moving any working children off silk-looms and into government classrooms, 45 kilometers away, the Nokia SEZ was set into motion, its fleet of ‘company-buses’ carrying hundreds, then thousands, of young people – young women, in particular – from places like Kanchipuram to work on its 24-by-7 assembly-lines. A weaver in my neighborhood was making plans to turn her wooden frame-loom into an innocuous sofa – her children had little interest in taking up weaving, opting for contract labor on SEZs instead. “I have been sitting at the loom all my life,” she told me wryly, “I might as well sit on it for the rest of it.”

When I first arrived in Kanchipuram in 2009, the silk hand-looms that had sound-tracked daily life in weavers’ neighborhoods for centuries were a little muted therefore, mingled with a murmured lament for the self-described “last generation of Kanchipuram weavers,” but also youthful chatter about “company-*velai*” (company-work) in SEZs: the smart company uniform and the monthly ‘salary-slip,’ in particular, in modern contrast to the *pavadai*⁵ and piece-rate of the loom. Songs celebrating the victory of *kalvi* – education – over the exploitation of children on the loom were sung loudly during the morning assembly in the neighborhood government school, even as school-children, boys for the most part, “escaped” their classrooms for the narrow alleys and casual-work spaces in the neighborhood, chased by Project officials with shouted threats of “hostel.”⁶

⁵ The long-skirt traditionally preferred by girls and young women on the loom.

⁶ Hostels refer to residential schools

From a quest for the fifty (or three) thousand children rescued and rehabilitated – “saved” (see Popkewitz 1998) – by and into school, to a babel of laments, victory-songs, excited chatter and warnings in Kanchipuram’s weavers’ neighborhoods; from household-based looms transnationally surveilled by projects like INDUS that required 14-year olds to be in school as a matter of *right*, to the multi-national spaces of SEZs where a 15 or 16-year old with the right “age proofs”⁷ worked on flexible contracts with few labor rights and protections: how did one make sense of the cacophony and contradictions? Indeed, from slave-like child workers rescued by transnational efforts, to school-children leaving their classrooms for SEZ work or escaping their classrooms for casual work: given the transnational commitment to children’s rights to childhood and education, how did one resolve the Kanchipuram paradox?

* * *

The following pages are, in the first instance, an anthropology of policy: drawing on Shore & Wright’s () Foucauldian approach, I offer a situated account of rights-based educational policies as techniques of “governmentality” that operate by constituting particular kinds of subjects in particular social relations. A characteristic post-structural critique of policies as political projects of “making” places and subjects, including making them objects of intervention (see Rist 2002; Ferguson 2006; Escobar 2011), I narrate the prevailing global orthodoxy on “combating child labor through education” as the production of particular (child) subjects and (educational) spaces: the production/reconstitution of Kanchipuram’s child apprentices as “the small hands of slavery” and, thus, objects of transnational rescue; and the production of the

formal government school classroom as *the* educational space that, in opposition to loom-spaces, was held up as the rightful (and rights-full) place for children.

In the process, I offer a view from the global south of the global cultural politics of childhood and education at the turn of the new millennium: in particular, of the ongoing “global export of childhood” (Boyden 2015) – or the export of “global childhood” (Nieuwenhuys 1998; Wells 2015) – via universalistic child rights frameworks and international development/education (IDE) policies that converge in the formal school classroom. Imaged in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) as a biologically-determined and age-defined developmental stage of preparation for – and protection from – adult responsibility, ‘global childhood’ is an intrinsically modern form that requires the separation of children from adult arenas into particular pedagogical spaces (Archard 1993; Nieuwenhuys 1998). In effect, rendering a classroom-sited childhood axiomatic in the two-pronged international development logics of human capital and human rights (Kendall 2008): the classroom represents not only appropriate human development (Sen 2005) and socioeconomic development (Psacharopoulos 1994), but empowerment and freedom (Tomasevski 2004); mankind’s “best,” in fact, as the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child promised in 1924.

With the UNCRC the most ratified human rights law in history, global childhood increasingly regulates the lived experiences and spaces of ‘real’ children in the global south – how do these children, Kanchipuram’s child apprentices, for example, encounter and negotiate the classroom-space where their attendance is both an empowering right and a policy requirement? (How) Did they realize the emancipatory and developmental promise of the formal classroom-spaces seeking to reconstruct their daily lives in line with global childhood?

I attempt an answer by mapping children's rescue trajectories in Kanchipuram, in the wake of the publication of the HRW Report in 1996 that first brought them to global attention: I follow Kanchipuram's children as projects like INDUS moved them off the looms and into Transition Education Centers ("Special Schools") and school classrooms; but also as they were dislocated in the process, into night-schools, into casual work-spaces in the growing informal economy and, subsequently, into the contract work-spaces of deregulated SEZs. This, then, is the central empirical focus of my narrative: as the objects of policy efforts seeking to enforce their right to education, *where* – in what spaces – did the children of Kanchipuram's weavers' neighborhoods find themselves? In thus tracing children's movements I offer a *spatial* anthropology of policy (Ferguson & Gupta 2002) – of rights-based educational policies as (re)spatializing practices that, in enclosing childhood, served to also routinize particular sociopolitical hierarchies. That is, I narrate the reconstruction of childhood in Kanchipuram in the new millennium as the *respatialization of childhood* enforced by globally mandated right-to-education projects like INDUS.

Geographers in particular, drawing on Lefebvre's reading of everyday spaces as a powerful social analytic, have sought to demonstrate how the mundane life-spaces of children and young people offer an illuminating – if less studied – window into social processes and transformations (Holloway & Valentine 2000); including those of globalization (Aitken 2001). Space, in this accounting, is *social* space, produced in relations and interconnections that, as Massey (1998) demonstrated in her study of Guatemalan youth culture, range from "the very local to the intercontinental" (p. 125). Katz's (2004) *Growing up Global*, for instance, describes the changing practices of sociocultural reproduction in Sudan that, registered in the transformed

spaces and geographies of children's daily lives in Howa, reflected the imperatives of global capitalism in the Suki Agricultural Project.

If the everyday spaces of childhood are produced in their webs of connections within wider proximal//global social processes, what do the shifting spaces of childhood in Kanchipuram – from loom to school, but also into local casual work-spaces and multinational contract work-spaces – reveal about the imperatives and calculations of global interventions in the name of Kanchipuram's children? It was Sharon Stephens, the late anthropologist, who first argued that the global cultural politics of childhood are inextricable from the processes and relations of production and exchange in modernity – that (the export of) 'global childhood' cannot be studied in isolation from the export of cultural constructions (including gender, sociality and individuality) that constitute economic globalization (Stephens 1995). Indeed, for other anthropologists like Nancy Scheper-Hughes, children represent the veritable canary in the mine, their daily lives anticipating the structural violence unleashed in the increasingly global neoliberal political economy at the turn of the millennium (Scheper-Hughes & Sargent 1998). In this context, human rights politics are envisaged as an antidote to the social and political ills of neoliberal globalization – the last Grand Narrative, as Lindgren-Alves (2000) describes the human rights regime in postmodernity. Child rights-based approaches – the right to education, in particular, the "human face" of dispossessing development (Cornia, Jolly & Stewart 1987) – in offering a secular, moral trajectory for the 'story' of human-kind, hold out the reassuring possibility of redeeming global society by saving those most vulnerable to its violence (Koren 2001; see also Mutua 2001).

On the other hand, the very recognition of the structural violence suffered by children in the global south as, for instance, in the calls for trade linkages, boycotts and sanctions – the

Harkin Bill that sought to ban the U.S. import of products using child labor is perhaps the best-known example – may have promoted a global neoliberal production regime. As scholars of international human rights law have pointed out, the focus on child (labor) rights also served to legitimate the erosion of (adult) labor rights. The five globally mandatory ‘core labor standards’⁸ declared in 1998 by the ILO, while assuring workers everywhere of their political and civil rights to free association, non-discrimination and freedom from forced labor and child labor, made no mention at all of workers’ rights to minimum wages, social protections and humane hours and conditions of work – in effect, as Alston (2004) points out, enshrining a neoliberal labor regime. Anthropologist Olga Nieuwenhuys also implicates current global childhood policy agenda in the neoliberal project, if from a consumption point of view: in valorizing a play-full, work-free childhood, child rights-based approaches, she argues, promote ‘consumer childhood’ and are, in effect, part and parcel of a broadly neoliberal system of re/production (Nieuwenhuys 2007).

Given such complex and contradictory, even paradoxical, articulations between broadly emancipatory rights-based discourses and a broadly neoliberal regime of economic development, Kanchipuram offers a “strategically situated single site” (Marcus 1998, p. 95) for studying the unfolding of child rights-based educational projects in the context of neoliberal globalization. If the global cultural politics of childhood are intertwined with the social relations of globe-spanning production supply chains and consumer markets, what light can the experiences and trajectories of children in Kanchipuram shed? Children, once recognized within the relations of production and “attachment”⁹ on the looms as apprentices and wage-earners in their own right, were now drawn into particular relations with the duty-bearing state of global rights-based

⁸ Also known as the (ILO) Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

⁹ See Remesh (2001)

discourses; in the process, reconstituted as school-children claiming their right to education and protection from the apparently coercive relations of production on the loom. As the educationally empowered child subjects of state classrooms (and economically price-less – see Zelizer 1985), were Kanchipuram's erstwhile child apprentices also being reconstituted as market-friendly consumer-citizens (as Nieuwenhuys feared); reproduced as neoliberal worker-subjects, accommodative of stripped down labor protections (as Alston warned); or did they, as empowered, rights-bearing individuals, go on to realize the highest hopes of human rights narratives in resisting the ongoing structural violence that Scheper-Hughes indicted neoliberal development of?

In response, I foreground the experiences, perspectives and aspirations of children themselves as they variously responded to transnational rescue trajectories from loom to school, including by forging other pathways that best served their own interests. Children, as childhood studies scholars have insisted (see Prout & James 1997), are not only knowledgeable about their own lives, but social actors – “protagonists,” as Liebel (2007) puts it – who actively make sense of their own life circumstances and seek to maximize their own opportunities and welfare as well as those of their families and communities (see also Karunan 2005). Even in very difficult circumstances and a limited environment, children, as Montgomery (2001) demonstrates of child prostitutes in Thailand, are “active agents in their own lives, capable of making decisions and choices about their lives, and developing strategies for coping” (p. 90). Kanchipuram's children, thus, are not merely outcomes of structural determinations and transnational discourses – not merely objects of rescue – but calculative subjects making decisions in the “friction” (Tsing 2005) between ‘global childhood’ and the imperatives and practices of loom-based childhoods (see also Thangaraj 2016).

In foregrounding the voices of children to narrate the respatialization/reconstruction of childhood in Kanchipuram, my narrative honors childhood studies' pioneer Gertrude Lenzer's call to respect children: to view them in their fullness as human beings and recognize that their reality is not *exclusively* a construction of adults (Lenzer 2001). Seeking to "give voice to children" does not, however, mean privileging children's voices above all other (adults); nor is it to claim on the basis of children's voices in Kanchipuram that *this* is what childhood is really like or ought to be. After all, given "the cultural nature of human development," as psychological anthropologist Barbra Rogoff (2003) has put it, childhood studies has long held to the epistemological claim that childhood is a *social construction*: while children undergo recognizable patterns of physical and psychological changes – and while childhood is a persistent social-structural form across societies (Qvortrup 2009) – the meanings given to children and childhood vary over time, space and from culture to culture (Burman 2001; Montgomery 2008; Balagopalan 2011).

In the first instance then, 'global childhood' is a *particular* social construction – one that, as historians in the tradition of Philippe Aries (1962) have argued, emerged in the sociocultural and political economic relations, including child-adult relations, that constituted modernity in western nations (see Nardinelli 1980; Zelizer 1985; Cunningham 1995; Hendrick 1997; Stearns 2005; Humphries 2010). My effort to "give voice to children" in Kanchipuram, therefore, is not so much a political project of emancipating children from modern child-adult binaries (see, for instance, Mayall 2000); neither is it solely a means of recovering some pre-modern construction of childhood on the loom that, in "proving" children's agency, effectively, reinscribes north-south difference (James 2010; Balagopalan 2014). On the other hand, as Bluebond-Langner & Korbin (2007) note in reviewing the emerging "anthropology of childhoods," children's voices

and experiences are integral to any multi-vocal, multi-perspectival view of culture and society – and of particular analytic value in studying sociocultural change. Thus, in foregrounding children’s experiences and aspirations, my primary aim is to describe how – and to what extent and to what outcomes – children’s opportunities to shape their present and future lives are (re)shaped by a classroom-centered childhood, enforced in Kanchipuram to overwrite the sociocultural practices of childhood in weaving neighborhoods.

For generations, children in Kanchipuram have grown up on the hand-loom – now old enough for reeling the yarn – now adept enough to “pick” the *korvai* sari-borders – now tall enough to reach the pedal or harness of the loom; in the process, describing the developmental arc from child helper to apprentice to weaver-for-hire, as they progressively mastered weaving techniques enroute to the “independent weaver” status that signaled social standing and adult responsibilities (see Arterburn 1982). And thus, the looms have been the site of material production and social reproduction in Kanchipuram for centuries, with childhood, the site of entry into the intergenerational divisions of labor and occupational trajectories – and the obligations and aspirations – that constitute the artisanal “way of life” (in Arterburn’s words). In the new millennium, however, as the daily spaces – and routines and relations – that constituted childhood on the looms in Kanchipuram have been translocated to the classroom, a space constituted new routines and performances, relations and rights, how have children responded to these shifts – and *what end?* That is, if childhood is a culturally and historically specific institution in Kanchipuram, central to production and reproduction on the loom; and if (rights-based educational) policy is a political technology for the production of particular (childhood) spaces and subjectivities, how are Kanchipuram’s children implicated in contemporary projects of (re)production – *and to what (neoliberal?) ends?*

After all, as childhood studies scholars have argued and demonstrated, any universal/universalizing notion childhood is ideological (James & Prout 1997). Indeed, postcolonial scholars have demonstrated how ‘childhood’ was a key mobilizing metaphor of the colonial enterprise, reconfiguring violently-imposed colonial hierarchies in the paternal terms of a universal family (McClintock 1995), the adult colonizer initiating and disciplining – harshly, if required – the child-like Indian into a civilized way of being (Kumar 2005). An anthropology of childhoods must acknowledge the discipline’s implication in such violence, given the knowledge Victorian anthropologists like Spencer and Tylor produced about the “savage” colonial other as the pre- or mis-socialized child (see Montgomery 2008); an anthropological frame that, in turn, was shored up by Freudian pseudoscientific psychological claims about the history of non-European ‘primitive’ peoples as the “childhood of the races” (Freud 1918). Post-development scholars have also, in a similar vein, indicted the biological determinism of childhood development models at the root of international development projects, legitimizing dispossession and displacement in the global south by assuming European trajectories of industrial advancement as the singular pathway of progress (Rist 1997).

Historians of childhood, moreover, have pointed out the race and class ideologies underpinning efforts to universalize childhood. Jacobs (2009), for instance, describes how normative childhood (and maternal) idea(l)s historically entitled race and class elites in the U.S. to take children away from their inferiors by claiming superior guardianship (see also Gordon 2008). Across the Atlantic, the first child labor law, the British Factory Act of 1802, The Health and Morals of Apprentices Act, in institutionalizing across social classes what were essentially middle-class domestic norms of appropriate health and morals in children, sought to progressively educate factory-children out of their dissolute working-class ways and away from

their working class families (Johnson 1970; Davin 1982; Hendrick 2003). Indeed, this “internal civilizing mission” of reclaiming the poor and the vagrant in European society through statist educational interventions in childhood – child labor laws, as Hendrick (2003) notes, were argued for on the basis of reclaim[ing] the wage-earning child for civilization – was inseparable from the “external *mission civilisatrice*” of colonization (Fischer-Tine 2005); both missions organized in terms of a child-ish other in need of reform and discipline, in the process, naturalizing oppressive social orders of race, class and civilization in paternal/familial terms.

Given such ideological imperatives – given the not-so-innocent implication of childhood in globalizing projects, whether colonial expansion or neocolonial development – the export of ‘global childhood’ via rights-based educational policy at the turn of the second millennium ought to give us pause. Can Kanchipuram, its longstanding practices and spaces of childhood on the loom unraveled by rights-based no-work-more-school imperatives, shed light into global childhood as a particular disciplinary project – especially in relation to the global neoliberal regime represented by SEZs? In particular, I am interested in (if) how children’s experiences of the classroom and its rights claims/promises resist and/or resonate with the broadly neoliberal (labor) regime represented by Special Economic Zones in Kanchipuram.

‘Neoliberalism,’ as Ferguson (2010) noted, has been used in a “wide variety of partly overlapping and partly contradictory ways” (p. 166): so ubiquitous and ready a villain – a “term of insult!” exclaims Hart (2008) – among critical social scientists as to be analytically almost useless (p. 680). Or at least, necessitating arguably clunky scholarly distinctions between theoretical and practical neoliberalism (see Harvey 2007). Traceable as a development project to the 1970’s and more or less codified by the 1990’s as the Washington Consensus, neoliberal economic models have since been variously adopted or enforced – by multilateral financial

institutions via structural adjustment policies (SAP) – in the global south as a means of achieving growth (Hilgers 2012). As ‘theory,’ neoliberal economists have centrally argued for market-led development: the expansion of the market, whether by opening up more or less localized economies to global-scale supply chains and capital flows (globalization), by expanding into traditionally statist arenas of production and service provision (privatization), by preferring the marketplace to the state as the expression of public will towards regulation (liberalization). Or, LPG (Liberalization-Privatization-Globalization) as the Indian state’s New Economic Policy laid out in the early 1990’s (see Uppal 1993); and arguably best embodied by the deregulated, export-oriented, private investment-led developmental spaces of Special Economic Zones (SEZs).

In ‘practice,’ of course, the neoliberal market agenda has been sustained by necessarily populist accommodations (Ferguson 2009), “enlightened” efforts to embed neoliberalism in society (Hart 2008; see also Harvey 2007) and (the “successful failure” of) welfarist policies for education or health (Kendall 2007). ‘Practical neoliberalism,’ then, is not merely economic dogma but a larger – a global and globalizing – political and sociocultural project; one that critical scholars, depending on their post/structuralist tendencies, have typically analyzed as a class (and/or racialized/caste) project, as the arts of government, or as emerging cultural formations and fetishes (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001; Harvey 2007; Hart 2008; Ferguson 2009; Wacquant 2010; Kamat 2011). Given *practical* neoliberalism, however – given the variegated practices and politics of neoliberalism in the post-colony, in particular, where neoliberal policies are embedded in the (often contradictory) historical-geographical specificities of liberalizational struggles and state-led development (see Hart 2008; Kamat 2014) – the anthropological project of specifying such analyses, of coming to grips with the particular compromises and cultures of neoliberalism-in-practice remains. After all, as Tsing (2005) points out, generalizing

explanations carry a special valence for neoliberalism, given its global (market) pretensions; the *ethnographic* project, on the other hand, is to record the messy translation – the “friction” – of neoliberal policies as they unfold in particular contexts, giving rise to new (and neoliberal?) ways of being and doing. It is this ethnographic project of neoliberalism as practice that I privilege: in describing the friction of SEZ-embodied neoliberalism as it unfolds in Kanchipuram’s weavers’ neighborhoods – *and* encounters and enfolds ‘childhood’ newly sited in elementary school classrooms – I am interested in the ways that children learn to be, do (and feel) and become in the trajectories possibilized by right-to-education policies, including into the neoliberal spaces of SEZs.

Scholarly analyses, whether privileging class hegemony, governmentality or consumption practices, have sought to describe neoliberalism in terms of changing social relations and obligations, including relations with and obligation to the self. In particular, they have raised the alarm over the pervasiveness of the market idiom in the social and political institutions of our day – indeed, of market values/rationality as habits of the heart (Harvey 2007), the morality of ‘doing (and feeling) the right thing’ (Muehlebach 2011), and rising up from the very soul of the citizen-subject (Brown 2003). For Foucault (2008), this neoliberal subject is the “eminently governable” *homo economicus*, his social conduct thoroughly amenable to marketized incentives and disincentives: an individual subject “disentangl[ed from] the webs of mutual obligations and rights (that characterize the informal economy in Cairo)” (Elyachar 2005, p. 214), an ‘entrepreneur of the self’ obligated – responsibilized – to fulfill herself (Rose 1996) and who, thus, not only constantly invests in her own human capital as a means of appreciating herself (Feher 2009), but whose rights and entitlements are (consequently) “graduated” in terms of her marketable skills (rather than a guarantee of citizenship) (Ong 2006). Kendall (2007), for

instance, in describing the expansion of free primary education (FPE) in Malawi alongside policies that deregulated the agricultural sector, charges FPE in fueling a neoliberal transformation of relations between (a decentered) state, (individuated, rational, choosing) citizens and (a necessarily self-reliant) community. Does Kanchipuram offer similar stories – and similar subjects – of neoliberal transformations among its children and weaving communities, given the SEZ-promoting Indian state?

‘Flexibility,’ as Freeman (2014) notes, has been a cornerstone of the neoliberal agenda, whether flexibly enterprising subjects, flexible citizenship, or flexible labor and capital regimes. SEZ spaces are, in the first instance, *the embodiment of ‘flexible accumulation,’* as Harvey (1989) terms the post-Fordist production paradigm, marked by flexible production processes, products, markets and, above all, labor arrangements. Typified by large and numerically-flexible ‘peripheral’ groups of part-timers, casuals, contract staff, temporaries, sub-contractors and public subsidy trainees (and a small and shrinking ‘core’ of full-time, permanent employees), flexible labor processes are associated with the rapid destruction and reconstruction of skills, the rollback of unions, and lower wage levels and job security in general (Harvey 1989, pp. 147-155). Women – in the global south, in particular – Harvey adds, are especially vulnerable in this era of flexible labor arrangements, as multinational companies have shifted mass production to newly-industrializing countries where they employ mainly young women in conditions of “extremely low pay and negligible job security” (p. 154; see also Ong 1991). Indeed, one of the attractions for Nokia in setting up its SEZ near Kanchipuram was, as Dutta (2016) notes,¹⁰ the government’s promise of “flexibility of labor law,” permitting the “flexibility to hire the workforce without any

¹⁰ Dutta (2016) is quoting from government documents, including the Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Tamil Nadu and Nokia, signed in 2005.

restrictions and conditions” – for instance, the “flexibility in employment conditions (including working hours for women …)” (p. 45). No wonder then that young women, including from Kanchipuram, were preferentially employed as contract-labor on Nokia’s assembly-lines; their entitlements to state protection (from working night-shifts, for example, as Indian labor law stipulates) disarticulated from their citizenship as a condition of life and livelihood in the deliberately deterritorialized zones of SEZs. The dark underside of “flexible citizenship,” as Ong (1999, 2006) might say.

Given such prevalence of flexible and feminized transnational industrial labor, Ong (1991) was one of the first (see also Elson & Pearson 1981) to describe the emergence of new ‘neoliberal’ modes of worker disciplines in SEZs, marked by the control of body and space. From specified bodily postures and hand-eye movements repeatedly performed for hours on end on the assembly-line, to close surveillance by line-supervisors to ensure production rate targets, monitored toilet breaks and company-gates guarded by private security agencies, the daily routines and spatial practices of flexible labor regimes on factory-floors dispose young, female bodies to compliance, whether in the EPZs (Export Processing Zones) of East and Southeast Asia or, more latterly, in the garment factories and Special Economic Zones in South Asia. Across these contexts, multinational corporations as well as states have also drawn on and re-narrated the neoliberal disciplines of SEZ-work in terms of the feminized cultural discourses of “docility” and “dexterity” (Ong 1991; Chhachhi 1997; Elias 2005; Pearson 2005; Wright 2006; Dutta 2016). Nevertheless, there is little to suggest in these accounts of any widespread emergence of female working class or feminist solidarity in resistance to the flexible labor regimes that have hallmark the neoliberal agenda. As ethnographers have demonstrated, any forms of confrontation or accommodation among SEZ workers – any “attempts to escape from or

live with [such] industrial systems without losing one's sense of human dignity" (Ong 1991, p. 296) – have been typically organized in terms of the proximate idioms and relations of friendship and kinship, family and social status, gender and culture, rather than in the relatively abstract terms of labor rights or female empowerment.

As young women from Kanchipuram – many of them 'girls,' in fact, in the "straight-eighteen" parlance of rights-based frameworks and some, as young as fourteen years – entered SEZ-spaces subsequent to their right(s)ful, rehabilitative stint in school classrooms, how did they experience and respond to the disciplinary labor practices that, as Dutta (2016) describes of the Nokia assembly-line, sought to produce "working bodies" suited for neoliberal modes of "hyper-efficient production"? What forms and tactics of resistance – what oppositional languages and practices – what coping mechanisms and solidarities – what subjectivities – resulted as formally-schooled, girlish bodies encountered the neoliberal arrangements of work on SEZ assembly-lines? (How) Did their experiences of transnationally-mediated rescue-and-rehabilitation from loom to school – framed in INDUS posters and stickers as a movement from "exploitation to education" – inscribe their bodies with a rights-full posture of empowerment in the face of flexible labor regimes? Or did they, as Freeman (2014) describes of middle-class women in the Caribbean, embrace neoliberal flexibility as a means of escaping the household sphere and its gendered practices of respectability that, for instance, behooved girls in Kanchipuram to perform *addakam* (restraint) – in particular, by limiting themselves to the private spaces of home, loom and classroom?

Once economic agents as apprentices on Kanchipuram's longstanding hand-looms; then rights-bearing child subjects, protected from "exploitation" in the classroom; and now, preferential hires on multinational assembly-lines in the characteristically flexible labor

arrangements of neoliberal SEZs: in the shifting spaces and relations of girlhood, what ways of life and livelihood have been made possible and made meaningful for girls in Kanchipuram's weavers' neighborhoods? Given the claims of empowerment and equality that underlie not only rights-based but gender-and-development (GAD) discourses in education (Kabeer 2005), how did girls make sense of the flexible labor regimes that rendered them as the ideal 'working bodies' on SEZ factory-floors?

Between the ungendered Child of 'global childhood' who right(s)fully participated in the school classroom and the feminized worker-subject of neoliberal industrial development, what of the boys and young men of Kanchipuram's weaving neighborhoods? Rescued from the loom like their female counterparts and, in the process, dislocated from longstanding apprenticeship trajectories to becoming "owners" and 'independent weavers,' what spaces and trajectories had been made possible for them in the shift from loom to school? As SEZs have continued to expand in the vicinity of Kanchipuram and are constantly on the lookout for new bodies to man their assembly-lines – "India's Shenzhen," as it has come to be known (see Homm & Bohle 2012) – how did boys in Kanchipuram's weaving neighborhoods make sense of these opportunities; especially when autonomy – as *independent* weavers and owners – was greatly prized in the loom-space? Alfred Chatterton, British Superintendent of Industrial Education in the Madras Presidency (present-day Tamil Nadu) in the 1860's, had bemoaned the stubborn resistance of weavers in the province to the factory disciplines of production, writing later that:

It is perhaps difficult for most of you to realize the great change which bringing the weaver into a factory system involves... he is accustomed to work at his own time and in his own home.... They dislike being subjected to the discipline and regular hours of

working... Even if they can earn considerably more, they much prefer the old system. (Chatterton 1912, p. 218).

Where, a century and half ago, Chatterton had failed in his experiments to shift (male) weavers in Tamil Nadu out of the loom-space and into the modern factory and its work disciplines, how had present-day flexible labor regimes fared? Had Kanchipuram's boys and young men, moved off the loom – where the weaver was “accustomed to work at his own time and in his own home” – and into the classroom, proved any more (or less) amenable to the ‘hyper efficient’ factory disciplines and routines of SEZ-spaces?

Transnational rescues to school had, of course, not only disrupted pathways to the relative autonomy of ownership and independent weaving, boys – unlike *adakkam*-performing girls – were also reined in from their spatially wide-ranging trajectories on the loom and confined in/to the classroom. Where the loom-space was interrupted by frequent errands for the master-weaver – boys ran to the corner tea-*kadai* (shop), to the bazaar for silk yarn, to a neighbor's with a message, engaging in some surreptitious *ur suththaradhu* (roaming around town) with their mates enroute – classroom modalities contrasted sharply: “sitting in one place, with a book in hand,” as an INDUS Special School instructor had phrased it. Such classroom routines did not sit well with boys. Hoodwinking the school authorities, these “rogues” – as teachers and INDUS staff were wont to call them – sought to “escape” the classroom – boys’ dramatic words, borrowed from the movies – and roam around the neighborhood, in process, often engaging in casual-work for money. Caught between the push into the confines of right(s)ful classrooms and the pull of the spatially-expansive *ur suththara* practices that marked their emerging masculinity, what liminal spaces did boys in Kanchipuram's weavers' neighborhoods traverse; and – given the expansion of the local informal economy as neoliberal

reforms to do away with regulatory “rigidities” took hold (Heintz & Pollin 2003) – what ways of life and livelihood were made possible for them?

To be *rajah* and *mantri* on the loom

“A typical Kanchipuram¹¹ Silk Sari” notes the application registering a ‘geographical indication’ (GI)¹² for the *kanjeevaram*, “is known for its distinguished characteristics of heavy weight, bright colors and solid *zari* borders with ‘Pallu.’” A description that is as sound as it is unsatisfying, indicating little of the rich history, the storied traditions, the lustrous allure, or even the expensive materials of the *kanjeevaram*, eponymous for the town and district where it has been woven, some claim, for nearly two thousand years now. An elderly professor friend, a historian of India,¹³ enjoys recounting his first encounter with the *kanjeevaram*, circa 1965, just as he was concluding one of his many research trips to the country. As he was saying his farewells to one of the high-caste, high-status families in Madras (present-day Chennai) that had befriended him, the daughter of the house brought out a few family heirlooms for him to see. Incredibly beautiful silk saris, some had been woven by weaving households in the Varadaraja Perumal temple-complex at the northern entrance to Kanchipuram. One in particular, nine yards-long as befitting high-caste *brahmins*, its broad borders and *pallu*, intricately and extensively patterned in golden *zari* thread, had been specifically woven for the family on the occasion of a special *puja* ceremony held once every hundred years. “Not the first of its kind, then?” enquired

¹¹ The alternate spelling, Kancheepuram, is often preferred in official records, to mark the newly drawn boundaries of the district in 1997. When under British control – the region was, in 1760, one of the earliest territorial possessions of the East India Company – the anglicized ‘Conjeevaram’ was in use.

¹² Filed in 2004 under the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration & Protection) Act, 1999, by the Commissioner, Department of Handlooms & Textiles, Chennai, I was given a copy of the application when I visited the Department at their Kuralagam offices in 2013. The application was approved in 2005, and the *kanjeevaram* was one of the first goods in India to be thus geographically marked.

¹³ Prof. Robert Frykenberg, Emeritus Professor at the Dept. of History, UW-Madison, who has written extensively on religion and *Raj* in India; in a personal email, October 2017.

the professor with a smile, only to be told that it was, in fact, the latest in an unbroken line of *eleven saris*.

A brief history of the *kanjeevaram*

If silk-weaving in Kanchipuram was at least a thousand years old, often traced to patronage of the later Chola kings who built the Varadaraja temple in the 11th century, then other origin stories went further back in history. The G.I. application, for instance, suggests the patronage of Asoka, the 3rd century BC Mauryan king who turned to Buddhism. Hyun Tsang, the Tang dynasty Buddhist scholar who traveled to India in the 7th century records the flourishing of Buddhism in Kanchipuram at the time. Closer home, the ‘silk-houses’ in Little Kanchi, adept at recruiting history and tradition as a marketing ploy, insisted on an unbroken two thousand year-old weaving lineage on the basis of the *Silapadikaram*: One of the ‘Five Great Epics of Tamil Literature’ and written circa 2nd century, the *Silapadikaram* describes a group of skilled weavers of cotton and silk fleeing inland, escaping the sea that swallowed Kaveripattinam, the famed maritime capital of the early Chola kings. Forming an early settlement of weavers in Kanchipuram (see also Census Commission of India 1961), their numbers were added to by waves of migrants: the *Saliyar* weavers, patronized by the great Chola emperor Raja Raja I, who arrived in Kanchipuram from Telugu-speaking areas in the north, circa 10th century (Thurston 1909); the *Saurashtrians*,¹⁴ fleeing the Muslim invasion of their native Gujarat for the Hindu kingdoms of the south, circa 14th century, who then popularized *zari*-weaving techniques in Kanchipuram and across Tamil Nadu (Arterburn 1982; Census Commission of India 1963); and the more numerous *Sengundars*, a *kaikollar* artisan caste – named, it has been suggested, for the

¹⁴ Also known in southern India as the *Pattunulkarars*, workers of the *pattu-nul* or silk-thread.

koi, the loom shuttle – who settled in Kanchipuram at least as far back as AD 1346, according to temple land-grant records (Chicherov 1971), and gradually shifted from cotton to silk weaving in response to commercial imperatives. *Kalam-kalam-a Kanchipuram-la thari-karanga than*, said Arul, a *kanjeevaram* wholesaler and retailer in Gandhi Bazaar that I got to know: age after historical age, it was weavers who occupied Kanchipuram.

The “glory” of the *kanjeevaram*: the auspicious *korvai*

The historical heft of the *kanjeevaram* is quite literally materialized by its characteristic “heavy weight,” as the GI application puts it, owing to the three-ply silk yarn and the liberal interweaving of *zari* thread in the golden “lace” patterns of the borders and *mundhi (pallu)* of the sari. So heavy that, as the salespersons in Kanchipuram’s ‘silk-houses’ are keen to point out, the *kanjeevaram* does not crease easily, no matter how long the ceremonies and “functions” it is worn to last. So weighty that, when the Prince and Princess of Wales – who went on to rule India as King George V and Queen Mary – visited Madras in 1906, they were presented with a *kanjeevaram* sari, specially designed with a ‘durbar’ or coronation border for the occasion (Nalli 2014).

If it was the *zari* – silver-coated silk thread, overlaid with gold in strictly specified ratios ^{–¹⁵} that, with the ‘double-yarn’ silk gave the *kanjeevaram* its material value, then, as Nathan, one of the master-weavers who taught me observed, it was the seamless interlocking techniques of *korvai* and *petni* that gave the *kanjeevaram* its *mouss* (glory). Between the *zari* and *korvai/petni*, the “original” *kanjeevaram* gave long “service” – twenty-five years at least, insisted Vajravel sir, one of the co-founders of the Anna weavers’ cooperative society; its durability distinguishing it

¹⁵ Silver – 57%, Silk – 24%, Copper – 18.41 % and Gold – 0.59%

from the shorter-lived counterfeits that had flooded the market in recent years when gold prices had risen dramatically and *korvai/petni* was nearly extinct on the looms. In this context, it is worth quoting the 1961 Census of India that attempted to catalog the ‘Crafts and Artisans’ of the country, including the ‘Handlooms in Madras State.’ The *petni*, it observes in a section titled “Silk Weaving of Kanchipuram,” is the name given to

the process of joining the *mundhi* of a different color to the body of the sari in such a manner that the two pieces blend together in harmony of color and, to the naked eye, does not betray that they are different pieces of cloth. ... After weaving 5 ½ yards..., another warp with the threads of the color of the border is arranged over the existing warp and the threads are drawn through the healds and reed... A length of 4 to 6 inches is then woven and the ends of the two warps are again neatly trimmed so that body of the sari and the *mundhi* appear to blend together as one piece... *This is the glory of the Kanchipuram sari, unlike any other sari produced in the South.* (Census Commission of India 1963; emphasis mine)

The *mundhi* is the frontispiece or ‘heading’ of the sari, attached crosswise to its body by the *petni*, and continuing the design and colors of the sari’s ‘solid borders,’¹⁶ in turn, attached to the body by a *korvai* technique. Originating from a time when Kanchipuram’s cotton weavers had added silk borders to the fabrics they wove, “the weft threads [of the sari’s body] do not enter into the borders” of a *korvai* sari, as Census researchers noted. Instead, the two borders, each using a separate shuttle, are interlocked with the body, pick by single pick, all along the sari’s length. The *petni* and *korvai*, thus, allowed for “contrast” borders and *mundhis* with complex

¹⁶ As opposed to ‘shot borders’

(and increasingly jacquard-based) designs in *zari* and dramatically contrast-colored silk yarn: the “glory” of the *kanjeevaram*, indeed.

It is this *korvai*, the joining of opposed or contrasting elements that, suggests Kawlra (2005), confers the *kanjeevaram* with the “auspiciousness” that has made it the near-mandatory attire for marriage rituals across southern India and the diaspora. *Raasi*, the Tamil term for auspiciousness (*nalla raasi*), resulting from the fortuitous conjunction of opposed elements, is materialized in the joining of contrastingly-colored yarns, carried by separate shuttles, as the *korvai* brings together border and body of the *kanjeevaram*. The interlocking design motifs at the [con]junction of border and body, she adds, are in inverse relation to the opposing end, all perfectly matched up to produce a balance overall: each element – body, border, *mundhi* – in its place, distinct and separate, yet held together by *korvai* and *petni*. When dark-colored borders are alternated with light, the sari’s body holds them together, symbolizing the unity of morning and evening (the *kaalai-maalai* pattern) or imaging the confluence of Ganga-Jamuna, marking their separate origins, even as the great rivers meet and flow together. The elaborate *mundhi* heading the sari, reiterated such balancing of oppositions, its weft-patterned ornamentation repeating the warp-wise border design. The technical praxis of *korvai* and *petni* thus realized and expressed not only the design aesthetic but the auspicious value of balancing contrasts to produce *nalla raasi*. The bride in her *kanjeevaram* proclaimed her *sumangali* (good fortune) in the contrasting red body and yellow (turmeric) borders she wore, while the widow in her undifferentiated white sari, unmitigated by borders, lamented her *ketta raasi* (ill-luck). Kanchipuram’s storied weavers, in weaving the *kanjeevaram*, also wove the good life of *nalla raasi* into being.

The handloom in development policy

In written histories and policy prescriptions, however, rarely have weavers in India figured in the context of the good life. Despite a leading role in Gandhian *swadeshi* calculus, an indigenous formulation of village-led development and articulated as resistance during the independence struggle, policy-makers, possessed by visions of modernist development, have regularly lapsed into a view of the handloom as a ‘traditional’ industry in decline (Niranjana & Vinayan 2001). A relatively inefficient tool of production, on the one hand, as the Kanungo Textile Enquiry Commission of 1952 argued, that was ripe for replacement by more competitive power-looms (GOI 1954, para 75-81); or, as the Karve Committee on Village and Small Scale Industries argued, a means of mass employment – second only to agriculture in India – to be sustained by special protections (‘reservations’): the place of the handloom in the country’s development has been framed by the two approaches since independence (GOI 1955). Or, as Mamidipudi & Bijker (2012) put it, trapped in a “progress discourse,” a “poverty discourse,” and a “market discourse,” the dominant image of weaving is as premodern, unproductive and unsustainable.

If the Textile Policy of 1956, the first in post-independence India, incentivized weavers’ cooperatives through offering subsidized working capital loans as a means of employment generation, then the loosening of restrictions on power-looms over the following decades effectively pitted handloom weavers against mills and power-looms in an unequal battle for inputs and markets (see Niranjana & Vinayan 2001). The ‘New Textile Policy’ announced in 1985 only tightened the screws: the most comprehensive policy statement since independence, it professed support for weavers through a number of welfare schemes even as it reclassified production in the textile sector on the basis of process rather than input (GOI 1985). ‘Small-scale’ power-looms were thus categorized with handlooms, despite categorical differences in the

conditions and relations of production; effectively, deregulating the power-loom sector.

‘Liberalization by stealth,’ as Panagariya (2008) put it.¹⁷

As small-scale power-looms proliferated rapidly, eating into handlooms’ share of hank yarn while making use of the concessions available to the small-scale sector, weavers were encouraged to modernize and compete with power-looms: the state offered financial schemes for the upgradation of weavers’ work-places (homes) and looms, for instance. Productivity was the watch word in this New policy regime, closely followed by competitiveness, quality, systems, data, planning, marketing, and training (see GOI 1985; Srinivasulu 1996); a veritable unleashing of the anti-politics machine of development (Ferguson 1990) that skirted around the incommensurability of the modes of handloom and power-loom production and the political power wielded by industrialists over weavers. By focusing on productivity as a technological challenge for handloom weavers to overcome, the development apparatus also obscured the violence of scale (see Tsing 2005): the human, social and environmental costs that went unaccounted for in the mass production technology of power-looms. In the 1990s, the modernization drive intensified, with the “focus on the weaver rather than looms,” as the Abid Hussain Committee recommended (GOI 1990). Retraining interventions – for instance, weavers were offered computer-aided design classes at Weavers’ Service Centers in the country – were coupled with decentralization efforts that, in line with World Bank thinking,¹⁸ pushed for

¹⁷ It is important to note here that if early textile policies reserving inputs and product markets for handloom promoted their growth, then equally, there is nothing ‘natural’ or ‘purely’ market-driven about the growth of power-looms; benefitting as they have, from availing the state’s protections for handlooms by moving into the ‘small-scale’ sector, and subsequently, from the state’s neoliberal calculations that explicitly shifted resources towards mechanized production.

¹⁸ Consider the National Sericulture Project, for example, supported by the World Bank, 1989-96, that sought “sericulture development in India by supporting an important expansion phase requiring improvements in productivity, product quality and support services and increased private sector involvement in the industry” (World Bank 1997, p.)

‘weaving clusters’ over handloom cooperatives to promote private enterprise and local entrepreneurship (‘de-cooperativization’). Meanwhile, as power-loom restrictions continued to be phased out, the Satyam Committee, in 1999, proposed an export-oriented strategy for the survival of handlooms. The handloom sector would be scaled back to focus on the production of high-end handloom cloth for export and weavers encouraged to find alternative employment. The Committee also made it clear that there would be no new welfare schemes for weavers (GOI 1999), underlining its pessimism about the viability of handlooms in a new millennium.

With ‘LPG’ – liberalization, privatization, globalization – the reform mantra for development by the end of the millennium (Uppal 1993), protectionist policies and reservations for handlooms were no longer in favor. A key means of poverty alleviation through employment generation at the time of independence, they now represented the “strangulation of industry” by regulations that had locked Indian enterprises into customer-unfriendly, low quality and high price modes, and locked them out of a competitive world market (Panagariya 2008, p. 56). To promote handlooms was to throw good money after bad – to “squander state resources on existing industries,” as Bhagwati & Panagariya (2013) put it, when the way forward was the East Asian way of promoting “specific, vital, new industries” to kick-start export-led growth (p.1). Handlooms, by implication, were a dying enterprise, too old to contribute to development in the post-reform LPG era. If parts of it survived, they would serve as a reminder of the country’s rich history and heritage – a cultural gloss on Indian production in a global market, but no longer economically significant.

The contribution of handlooms to the national textile output stood at 14.5 per cent, mid-century, at the end of colonial rule; and rose to a quarter of total cloth production over the next three decades. With the introduction of liberalization policies, “stealthily” in the mid-80’s and

with increasing stridency in the 90's, the share of handloom production fell to below twenty per cent at the turn of the century,¹⁹ stabilizing at about 18 per cent, before falling further to under 15 per cent in 2010.²⁰ In effect, three decades of neoliberal development had set the clock back to a colonial regime: the easing of export and import controls, for example, that opened up the Indian market to power-looms abroad, while introducing global competition into the input/yarn markets. For instance, the importation of artificial silk yarn led to increased competition from power-loom imitations that ate into markets for handloom silk saris at home and abroad. The push for deregulation also shrunk credit available for handloom production: banks were no longer required to prioritize lending to weavers' cooperatives, even as government resources available to the handloom sector diminished or were rerouted and disbursed as project funds to spur private enterprise. Between rising input costs and shrinking markets, weavers were forced off their looms – the number of handloom workers dropped from 7.5 million in 1985 when the New Textile Policy ushered in liberalization, to 4.3 million workers in the post-reform era in 2009-10 (GOI 1985; Planning Commission 2014) – or forced to borrow working capital at exorbitant rates to stay in the game. Indebtedness ran so high in the handloom sector, that weavers' suicides were reported in Andhra Pradesh (Krishnakumar 2001) and, more recently among the famed silk-weavers of Benares.

The Indian weaver: resilient or receding?

From modernize or perish to death by liberalization, the Damocles sword of obsolescence has dangled over the Indian weaver for well over a century, in colonial as much as the post-

¹⁹ 18.75 per cent in 1999-00, to be exact, as per data drawn from the *Compendium of Textile Statistics 2000*, maintained by the Textiles Commissioner, Mumbai.

²⁰ Kumar & Naidu (2015), p. 62, using data from the Annual Report, Ministry of Textile, Government of India.

independence years or in the post-(neoliberal)reforms era. Soundarapandian (2002), for instance, raises well-intentioned concerns about the “unchanged outlook” of the Indian weaver as she entered the new millennium,²¹ dogged by “traditional methods of production and designs due to lack of exposure, awareness and knowledge of changing technologies, methods and requirements” (p. v). Concerns that have themselves remained unchanged for over a century now: “The dawn of a new century,” wrote Thurston in his *Monograph on the Silk Fabric Industry of Madras Presidency* in 1899, “finds the Indian weaver, without capital, and using a primitive hand-loom, being ousted from his hereditary craft by the … quick outturn in power- looms” (p. 3). Or that Indian weavers, as Max Weber argued, were culturally indisposed to entrepreneurialism (Weber 2013): between caste restrictions, ignorance and a climatic predisposition to indolence, the Indian weaver, as Chatterton (1912) bemoaned, was trapped in an “Eastern inertia” that refused change (p. 104). A tragically static and anti-development figure, always and already the relic of a bygone era, this Indian weaver who, nevertheless, had entered the new millennium, more numerous than any category of worker in the country, barring agricultural labor (Census 2001).

A quintessentially Oriental figure, infinitely unchanging over time and place, as Said (1978, 1985) might have said, the static foil to the technologically-minded and forward-thinking power-loom owner; or a figure of resilience, as Niranjana (2004) argues, resourceful in response to the imperial designs of British mill-owners and adapting to the contradictory signals of Indian textile policy? Handloom histories, as Wendt (2005) demonstrates, have been largely written and read in the thrall of modernization theory: accounts of the south Indian textile industry, he points

²¹ The handloom sector has been increasingly feminized in the decades since independence, with the latest Handloom Census suggesting that three-fourths of weavers in the country were female (Ministry of Textiles, GOI 2010).

out, have told “very similar stories, whether they analyze the seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth century. The [handloom] textile industry began as a successful, competitive producing and trading society, and the industry experienced economic, social or political decline at the end of each study... [M]ost authors felt obliged to address the poverty of India by detecting and even foreseeing decline” (p. 205). The ‘standard line’ on the decline of indigenous technology, of the ‘deindustrialization’ of a country under a colonial *Raj* that promoted the interests of British manufacture – a strain of historical thought haunted by Marx’s words on starving weavers whose bones bleached the plains of India under British rule – in seeking to hold colonial excesses accountable for native poverty and underdevelopment, may have overlooked the dynamism of handloom weavers in responding to policy and market constraints and change technological and economic (Harnetty 1991; Haynes & Roy 1999). Even Sir Alfred Chatterton, deeply exercised about the ‘Indian Industrial Problem’ and unsparing in his views about the backward-looking laboring and capitalist classes in the country (Chatterton 1912), acknowledges their “vitality”: “[Government] assistance has in more than one case been given directly to the efforts of English manufacturers to exploit Indian markets, whilst the industrious artisan has been left severely alone to combat as best he can the growing difficulties of his position. That he has survived so long may be taken as evidence of the possession of certain elements of vitality and as affording justification for the hope that a permanent place may be found for him in the industrial future of India” (p. 20).

In the last thirty years, therefore, the historiography of industrialization in India has sought to right the neglect, pointing out that histories of the decline of weaving are also and equally accounts of the size, scope and vitality of handloom production and trade at *particular times and in specific places*. The regional specificities of handloom production, as Specker

(1989) argues in his survey of *Madras Handlooms in the Nineteenth Century*, refutes any singular tragic arc of flourishing handloom markets declining in the face of modern technology. Indeed, despite imperial policy in the 18th and 19th centuries, there was no broad, undifferentiated category of ‘handloom weaver,’ much less a shared “fate” of decline, Meera (1997) concluded, in her study of handlooms in coastal Andhra. On the other hand, as Baker’s (1984) landmark account demonstrates – in a corrective to the focus on the (decline of) handlooms in colonial Bengal – handloom production in Madras Presidency expanded over the 19th century, *in the face of competition from mill-made cloth*. In fact, weavers in Madras Presidency were adept at changing their product-mix, adapting not only to output and input markets – shifting to more expensive, finer cloth to compete with mill-made products or to cheaper, coarse cloth to combat shortages during the Wars – but also to the changing clothing habits in the country (Yanagisawa). As handloom activists like Uzramma have observed, the elegy for the Indian weaver has been written often and always too soon (see Niranjana et al. 2006).

The more recent revisionist accounts of Harnetty (1991), Haynes (1996), Roy (1993), Arnold (2000), Niranjana (2004), Kawlra (2014) or Mamidipudi & Bijker (2012) have underlined the dynamism of the handloom industry in response to changing conditions of production and policy, markets and materials, demonstrating the adaptive skill of weavers’ communities; not only challenging the standard line on decline and deindustrialization, but offering new grounds to argue for the future of handlooms. Grounds that are not derivatively framed in the high modernist language of scale, technology, efficiency, control and productivity that then produces the loom-space as a dark space of deficit – an anti-development space, consigned to the past. Whether [neo]liberal or welfarist in orientation, neither policy approach has made a case for or against the handloom, in *handloom*-terms; in the process, relegating the

handloom to a space of low productivity, useful, at best, as means of residual employment (Biswas 2007). The language of productivity, however, is selective, in fact, privileging technical efficiency over allocative efficiency: calculations of (high) output per worker that favor power- looms have had greater traction in policy (see Mazumdar's 1984 study for the World Bank) than calculations of (low) capital and production costs per unit output or indeed (high) employment per unit output that favor handlooms (Parthasarathy 2000, pp. 35-36). Also obscured is the unique character of the loom-space and the other – 'other' – attributes it possesses: the cultural ideologies of neighborliness and community that are woven through the production process and were so effectively harnessed by Gandhi during the freedom struggle (Bayly 1986); the resistance to impersonal commodification that the very material of handloom cloth offers; the embodied human capital of the weaver, with production and pedagogy, earning and learning seamlessly intertwined on the loom; the innovative master artisan who pressed on with changes in product and process, in the face of resistance and even violence (Roy 2007); the low fixed capital and low operating costs per unit that handloom production demands, enabling adaptability and mobility; the distribution of commercial risk and reward across hierarchies in weavers' production networks; the customary obligations and reciprocity – the social capital – that lower transaction costs; the speedy movement of resources and information across supply-chains connecting markets and weavers; and the negligible environmental impact and limited dependence on non-renewable energy of handloom production (Bayly 1986; Remesh 2001; Uma Rani & Unni 2004; Niranjana et al 2006; Biswas 2007; Roy 2007; Bhagavatula 2010; Kawlra 2014). Indeed, as Mamidipudi & Bijker (2012) propose, an alternative view of handloom weaving as a 'socio-technology' is called for – an "ensemble" of knowledge, skills, technology and social relations that attends to its sustainability, socioeconomic as well as environmental.

The occupational group of *kanjeevaram* weavers: diversity and development

To tell the story of *kanjeevaram* weaver, it is important to extricate the silk handloom from the anti-development space to which all weavers are consigned in policy imagination, a dark negative of the modernization trajectory represented by power-loom and textile-mill. In the first instance, the handloom production of silk has remained relevant in the modern context, whether in the present-day or a hundred years ago under colonial rule. As Baker (1984) noted of the market for silk has always been relatively well-established, by taste as well as technology. Machine-made cloth, Thurston (1899) pointed out, is wanting in comparison to handloom silk, in “durability” but also in “the colored and embroidered border of the native cloth” that made it so suitable for ceremonial occasions (p. 4). Power-looms had made only “hesitant inroads” in the 20th century, notes Roy (1998), especially in “advanced pockets of silk handloom weaving.” Arterburn (1982) echoes Thurston, noting the important part that the *kanjeevaram* played in ceremonial gift exchanges across southern India, its cultural meaningfulness (*raasi*) not readily duplicated by machine. Nor could machine replicate the adjustment of yarn tension permitted to weavers, which not only reduced the wastage of expensive silk and *zari* yarn, but also produced a better-finished product (Basu 2015).

When Thurston surveyed the silk handlooms in Kanchipuram – ‘Conjeeveram’ to the British – it was an established weaving center: the largest silk weaving center by far in the Madras Presidency at the time, with over five thousand looms in operation and engaging about 15,000 weavers, “men and boys, as well as women and girls” (Thurston 1899, p. 11).²² The prominence of the *kanjeevaram* weaver was indisputable, celebrated by Thurston and featured in

²² A number that had, in fact shrunk as a result of a recent famine in the area.

two of the three photographic plates he used to illustrate his monograph. While the traditional weaving castes – the *Saliyars*, *Saurashtrians* and *Sengundars* – predominated, Thurston listed ten different caste-groups among the 15,000 *kanjeevaram* weavers he surveyed. Mid-century, caste-groups of “inferior status socially,” the *Vanniyars*, *Yadavas*, *Naidus* and *Nadars* had also entered the Kanchipuram loom-space as wage weavers (Roy 1987, p. 22). By 1971, there were twenty-one different castes working on Kanchipuram’s silk handlooms (Arterburn 1982), with *Koravar* and Schedule Caste (SC) households entering the loom-space in the last quarter of the 20th century. The diversity on the looms over the course of the 20th century is noteworthy, signaling the mobility the loom-space offered and the opportunity for development it represented. It was the economic and social diversity and movement that Arterburn (1982) witnessed among *kanjeevaram* weavers that led her to categorize the *thari* as an “occupational community... cutting across traditional social ties [of caste]” (p. 150; emphasis mine): far from petrified into socio-religious categories of caste and lost to the backward heap of tradition, weavers in Kanchipuram, Arterburn insists, were a situated occupational group shaped by thoroughly ‘modern’ imperatives of commerce and industry. From flourishing trade under the Vijayanagar kings in the 14th century to the trade rivalries and restrictions of the colonial period, the textile policies and (dis)incentives of the post-independence era, and the relative neglect engendered by neoliberal policies, the size and composition of Kanchipuram’s weaving neighborhoods has reflected economic realities.

The weavers’ neighborhood I lived in is a case in point: while composed largely of *Sengundar* households, settled on temple-owned *thope* (orchard) land, weavers from other castes,

including Most Backward Class (MBC)²³ and Scheduled Caste (SC) households also lived amongst them. Like the *Sengundar*, cotton-weavers who had joined the occupational community of *kanjeevaram* weavers in the last few centuries in response to increasing competition in cotton markets and the better prospects of silk, MBC and SC households entered the loom-space in the last quarter of the 20th century. Economic migrants from surrounding areas, for the most part, they were drawn to the relative prosperity of Kanchipuram's weavers in the 80's and 90's. The caste composition of weavers was, as Arul, a silk-house owner, put it, at "peak variety," circa 1985; no other occupation was as "excellent" in those days as silk weaving in Kanchipuram. Households from lower caste groups, traditionally engaged in agriculture, on brick-kilns or as mat-weavers and woodcutters – even those from the nomadic *kuruvikarars* and *koravar* or the occasional high-caste *brahmin* household – all had sought to enter the loom-space. They had watched weaving households "develop" he explained, and sought to follow suit. The laborers in his native village, for example, had approached Arul's father in the late 80's for work on his looms – they offered a more tangible means of economic opportunity at the time, especially in comparison with agriculture.

The influx of non-traditional weavers continued well into the 1990s – Chelliah, a young weaver I interviewed, recalled cycling every day with a score of his compatriots from the SC localities of Mel and Keel Kadirpur to learn with the master-weavers on Madanpalaya *theru*. The year was 1996; and while Chelliah continued to weave for hire in the neighborhood, many of his

²³ 'MBC' refers to those caste-groups that are the most socioeconomically and educationally vulnerable among the OBC category. Groups classified as OBC and MBC are beneficiaries of several welfare and development schemes funded by the Tamil Nadu state government. Tamil Nadu, with a history of Dravidian anti-upper caste movements, has been at the forefront of affirmative action; where the national mandate for public sector employment and higher education reservations stands at 27 per cent for OBCs, in Tamil Nadu, the number stands at 30 per cent for OBCs and a further 20 for MBCs.

friends had returned to Kadirpur to establish small pockets of weavers among the brick-kilns that once dominated the area. Still other SC weavers had settled down to weave in the *thope* close to where I lived. Gopi, for example, who had married a *Sengundar* girl in the neighborhood – a minor scandal in the day, with the “love marriage” between the two apprentice-weavers initially opposed by both families – had set up his new household and loom among the wizened tamarind trees, to weave alongside his young wife for their master-weaver. Such inter-caste marriages, while hardly the rule, were not uncommon in the loom-space either, occasioning connections and movements across neighborhoods in both directions. Chitrakala, a young weaver from the SC community, had returned home one evening from Kanchipuram, her *Sengundar* master-weaver in tow. Married in quick time, they had established their own silk-loods in Kadirpur, their two-storey *maadi-veedu*, pretty and pink at the entrance to the neighborhood, a concrete monument to their socioeconomic “development.”

Madanpalaya *theru* itself, as Gangadharan, the oldest weaver in the neighborhood, was fond of recalling, testified to the developmental power of the *kanjeevaram*. Looking out over the hundred-odd weavers’ *maadi-veedu* today, packed cheek by jowl up and down the length of the street, it was difficult to imagine it in the fifties when Gangadharan’s household had moved in. One of only six houses at the time, row-houses all, in whitewashed brick and low-roofed thatch and tile, as befitting cotton-weavers, his was the first on the street to set up a silk-loom in the household. When the family had “develop[ed]” quickly, with two more silk looms added in quick succession and the house extended to accommodate the looms, others on the street had followed in their wake. With migrants arriving in the seventies from nearby rural areas, seeking to escape agricultural distress, silk-loods and weavers proliferated in the neighborhood, their houses, gradually rebuilt in concrete and extended over the years in the eighties and nineties:

standing, material proof of the economic development fostered by the *kanjeevaram* on Madanpalaya *theru*.

Halfway down the street, where it was bisected by the alley that led into one of the two (*pulian*) *thope* – (tamarind) orchards – in area, stood Damodaran’s house, the largest *madi veedu* in the entire neighborhood. Occupying an entire block on Madanpalaya *theru* and stretching all the way to the parallel street behind – a giant, green-colored shoebox, visible from either end of the street – it reflected the consequence of its owner. Damodaran was a well-known master-weaver, respected even among the notoriously elitist weavers in Chinna Kanchipuram on the other side of town, who spoke enviously of his “factory[-sized operation]” with over one hundred looms in the nineties that had funded his massive three-storey edifice. Equally dramatic if less imposing was Murali’s first-floor home in the two-storey building he shared with one of his sisters. A well-respected master-weaver in the neighborhood, he and his family of two sisters and three brothers had moved to Kanchipuram from Dusi in the seventies, in search of the thriving looms. A seven-year-old at the time, he and his family had worked their way up over the next twenty-five years, not only buying the small house on Madanpalaya *theru* they had first rented, but owning twenty looms at the turn of the millennium.

“*Nalla develop-aairchu* [it has developed well],” Gangadharan often said, gesturing to the street from his courtyard where we gathered to chat in the evenings; “all this development was made by the *pattu thari* (silk loom).” And the ‘society bonus,’ he would occasionally add, with a decisive nod of his grey head. “None of this,” said Vajravel Sir, echoing Gangadharan’s gesture, spreading his hands out towards the weavers’ houses in Orikkai, “none of this existed before the society was formed.” Small and single-storyed *madi veedu*, they stretched out on all sides from his own home in the weavers’ neighborhood that had outgrown its origins on Mettu

Street. “Whatever you may think about cooperative societies, this much is true,” he reiterated, “these ‘own houses’ for weavers did not exist before, and now they do.” ‘Society’ was how weavers referred to the weavers’ cooperative societies in the Kanchipuram; and as one of the three founders of Anna Society – the largest in present-day Kanchipuram – Vajravel Sir was justly proud of the development they had enabled, of concrete ‘own houses’ they had helped build.

Weavers’ cooperatives, as Arterburn (1982) records, have a century-long history in Kanchipuram, dating back to the early 1900s when a credit society was set up to offer succor to cotton-weavers recovering from a recent famine. It was forty years later that silk weavers joined the cooperative movement, the Kanchipuram Silk Weavers’ Cooperative Production and Sales’ Society established in 1942 on the back of a successful campaign among weavers, organized by Communist Party activists, to raise piece-rates in 1937. While the Society itself was short-lived,²⁴ the cooperative movement continued to grow under ‘KSP’ (K.S. Parthasarathy), a silk weaver himself who, as a member of the CPI, established the Kanchipuram Silk Weavers’ Union in 1953 (Dorairaj 2009).²⁵ With the newly-independent Indian state promoting cooperatization as a key means of “populist-nationalist development” (Develtere 1993), Kanchipuram’s silk-weavers were primed and ready to take advantage of institutional incentives. In March 1955, the Silk Kamakshiamman Weavers’ Cooperative Production and Marketing Society was established by CPI-affiliated weavers with what became the standard template for state assistance: loans for weavers’ initial ‘contributions’ (share capital); working capital loans at subsidized rates for

²⁴ The Society was reopened in 1957, and continues to function today with 800 members.

²⁵ The Trade Union continues to function, if intermittently; springing to life on occasion, led by local weavers, to negotiate with master-weavers for wage hikes in the 60’s and 70’s; with the rise of cooperative societies however, the Union has been largely dormant, with a current membership of about eighty to hundred weavers.

procuring silk and *zari*; marketing support; and support for welfare measures such as subsidized cooperative housing loans and health insurance for weavers (see Arterburn 1982). The Society, one of the largest in Kanchipuram to this day, was soon joined by others: Murugan Society in 1957 (under the aegis of the Congress Party) and Thiruvalluvar Society in 1962, with later entrants like the Arignar Anna Society affiliated with regional Dravidian parties. At the turn of the century – and despite fracture along political lines, as Arterburn masterfully describes – the cooperative movement in Kanchipuram had grown to 20,000 weaver-members, male as well as female, distributed over 20-plus societies.

Over half a century, silk-weavers' cooperatives in Kanchipuram had borrowed working capital from state banks, procured *zari* and silk supplies from state-run enterprises, incorporated the latest designs from state-run Weavers' Service Centers, sold their *kanjeevarams* in new markets through state-run retail outlets, and channelized state welfare schemes to initiate cooperative housing projects for weavers. In the process, overseeing a period of unprecedented profits on the loom, rising *kanjeevaram* production and sales, and the economic security and 'development' represented by "own" looms and homes. Above all, however, it was the 'society bonus' that conferred legendary status on Kanchipuram's cooperatives and weaver-members. Awarded annually at the festival season, bonuses were sizeable sums paid out of the society's net profits and in addition to the wages and dividends that weavers earned – to the extent a hundred per cent even, as was typical in the 80's and 90's when the *kanjeevaram* market was at its zenith.

The attraction of the society bonus was such, Balaji observed, laughing, that "girls lined up outside my door for marriage." A weaver in his forties when I met him, he had married in the early 1990s; as had a friend who too had the pick of prospective brides, acquiring a fair few '[gold] sovereigns' as dowry in the process. When the societies were doing well, "*ponnu na thari*

karangukku than,” recalled Babu wistfully: hopeful brides across the district waited for weavers to come along. “*Evalo venalum selavu panni kudupanga,*” added Arul; girls’ families would spend whatever it took – in dowry or the grandeur of wedding celebrations – to secure a match with weavers. Such was their “prestige,” and such was the fame of the bonus in funding the modern conveniences and the *maadi-veedu* that signaled their ‘developed’ status. Weavers had been some of the first in their neighborhoods to acquire televisions, for instance, decades before government schemes distributed them for free; and it was weavers who led the way in converting and expanding traditionally-built row-houses into modern *maadi-veedu*. Indeed, weavers dated their home-extension projects by recalling the years of a bumper bonus. Daughters’ weddings, investments in gold sovereigns and jewelry – still considered the safest mode across southern India – and, more latterly, saving for children’s higher education, were all facilitated by the society bonus.

Relations and arrangements of production on the loom

“I am ‘owner’ – I am not anybody’s *adimai* (slave),” Tamizhselvi declared fiercely, adding, “That is our true *gauravam* (pride), the *gauravam* of Kanchipuram weavers, that we are not *adimai*.” A female weaver in her forties – a self-described ‘independent weaver’ – we first met at the night-school in the neighborhood, where she was learning, she said, to talk about the world on an equal footing with her brother, a school-teacher. Tamizhselvi was nobody’s slave and nobody’s fool. What did she mean by her staunch declaration of independence when she, in fact, wove on her household loom for a master-weaver with his yarn?

The dread figure of the master-weaver: the harbinger of the subordination of production to commerce, as stylized histories of proto-industrial transitions to a capitalist/industrial economy in Europe presented him (Medick 1976). A figure that Chicherov (1971), in his *Outline*

history of crafts and trade – the seminal account of economic development in precolonial India, for long – recalls in characterizing handloom and handicraft production in 17th century northern India on the lines of the European ‘putting out’ system: the master-weaver advanced monies and/or raw materials to weavers in exchange for weavers’ products at a predetermined piece-rate. The more expensive the input materials and farther-flung the markets, the more powerful was the master-weaver – and the greater the exploitation of the weaver. It was this oppressive master-weaver figure that the Marxist rhetoric, woven into the origins of the cooperative movement in Kanchipuram, had in its sights: as member-owners of cooperative societies, weavers were no longer dependent on – enslaved to, to quote Tamizhselvi – the master-weaver for the expensive silk-yarn and *zari* marcs or to access the historically widespread market for the *kanjeevaram*. Development efforts in colonial and newly-independent states in the 20th century followed a similar logic in promoting cooperativization: the cooperative society, by performing procurement and marketing functions in return for membership, would untangle weavers from master-weavers and the exploitative relations of production and patronage that produced underdevelopment (see Develtere 1993).

So preponderant is the narrative of exploitative relations in handloom production and policy that Arterburn’s (1982) account, written in the seventies in celebration of Kanchipuram’s growing cooperatives, assumes and reproduces it – even favoring it over the accounts of her weaver-subjects. On the other hand, the exploitation narrative belies the persistence of the master-weaver in the 20th century and into the present-day in India, despite the state pursuit of cooperativization, stop-start though it was (Khasabnis & Nag 2002; Bhagavatula 2010). According to the Handloom Sector Survey (NCAER 1996), for instance, three-fourths of weavers in India continued to work with master-weavers. Given the persistence of the master-

weaver in Kanchipuram, cooperative societies notwithstanding, what then of Tamizhselvi's pride as an independent weaver if she was still ensnared in dependent relations with master-weavers?

Parthasarathi (2001), in his critical economic history of south India, argues that there is scant evidence of the master-weaver as an extractive institution predating British dominion in south India. If the rising influence of merchant guilds in the 15th and 16th centuries under the trade-promoting Vijayanagar kings, rulers in Kanchipuram, signaled the growing power of commerce over production, as Ramaswamy (2006) describes, with the 'merchant master-weaver' increasingly specifying the product of the loom,²⁶ Parthasarathi (2001) also points to a robust history of weaver resistances in precolonial India. In the 1770's, for instance, the looms across south India fell silent as weavers downed their shuttles to protest changes in the structure of merchant contracts. These protests, he adds, were not only about protecting their incomes, but also about preserving autonomy and control over the work process (Parthasarathi 2001, 2012): as the old Tamil proverb goes, 'when the merchant reduces the money, the weaver reduces the thread. "[T]he passive resistance of the weavers," bemoans Chatterton (1912) – Superintendent of Industrial Education in the Madras Presidency, circa 1866 – while no formally oppositional institution like a trade union, was a "serious factor" nevertheless, ignored at the peril of the profit-minded capitalist or the developmentally-minded educator (p. 33).

Skimming off yarn or even absconding with it (a rather remunerative proposition in silk-weaving), reducing the pick-count, artificially weighting the yarn or cutting off the ends of the woven fabric: they were widespread among weavers, part of their repertoire of resistance on the loom. Such daily (mal)practices on the loom – weavers' "everyday" means of resistance, as

²⁶ As a case in point, Ramaswamy (2006) presents an inscription, addressed by merchant groups to weaving centers and dated 1538, that listed specifications for weavers to weave to (p. 302).

Haynes (2008) describes, drawing on Scott (1985) – tempered and thwarted any strict labor regimes that merchants, traders or *karkhana* (factory/workshop) masters sought to impose on weavers.²⁷ Even if, in the context of international capitalism in the 19th and 20th centuries, merchants and master-weavers established a degree of control over the products of the loom, they were less effective in controlling the labor processes involved. Weavers did not readily submit to attempts to regulate their work and leisure hours, resisting and subverting merchant/master-weaver efforts to control “the rhythms of their day” (Haynes , p. 22). As Chatterton (1912), concerned by labor inefficiency on the looms, reported – repeatedly and almost disbelievingly – his experiments in organizing weavers on the lines of factory conditions and disciplines of work had not been successful:

... Neither in Salem nor Madras have we ever been able to get them [weavers] to make full use of the improved way of working. It is perhaps difficult for most of you to realise the great change which bringing the weaver into a factory system involves. ...he is accustomed to work at his own time and in his own home, and the regular hours obtaining in a factory are extremely distasteful to him. In the factory the work is undoubtedly more monotonous than in the domestic circle... (p. 218).

We have found that the hand-weavers of Salem like the hand-weavers of Madras object to working in factory, and although their wages are good their attendance is unsatisfactory. This is mainly because the weavers prefer to work in their own homes... and dislike being subjected to the discipline and regular hours of working which must necessarily prevail in the factory. Although the men can earn considerably more than they

²⁷ Haynes (2008), while primarily describing weavers in the Bombay Presidency in 19th century, refers to the great Mattison Mines () to establish the existence of these practices in southern India as well.

do in their own houses and are ensured regular and continuous employment, they much prefer the old system... (p. 229).

One can sense his frustration as Chatterton scathingly declares that weavers' seeming independence was perhaps merely indolence and aversion to regular work; if appropriate industrial development was to occur in India, then modern looms and technologies alone would prove inadequate – weavers, noted the Superintendent of Industrial Education, would also need to be educated out of their independence/indolence/indiscipline.

The range of production arrangements and practices on the loom – the “great diversity of labor relations” in Indian history, as Parthasarathi (2012, p.130) puts it – reflected as well as served weavers’ efforts to sustain their relative autonomy in the face of commercial and modernist work regimes. While historical scholarship has typically narrated handloom production in India, in the context of colonial and capitalist expansion, as a movement of ‘independent’ weavers into dependent, often debt-ridden, relations with merchants in putting-out systems – Mehta (1909) offers the archetypal account – or as a shift from artisanal/household-based production to wage labor in the proliferating handloom factories/*karkhanas* of the 19th and 20th centuries (see Roy 1993, for instance), Haynes (2008) contends that labor relations on the looms remained “highly heterogeneous” over this period in India (p. 5). Drawing on 19th century colonial records, he argues that production arrangements were shaped by place and its particular politics: the geographical concentration of weavers and their mobility, for instance, or their specialization in particular areas and the presence of mercantile actors from outside weaving communities. Categorizations in terms of ‘dependent’ and ‘independent’ weavers did not reflect the diversity of organizational forms on the loom, nor were they experientially sensible: merchants “had to accept a certain degree of independence on the part of even the most

dependent of weavers" (Haynes, p. 26). Of course, merchants, in turn, sought to control weavers by drawing them into relations of personal obligation: the institution of the 'advance,' for instance, an interest-free loan that merchants provided, a cynical strategy to render weavers economically dependent, also served as social capital for weavers and a customary expectation (see also Roy 2001).

Such 'vertical' social relations on the loom were crisscrossed by other 'horizontal' affiliations – of caste, community and locality. The growth of factory-*karkhanas* in India, as Haynes (2012, 2008) argues, was not so much a new and modern organizational form that dramatically displaced 'traditional' artisanal modes of production as it was also a mobilization of the social ties of caste, community and locality in response to economic distress and migration. More appropriately called 'workshops,' these were small enterprises owned and operated by weaver-entrepreneurs, their production arrangements "as much shaped by the needs of workers as it was by [the] small capitalists," who ran them in relations of dependence on physically distant merchants and traders who supplied inputs and brokered markets (Haynes 2008, p. 28). 'Small town capitalists' (Haynes 2012), they also retained the social organization and practices of artisanal modes of production: entire weaving families were often hired (and housed) in workshops, even as artisanal approaches to time, work and leisure governed daily and seasonal practices. Weavers in Sholapur, for instance, as the Handloom Enquiry of 1948 reported, were known to leave their workshop-*karkhanas* for tobacco breaks during the day; and travel to their native villages – three times a year, even – for weddings, religious observances or to visit relatives. With "all the atmosphere of freedom and leisure," the Enquiry echoed master-weaver complaints, "sustained work for a regular number of hours" on the loom remained difficult to achieve in the *karkhana* (Haynes 2008).

Ramaswamy (2006, 1985), in tracing the indigenous roots of the master weaver institution in precolonial south India, offers a similar account of overlapping and crisscrossing spaces, relations and affiliations in handloom production, differentiating ‘merchant master-weavers’ belonging to the powerful merchant guilds in the trade-friendly Vijayanagar kings from the *artisanal* master-weavers who emerged from within rich weaving groups in south India. The silk-weaving *Saurashtrians* settled in Madurai, for example, also took on a mercantile role, setting up as master-weavers in putting-out arrangements with other local weavers. Temple records from the 16th century and surveys of the Coromandel Coast by European trading companies also attest to the presence of affluent weavers in south India who plied multiple looms with hired ‘*coolie*-weavers’ in their own households, typically, aggregating production for one or more larger merchant houses. Indeed, when European merchant houses set up bases along coastal south India in the 17th century, their company-officers by-passed merchant intermediaries to deal directly with such localized aggregative master-weavers, even taking them on, in some cases, as company agents. The “close bond” between artisanal master-weavers and their *coolie* weavers was certainly strained in the colonial era;²⁸ however – and despite their employment on company rolls – master-weavers also identified with weavers’: a weavers’ revolt in 1662 in Madras against the actions of the British East India Company was, in fact, led by a master-weaver in their employ (Ramaswamy 2006).

Labor relations on the loom – in southern and western India, at least, if less so in the north – were thus crisscrossed by horizontal and vertical ties, “blurred” by ties of obligation and affiliation, as Haynes (2008) puts it (p. 9). Unlike accounts of transitions in protoindustrial

²⁸ In the 18th century for example, master-weavers for calico-cotton, contracted to execute (the East India) Company orders at or below cost, exploited their *coolie*-weavers in turn.

Europe, the persistence and coexistence of a mix of production arrangements on Indian looms belies the emergence of a ‘proletariat class’ of weaver-workers, subject to the control of merchant/master-weaver capital and the disciplines of factory-based production. Between weavers’ everyday resistances and the local sociopolitics of obligations and affiliations, production arrangements variously accommodated the practices and proclivities of artisanal production; in particular, affording weavers relative autonomy in the spaces and practices of work.

Rajah and mantri on the loom

Writing at the turn of the 19th century, Thurston (1899) describes a diversity of production arrangements on Kanchipuram’s looms: weavers not only carried out orders for large merchant houses, much as in a putting-out system, they also sold their saris across the Madras Presidency via commercial and caste/community ties, as well as in local markets as ‘independent weavers.’ The custom of temple grandees, elite patrons, the rich-and-famous of Madras City or other longstanding clients was also significant; as was direct sale to the numerous pilgrims visiting Kanchipuram’s many temples. Nalli K. Chetti (2014) for instance, scion of the famous Nalli Silks in Chennai, recalls how visitors to the Varadaraja Perumal temple, circa 1905, frequently stopped on their way back to enquire about buying saris at his grandfather’s loom on Chetty Street. Chetti’s grandfather, Chinnasamy, weaving at the time for a master-weaver in Kanchipuram – who, in turn, sold to retailers – was soon able to build a clientele of his own, weaving by direct order for customers in the rich neighborhood of Mylapore in Madras.

The three large merchants in Kanchipuram at the time, according to Nalli (2014), were P. S. Kandasamy Muthu, Avalur Duraisamy Iyengar and Vakkiya Krishna Mudaliyar, each controlling as many as two thousand looms. Weavers, on the other hand, as Arterburn (1982)

records, recalled this period before the Great War as largely a time of independent weavers in Kanchipuram; an account that Arterburn herself tends to discount. Given the expensive input materials of the *kanjeevaram*, a Chicherov-ian putting out system was certainly more likely. The older weavers I interviewed however, born in the 1940s, were less ready to dismiss their predecessors: YM Narayanaswamy, for instance – YMN, to friend and foe – the erstwhile director of the Kamakshiamman Society and active in the Communist Party since his boyhood, described several types of so-called ‘independent weaver’ in Kanchipuram: weavers from traditional weaving households who sold in the market or wove to order for the elite families who sponsored temple ceremonies; weavers who capitalized on caste and community affiliations to build commercial ties across the Madras Presidency; weavers with longstanding links to yarn suppliers who “rotated” credit; weavers who wove for other master-weavers; and weavers who produced for merchant-retailers and wholesalers to sell. While not strictly ‘independent’ in the sense of economic historians’ definitions, these arrangements were sensible to weavers in their daily lives as the ownership of fixed capital – of the room and loom in/on which production occurred.

Remesh (2001), writing a hundred years after Thurston, while largely describing production in Kanchipuram as a putting-out system with few ‘independent weavers,’ points to a similar diversity of labor relations, organizing weavers by their “attachments” to various intermediaries: the master-weaver, the wholesaler (*malligai*) or the silk-merchant in the *thaniyar* (private) mode of production, or to the cooperative society. Attached weavers, as Remesh (2001) describes, worked on their own looms in their own households with working capital and inputs provided by the master-weaver who not only controlled the product, but held on to a fifteen to twenty-five per cent margin to cover his risk. Paid a pre-determined piece-rate for their

production, such weavers nevertheless tended to label themselves ‘independent weavers,’ when I asked; or, more often, called themselves “owners.” It was their “own house,” that they wove in, after all, and on their *sondha thari* – their “own *thari*,” they emphasized, using the English to make sure I understood. Working on one’s ‘own loom’ had once conferred status. When non-traditional weaving households entered silk-weaving in numbers, midcentury, it was the “right to own looms,” as Roy (1987) points out (drawing on Venkatraman’s Kanchipuram account), that signified traditional weavers, differentiating them from socially inferior upstarts. If less so in the present when SC weavers and *kuruvikarars* owned their looms, then it certainly accommodated weavers’ aspirations for autonomy: ownership was the means to achieve the “high degree of control... over their own labor processes, [working] at home (or near home) and at their own pace” that centrally characterized artisanal production (Smith 2008).

On his loom, declared twenty-six year old Bhaskar, he was both *rajah* and *mantri* – king and minister: he made the rules and he decided when and how to enforce them. If his friends dropped by, or if there was some urgent business to be taken care of, he could set his work aside and catch up later on the loom at a more convenient time. His life, he added – in a sly dig at the assembly-line jobs that many of young people in the neighborhood were opting for – “was not bound by the rules and routines of workplace ‘shifts.’” His friend Prakash concurred. Earning eighteen thousand rupees a *pav*, autonomy trumped even his fat wages, as far as he was concerned: “You may be excited about your ‘salary,’” he told me, “but you are still working for someone. Even if my income goes down, I am still the ‘owner.’”

At the night-school, the figures of fun were the two young men in the neighborhood who had briefly tried their hand at such shift-based work: Prithvi had quit within weeks; while Deva had lasted a full five months – rumor was that he had been trying to “impress” a girl who worked

there – before returning to the loom. Mohan, an erstwhile weaver and literacy activist in Kanchipuram, was unsurprised: “everyone was headed for company-work these days,” he said, but

he (they) will himself be drawn back to the loom – he will stay at home and start weaving a sari. Because in a company, you can only be an *adimai*. Because you have to do whatever the ‘in-charge’ says. If you miss the bus, you lose your pay. But for the weaver, he can sit right in his home. He choose when to work. Life at the company is a very monotonous life – you leave at 6 in the morning, then you return at 6 in the evening. You can’t talk to you neighbor, you can’t talk on the phone, because the employers want to squeeze all the work out of you. How can you live like that? On the loom, you can sit outside for a bit or go for a movie, because you can adjust to the work you have. But in a company, you can’t.

“That kind of work,” Prithvi agreed with a shake of his head, “was not for weavers (*thari-karar*). We have to get up and walk a bit or chat with friends and have some tea – that’s how we are. How can we work otherwise?” “How can we watch *Athipookal*, otherwise?” grinned a friend, sending everyone at the night-school into peals of laughter. *Athipookal* was the long-running Tamil soap opera that aired on Sun TV every day at two in the afternoon, popular among the men and women of the loom.

My neighbor Gamini would let nothing come in the way of *Athipookal* and her afternoon nap thereafter – it was the rule, as I was reminded each time I walked past her door, bolted shut in the afternoon when it stood ajar most other times. Of course, she also took frequent breaks from her loom to finish household chores or stop for a quick chat with me or our other neighbors,

but they could be fitted around her work as she pleased. “You don’t have to ask anyone on the *thari*,” as Chandru said, *yaarayum keka venda* – you didn’t need anyone’s permission.

When my mother calls, I can attend to her immediately. If she has to go the hospital, then I can accompany her. Or take this cell-phone. If it rings, I can see what my friend is asking for, I can go for a ‘round’ with him. If someone needs my help to fix a ‘mistake’ on the *thari*, then I must go. Last week, I had to put aside my work and help another weaver. This cellphone is a lot of *thollai* [trouble] – sometimes I think that I should go join a company [laughing]; they take away your cellphone at the gate, so no one will be able to disturb me there! Let me see how my friends convince the ‘supervisor’ to let me go!

Garima, sixteen going on seventeen, and a *coolie*-weavers who worked for Selvam – I was briefly apprenticed on her loom – had one dream: when she was married, she would weave full-time in her own (marital) household. A skilled weaver – Selvam’s best (the brevity of my apprenticeship owed to how much I was slowing her down) – she enjoyed her work and looked forward to a *sondha thari* and its affordance of housework. After all, as she pointed out, the married women in the neighborhood who wove availed a three-hour hiatus at noon to cook for the household. Parvathi, Selvam’s wife and mother of a five year-old, concurred:

On the loom, you can take care of the home as well. Even if you weave for hire, you can stop when you feel like and go finish your chores. You can even take ‘rest’ if you have a headache. In ‘company-*velai*’ [company-work in SEZs] once you go in, you must work... Can you ask the ‘supervisor’ for ten minutes’ ‘permission’ and go home? You can’t go home without the ‘company-van’... Many of us don’t work on the loom at the time of our ‘date’ [period], but how can you do that in company-*velai*?

From Bhaskar to Chandru, Gamini and Parvathi to Tamizhselvi, they were each attached to a master-weaver or, in Parvathi's case, reliant on a wholesaler; but they each also owned their loom. Despite their relations of dependence on master-weavers and merchants, what characterized their work was the control that ownership afforded in structuring labor and leisure as they saw fit, allowing for the performance of neighborliness and the familial and gendered relations that reproduced the weaving household and the "occupational group" of weavers (Arterburn 1982).

Weaver-owners distinguished themselves from those weavers who worked in master-weavers' homes and workshops as *coolie*-weavers in what Remesh (2001) terms 'parallel production.' Of course, as Parvathi observed, *coolie*-weavers had a certain degree of autonomy as well, piece-rated as their wages were. Male weavers, in particular, were notorious for their "careless" (carefree) ways and proclivity for tea and smoking breaks. Her husband Selvam, for instance, was frequently frustrated by the cavalier attitude of the young men he had hired: "nine out of ten boys," he often ranted, "were 'loafers' and 'rowdies' in making."²⁹ But even he acknowledged that "[y]ou didn't question weavers, because their wages are determined by what they weave [i.e., by piece-rate]. You can question 'salaried' people about their how efficiently they worked, but for weavers, their time accounted for itself."

Given such largely self-paced production arrangements, weavers, both male and female, stepped off their looms several times a day and with little fear of sanction: male weavers, to hang about in the *thope* with friends or visit a tea-shop, their female counterparts, more trammelled by social conventions, to head home for a bath or a nap or finish up any household chores. The

²⁹ Selvam had soon replaced all his male weavers with female weavers. Girls, he observed, were "correct" in their behavior unlike the rowdy boys.

loom-space was noisy with the goings-out and comings-in of weavers, their chatter and giggly gossip as loud as the music that constantly blared out of a radio or the tiny ‘*kalaignar* TV’ when the power was on. Even so, *coolie*-weavers felt the discipline of working under the nose and often alongside the master-weaver on premises and looms owned by the master-weaver. What counted in the vernacular, then, was not so much the scholarly distinction between independent and dependent weavers in terms of the control over input and product, but ‘ownership’ as the distinction between attached weavers and *coolie*-weavers. Ownership of the *sondha thari* but also of one’s time and place of work: the weaver as sovereign of his/her loom and governor over his/her daily pace and practices of work. Weavers’ everyday practices and aspirations of autonomy cut against the grain of their relations of dependence on master-weavers, belying conventional narratives of weavers’ powerlessness and exploitation vis-à-vis master-weavers and merchant capital.

Small ‘d’ development on the loom

Basile (2013), in describing Arni’s silk economy, some seventy kilometers by bus to the west of Kanchipuram, structures it by the antagonistic classes of capitalists and subalterns: master-weavers and *malligai*-merchants on the one hand, a class of weaving-families-done-well and moneyed agriculturalists brought together by shared interests, while on the other, a subaltern class of waged and independent weavers. ‘Small-scale master-weavers,’ who “controlled a limited number of looms and who usually are weavers themselves,” are largely discounted in the process, their status ideologically ambiguous and structurally irrelevant (p. 152). In Kanchipuram, on the other hand, ambiguity seemed far more the rule: From attached weavers who presented themselves as autonomous ‘owners,’ to the ubiquitous small-scale master-weaver who was variously dependent on *malligai* intermediaries, the social and ideological relations

separating capitalists from producers, artisans from merchants, and independent weavers from dependent labor did not necessarily structure and determine daily life. After all, YMN, doyen of the cooperative movement – ex-Director of the Kamakshiamman Society, in fact – and one of the leading lights of the local branch of the Communist Party, was the current President of the main *thaniyar* (private) silk manufacturers' *sangam* (association) in Kanchipuram,³⁰ while running well-established wholesale and retail operations on Saliyar Street with over sixty attached weavers. On Kanchipuram's looms, strict categorical and ideological differences between classes and interests were straddled every day in the occupational group of weavers, the lines of separation, unremarkably permeable on the loom and in weavers' self-narratives.

Attachments to master-weaver and *malligai* intermediaries were real enough, of course, a workaday reality for the vast majority of weavers in Kanchipuram, whether owners or small-scale master-weavers: tying up working capital in expensive inventories of silk yarn and *zari*-marcs was inefficient or simply unfeasible. Not all attachments were equal, however: master-weaver operations varied greatly in scale, from merchants whose numerous attachments extended beyond the immediate neighborhood to the villages nearby, to small-scale artisanal master-weavers who were themselves attached to the *malligai*. The *malligai* not only facilitated access to inputs, markets or both, their role in translating market signals into new designs and new markets was vital, not easily replicated by even the cooperatives; and their power was readily recognized on the looms. The visit of a Mudaliar wholesaler to Selvam's loom, for instance, was greeted by a rare silence, the ever-present radio turned off and the usual banter stilled – an expression of the grip of commerce over production. The 1930's had seen an influx

³⁰ The Kanchipuram Handloom Silk and Lace Sari Manufacturers Association was established in the 1950's as the leading body of *thaniyar* (private) manufacturers – master-weavers, wholesalers and merchants – to negotiate with weavers.

of merchant capital into Kanchipuram when the *Vellala Mudaliars*, an aristocratic landowner caste with little personal history of weaving, had set up as master-weavers in the area (Arterburn 1982). With uncertain demand during the (Second World) War years, weavers grew increasingly dependent on merchant capital; and conditions were ripe for exploitation. In 1937, however, weavers in Kanchipuram and surrounding villages, organized by communist activists, struck work for twenty-one days, demanding a rise in wages; in the process, laying the foundation of the cooperative movement in Kanchipuram. As Roy (1987) points out, writing about the relations of production in handloom weaving at this time (the mid-thirties), they were “more progressive with greater stratification among producers” in southern India, unlike the north where “merchants remained entrenched” (p. 1).

Stratification, whether in terms of the diversity of labor relations on the loom or the scale of master-weavers, reflected weavers’ (aspirations for) relative autonomy – but also afforded weavers relative mobility: the opportunity to “develop,” as it were. In the first instance, attachments, while marking relations of dependence, were neither permanent nor exclusive ties. They overlapped and crisscrossed in pragmatic fashion, shaped by market conditions as much as weavers’ strategies and aspirations for development. Gangadharan, for example, while a self-described life-long ‘society-man,’ also dabbled in *thaniyar* production from time to time. The second loom in his household, currently idling, was primarily for the use of a hired *coolie*-weaver who produced in attachment to one of Gangadharan’s wholesaler friends in Gandhi market. My neighbor and friend, Gagini, a member of one of the smaller cooperative societies that, in recent years, had slowed production, had supplemented her income by working as a *coolie*-weaver during the slow-down before refurbishing her “own loom” to weave in attachment to another master-weaver. Her marital family demonstrated even more diversity: her husband

and three brothers-in-law, while each attached to a different cooperative or master-weaver, also owned four additional looms between them, worked on by *coolie*-weavers, workshop-style, even as the household also put out for twenty-plus attached weavers spread out across Kanchipuram's weaving neighborhoods. The youngest brother also went on to develop an additional line of work as a "broker," organizing credit for weavers in exchange for their output, much like the *sahukar* and *mahajan* moneylenders in other parts of the country.

The ambiguity of the weaver-owner and the small-scale/artisanal master-weaver in the class structure was not irrelevant, as Basile (2013) argues, but central to the stories that Kanchipuram's weavers told about themselves and the trajectories to development they sought to materialize on the loom. Small 'd' development (Hart 2001) of the silk industry in Kanchipuram was sensible to weavers on the loom as the structurally and ideologically ambiguous positions of weaver-owners – producers who were also owners – and artisanal master-weavers – owners who were also producers. To enter the loom-space as a weaver was, in fact, to enter a pathway of staged professional and socioeconomic development, from novice *coolie*-weaver to 'owner' and artisanal master-weaver and beyond: from dependent labor to a producer-capitalist, even if small-scale. A weaver who hired out his/her skills as a *coolie*-weaver "rotated" from one master-weaver to another – like "pigeons," as Haynes (2008) describes, flitting from one employer to another (p. 33) – in search of higher wages, till (s)he had accumulated sufficient capital, skill and market networks to make the transformation from *coolie* weaver to weaver-'owner.' "When you go work on somebody else's loom," explained Mahesh, a twenty seven year-old weaver in the neighborhood,

they pay you two or three thousand, depending on the *regam* [the weight/design] of the sari. But if you have a *sondha thari* in your house, you would earn five hundred rupees

more for the same work. You could make 3500 rupees instead. So why would I want to go out to weave for someone, when I can do it for myself, at home, and be the ‘owner’? And so, with a *mudal* [deposit with the yarn supplier] of 30,000 rupees, I began to weave at home.

As Mahesh describes, it was in the context of ownership that weavers worked, weaving plans for autonomy and development on the loom as they wove the *kanjeevaram*. Ownership, in turn, set the stage for further development: looms were gradually added, worked on by household members and other *coolie*-weavers, till producer-owners were established as producer-capitalists; and, who knew, a weaver called Mahesh might, one day, be the next Nalli Chetti or Kalathi Mudaliar of Kanchipuram!

“When my grandfather came from a hamlet to No. 2 Chetty Street [in Kanchipuram],” as Nalli Chetti’s (2014) grandson recalled, narrating his development from a dependent weaver to a one of the best-known silk retailers in Chennai,

he did not know that he would get orders from customers coming from Madras. Because the shop was on the way [to the temple], they would give the orders to him... At that time, until 1911, after weaving, he used to give the saris to the master weaver. They would then sell them to the retailers. After 1916, he started getting orders from the customers. After making them ready he would deliver them to Madras. There were no middlemen. That was just one step forward from the weaver to a wholesaler. He came to that wholesaler’s position. After that all his customers came from Mylapore [in Madras]...

If you wanted to go to Madras there was only the train; not the electric train but the usual train. There were no buses [in] those days... We used to deliver saris and get some fresh orders. We used to come once every week or every fifteen days to deliver those saris... After that my father started to get orders frequently; i.e., once in a week, then twice a week and later thrice a week... He wanted to open a depot in Chennai... To go to Mylapore, the easiest way was to get [off] at the Mambalam railway station and then go to Mylapore. So he selected T. Nagar, because that was the place very near Mylapore and very near the railway station, also... Every week they would bring in the saris to Chennai and sell them from that house-cum-depot... He didn't know that T. Nagar was going to be a very big market. (pp. 8-10)

Closer home – two streets away from where I lived in Kanchipuram, in fact – was Kalathi Mudaliar's erstwhile home, a two-storey building that occupied an entire block and, in its heyday, had held at least 400 looms. *The archetypal rags to riches story*, Kalathi Mudaliar was the local Gatsby, a first generation silk-weaver – to coin a phrase – done good. From learning to weave in the neighborhood and working his way up to 'owner' in the 1970's, he had rapidly expanded his looms, running a factory-size operation of some 400 looms – the numbers increased with each telling. Large enough, at any rate, to be famous across Kanchipuram, the first *Sengundar* silk-weaver to compete with the longstanding master-weavers in Little Kanchipuram. When, at the height of his fame as a master-weaver, he had sold off his looms – presciently enough, before the downturn in the new millennium – and moved away, to run a chain of petrol-stations, some said, or to set up as a diamond trader in Chennai, as others claimed, his legendary status was made.

These narratives of development from *coolie*-weaver to large-scale master-weaver and wholesaler/retailer formed the basis of weavers' occupational imaginations – but always interwoven with their deep-seated aspirations for autonomy; and ownership was the lynchpin on which weavers' trajectories to autonomy and development turned. After all, not every young weaver rose to be a merchant master-weaver of legendary wealth: the cost of the wooden loom, the *mudal* for the yarn supplier, while relatively inexpensive – between twenty and thirty thousand at the time of my fieldwork – were nevertheless significant for *coolie* weavers earning between three and five thousand a month. There was social capital to consider as well – relationships with the *malligai-karar* and silk-houses that retailed for the artisanal master-weaver while collecting information on the latest market trends and preferences, on the one hand and yarn suppliers, on the other. The risk of failure was higher for new entrants in particular, who did not have longstanding familial networks with suppliers and marketers to draw on. Chandran, for instance, a first generation SC weaver in Mel Kadirpur, recalled his early days with some bitterness. “The number of times I was asked by one *malligai-karar* after another to spread my sari out so they could examine it inch-by-woven-inch!” he exclaimed. As Chandran's *kanjeevaram* lost its “stiff[ness]” in the process, it only made it harder for him to find a buyer. While cooperative membership, by offering stable markets and supplies, attempted to defray such risk – granted membership also required own looms, though subsidized by society loans, and the social capital to be successfully nominated – it did not, however, support the dramatic trajectories to fortune and fame of Kalathi Mudaliar-esque proportions. Or even of the scale of Damodaran, whose three-storey residence on my street announced his status in concrete terms to everyone in the neighborhood.

But every weaver could and did aspire to ownership: ownership was development and autonomy rolled into one, embodying the freedom to be (one's own master) and to become (master-weaver). As Kannan, at thirty, the owner of two looms, said eloquently:

Even if you have just one or two looms, just to meet your family's needs, even then, you are the 'owner.' [Pointing to his friend] He is 'owner' – I am also 'owner.' We both started as 'child labour,' and now, we are 'owners'! There are many people here who were born as 'labour' and went on to become 'owners' – like Kalathi Mudaliar, who used to live in your area. He started as 'child labour,' then became an owner, then, a 'top-most owner!' The weavers who worked for my grandfather, they left after marriage. That was difficult for us, but we are happy that they too are *chinna* (small) 'owners.' If someone joins a 'company' as 'labour' then till the end he is 'labour,' or at best, you become a 'manager' after some years. But in authentic work, 'labour' should be able to become 'owner.'

"I am 'owner,'" Tamizhselvi had declared, "I am not anybody's *adimai*." 'Development' was meaningful to weavers in terms of ownership and the autonomy of work it implied. Ownership implied development and development without ownership did not make sense on the loom; it was autonomous development, if you will, the intertwined trajectories to autonomy and development that characterized the occupational group of weavers.

A final note: vernacularizing development

Naiyin thozhilikku nigar illai, said Kannan, quoting Tamil poetry: nothing could compare to the weaving *thozhil* (occupation). On the other hand, and despite recent scholarly

interventions, policy and public perceptions of the handlooms have remained in the thrall of modernization theory – problematic not only in terms of handloom policies in India, as I have described; but also, as later chapters argue, in terms of the assumptions made in education and Big ‘D’ Development policy frameworks about appropriate trajectories of development and the aspirations of provincial communities in the country. To paraphrase Appadurai (2001), places like Kanchipuram and the ‘traditional’ institutions that have shaped their sociocultural and economic landscapes, have, in the context of modernization theory, largely served as the empirical material for the production or revision of theory.

“The critique of modernization,” Parthasarathi (2012) writes, in the context of Indian labor history, is yet “incomplete in terms of alternative practices” (p. 129). This chapter is an attempt to redress the situation; and, in anthropological vein, it seeks to do so by foregrounding the voices, perspectives, experiences, aspirations, languages and logics of weavers in Kanchipuram, to reconsider dominant historical narratives of proto-industrial transitions in the 19th and 20th centuries. This is especially important in the Indian context where, contrary to the teleology of such narratives, a formal economy with a proletarianized workforce has not materialized: the organized sector in India has only always represented a small part – under a tenth – of what is the largest workforce in the world. Indeed, the organized sector has shrunk further in the new millennium, given the proliferation of neoliberal labor regimes and pressures to scale back the state. On the other hand, ‘traditional’ forms of labor organization have persisted to this day, characterizing production in the unorganized sector, with the life-worlds of the vast majority of Indian workers, not only shaped by present-day neoliberal imperatives, but also by longstanding – and little understood – institutions and practices of (re)production. Largely overlooked in critical scholarship as well, as Chari (2004) points out, in the intellectual shift to

postcolonial power/knowledge from political economy approaches to the structural bases of power (characterizing peasant studies, for instance), he calls for a renewed focus on how workers³¹ revived and remade cultural-historic resources and narratives (of “toil”) to respond to the global, industrial present. “Decentered ethnographies of the capitalist present,” he observes, “might better begin with actual interactions of capitalism and subalternity, seeking forms of resistance alongside relations of complicity” (p. 762).

The recovery of ‘traditional’ forms – the institution of the artisanal master-weaver, for instance – is a deeply political project, as indeed, Parthasarathi (2012) also suggests. As the historical basis of producer power and resistance, as he puts it, they offer a vernacular frame and language to make claims for economic justice and redistribution ‘from below,’ as it were. Weavers’ experience and imagination of ‘ownership’ as the means for realizing development and/as autonomy – for realizing the good life – offer, I suggest, a vernacular idiom that reveals and, if not necessarily resists, then shapes the outworkings – the disciplinary effects and affects – of neoliberal labor regimes as they articulate with the international development/education apparatus. A vernacular alternative embedded in the social and temporal organization of artisanal work, moreover, that – as the next chapters describe – not only embodied the critique of the highly individualized ‘entrepreneur’ valorized in neoliberal narratives of development (see Elyachar 2005), but was also taken up by children in Kanchipuram, boys in particular, to craft new trajectories and horizons of aspiration in the LPG (liberalization, privatization and globalization) context of economic development in India.

³¹ In the textile town of Tiruppur, 400 kilometers southwest of Kanchipuram, where Chari’s study is sited

Mark Halstrom (1984), in his seminal *Social Anthropology of Indian Labour*, written in the context of state-led modernization and industrial development, noted in passing – and with some puzzlement – that while ‘government jobs’ ranked highest among workers in India for the security they offered, even government workers envied those who had their ‘own businesses.’ As Kanchipuram’s weavers show-and-tell us, ownership was the opportunity to be *rajah* and *mantri* of one’s loom and livelihood. With expectations of government jobs or alternatives in the organized private sector that promised secure employment receding in the present moment, it is perhaps time to take ‘other’ labor practices and aspirations for autonomous development seriously as a means to (re)think good lives and good futures.

Chatterton (1912), arguing the need for formal education, wrote that “Indians do not regard an industrial career with any favour; they only take to it when they are convinced that they have no prospect of success in more congenial occupations... I think I am correct in saying that not a single educated man is directly employed in the weaving trade although it is by far the largest indigenous industry in this country” (p. 218). The education and educational institutions he proposed, therefore, were not only about modern technical skills, but an appropriate preparation and appreciation for “industrial career(s)” as opposed to “congenial” indigenous occupations. Echoing Chari’s (2004) call to provincialize capital, it is time, I argue, to vernacularize development – in particular, to vernacularize understandings of what constitute appropriate education and appropriate pathways to appropriate careers and success. Understandings that attend more closely to the values and relations indigenous to ‘traditional’ occupational groups, weavers, in this case, still the largest (non-agricultural) occupational group in India, whose assertions of being *rajah* and *mantri* on the loom are marginal to the school-spaces of modern education.

Childhood in Kanchipuram: Weaving as production and pedagogy

Yvonne Arterburn, in her seminal work on weavers' cooperatives in the 1970's, notes rather matter-of-factly that in Kanchipuram's neighborhoods, "more children work than attend school" (Arterburn 1982, p. 36). Children's work was "training for full economic participation": if commencing "at the age of six," then, the child, "by the age of eighteen is able to bring into the family as much income as his [her] father" (p. 41). But children's work was not only 'training' for future economic activity; nor, as Haynes (2008) observes, merely 'supplementary,' the terminology used in official documents since colonial times. On the other hand, the children's work "was central to the productivity of the family" in weaving neighborhoods (Haynes 2008, p. 14). In Kanchipuram's neighborhoods, production and pedagogy were inseparably interwoven in childhood.

Childhood: the nucleus of production and reproduction in weaving households

The 1961 Census of India offers what remains the most comprehensive description of the various activities and tasks involved in the production of the *kanjeevaram* (Census Commission of India 1963). From sizing the warp to spinning and reeling the weft thread, assisting with the *korvai* borders, or even folding the sari in the correct manner, these tasks were shared and age-appropriately distributed across the weaving household. As weaver after weaver in Kanchipuram was quick to assure me, the *thari* (loom) was not *oru aal velai*, a one-man job – everyone played a role, children included.

The six or seven year old child, for instance, was a 'helper,' tasked with collecting any wayward strands of the expensive *zari* thread, while (s)he learned to wind the two and three-ply

weft yarn using a bamboo-pirn. An older sibling, nine or ten years old and more adept with the loom-shuttle, assisted his/her parent, sitting alongside on the loom and weaving the sari border in tandem. Together, parent and child produced the characteristically interlocked *korvai*, even as the child watched and learned the picking, shedding and beating motions essential to weaving – the three R's of weaving, if you will. When, at thirteen or fourteen, the child was tall enough to reach the pedal and the harness on the loom, it was time to get one's hand in: while he/she substituted for the parent taking a break, the younger sibling took his/her place in turn, assisting with the border. The siblings practiced on the household loom till it was time to step up their training: while the younger child stepped in to assist the parent, the older sibling, fifteen years or so, stepped out of the household, heading to apprentice with a master-weaver in the neighborhood. Growing physically stronger and more socially connected all the while, the apprentice continued to learn and earn, often "rotating" from one master-weaver to another, till, at eighteen years, (s)he had enough capital to set up an "own *thari*." The apprentice was an owner-weaver now, a full-fledged member of the prestigious occupational group of *kanjeevaram* weavers and well on the way to being the *rajah* and *mantri* of his/her loom.

If the physical and socio-cognitive trajectories of child development were interwoven with 'small d' development trajectories to ownership, then, as Arterburn (1982) describes, the domestic cycle of the household was also tightly interlocked with the occupational demands of the *thari* (pp. 36-40). Intergenerational divisions of labor were central to matching the subsistence needs of the household with domestic and occupational requirements. A nuclear family with a single loom and young children, for instance, was largely self-sufficient, their consumption needs balanced by their productivity: the wife assisted her husband on the one loom, while children attended school and helped out in the evenings and weekends. When the

children were older, however, able to manipulate a shuttle at eight or ten years, the household was no longer self-sufficient; not only falling behind in meeting the consumption needs of growing children, but inadequate in terms of appropriate pedagogical opportunities for developing children. The household now added a second loom for the wife, relieved of child-rearing duties, to weave on; her work, providing for household subsistence, but also the means for both children to learn beside their parents on the loom. At this time, therefore, the children traded off school for full-time loom-based training, active learners as well as producers in the household. Where children outnumbered the looms – not every household could afford, or indeed, accommodate a second loom – it was imperative to organize alternative arrangements: for sufficient income, yes, but equally, for adequate instruction. Consequently, older children in the family headed out to master-weaver households in the near vicinity to learn as well as earn on the loom.

As Malathi, a 17-year old weaver, described, the push and pull of household labor (child as well as adult) and household need (for income and instruction) were familiar even to her ten-year-old self.

For two years [she said], I had been able to do both, work and school. I could pull it off [because] I wasn't weaving at the time; I was only helping with the preparatory work – I learned to weave only after I had stopped going to school, when I dropped out. At that time, the children [siblings] were younger and the household expenses were manageable; but later, there were so many expenses. They were growing up, always asking for notebooks and pens and whatnot. And things were getting more expensive. Things keep getting more expensive – and we have to adjust our work to keep up with the expenses, right? When we didn't have too many expenses, it was possible [to go to school], but

when there are bigger expenses... That's why I decided I would stop going to school. I thought it was time to learn to weave as well – my family didn't suggest it, I myself decided I would quit school and start learning [to weave]. I didn't feel strongly about schooling at that time. And I had already made a few attempts to weave on the loom at home. So I decided I would go for it and weave full-time.

At ten, therefore, Malathi had started her apprenticeship with a master-weaver at the end of the street she lived on, moving on at fourteen as a full-time weaver, first in her aunt's household and, presently, at the master-weaver's where I met her. She had already saved up enough to set up her "own loom" – in her husband's household, she hoped, once she was married and there was enough room to set up a loom and start her own nuclear family.

Such contemporary arrangements harken back to the well-established 'neighborhood hiring' system of apprenticeships that N.G. Ranga, the Indian freedom-fighter and *kisan* (farmer) leader, describes among weaving communities in south India, during his scholarly travels in the 1920's – he was reading Economics at Oxford at the time.

If a father has only one son, he himself trains him. If he has three or four boys, he trains one of them, and the rest are sent to other weavers to learn the work. While under training, these boys are not paid anything for six months, in which period they are expected to learn their trade. After the elapse of six months, they are paid one rupee each per month until they become good workmen. When the time comes for the boys, who are usually 15 years old, to think that they have learnt the work and they would like to go to other employers to earn the ordinary wages paid for adults, their father then consults both the old and the prospective employers and if they are certain that the youngsters can give satisfaction in their work and at the same time, can earn enough money, they allow these

young men to work as adult weavers. When these young employees have saved enough from their earnings, they buy their own looms and set up as weavers. The average price of a loom is Rs. 15 and the other necessary things cost another Rs. 5 and so, by the time a boy becomes a weaver, owning his own loom, he usually has attained the age of 17 and has realized to some extent the advantages of thrift. (Ranga 1930).

Production and reproduction – livelihood and learning – were thus seamlessly interwoven on the *thari*, educational and economic calculus inseparably integrated in childhood. As Katz (2004) observed among the Howa, childhood practices were at the heart of (re)producing workers as well as their subsistence: children's mundane spaces and routines of daily life were not only essential to survival, they were central to determinations of “what constitutes being skilled, what kinds of knowledge are admissible and useful, what work attitudes are acceptable” (p. x). For Kanchipuram's children, the childhood spaces of pedagogy and play overlapped and intertwined with the productive social spaces of household and neighborhood. On the loom, children not only participated in the intergenerational relations on the loom to produce economic value, they exerted the right of the workman to instruction and participation in technical knowledge – as Lee (1979) characterized craft-based apprenticeships – while also enjoying the more or less playful childhood institutions on the loom – *inam kaas* – that anticipated the autonomy of the artisanal way of life. Childhood in Kanchipuram was, in equal parts, an initiation into the embodied routines and dispositions that produced the *kanjeevaram* as well as its weaver; a site of entry into the sociocultural worlds – the relations and obligations – that constituted the loom-space; and the labor that produced the *korvai* border which distinguished the *kanjeevaram* and conferred it with value.

Learning on the loom: ‘chore curriculum’

How did children learn on the loom? In the words of the Census of India, 1961, those who grew up around the loom simply “[took] to weaving as a fish takes to water” (Census Commission of India 1963, p. 23). Indeed, weavers themselves struggled to describe the learning process – it would hardly be fish who best described water – often turning to similes. *Thari oori poiruchi* was a common expression among weavers: their skills, they said, had “seeped” into their bodies and beings. How did such osmosis occur in childhood?

On the one hand, as Lancy (2012a) notes in a comparative study of *African Children at Work*, ethnologists have been unable to identify a unique term for apprenticeships in native languages. The “chore curriculum,” in contrast to the “core curriculum” (of Math, English, Science) of academic study, is relatively informal in organization; an expression of children’s developing capacity to emulate their elders and, often, is indistinguishable from the everyday interactions of households and neighborhoods; including, of course, the domestic and occupational divisions of labor. In Kanchipuram, for instance, it is enough to say that *ezhu-ettu vayasiliye thari-kku poiten* – that “I went to the loom” at seven-eight years of age; or that *oru ettu-path vayasila thari-la ukanthuten* – that I “sat on the loom” aged eight or ten. These mundane experiences in childhood – going to the loom or sitting on it – offered, as Rogoff (2003) describes, opportunities to observe and pitch in with ongoing, everyday activities in the neighborhood, rather than relying on learning lessons in spaces separated out from the context in which the knowledge and skills taught were used (p. 9). In effect, growing up around the loom in the household or neighborhood was also the initiation – largely non-discursive initiation – into the situated ‘practical knowledge’ that characterized weaving communities (see Clarke & Winch 2004).

On the other hand, as signaled by weavers' age-specified memories of childhood, their chore curriculum on the loom was as strictly, if implicitly, "laddered" and "staged" as age-graded schooling (Lancy 2012a). Age, in this instance, was not so much a record of years since birth, exact in its reckoning, but, in Rogoff's (2003) words, a 'cultural metric of (child) development.' In my very first week of fieldwork in Kanchipuram (in 2009), for example, I was hailed by an elderly lady spinning silk bobbins in the doorway of her house. Noticing her young grandson watching TV inside, I asked her how old he was. She wasn't sure, she told me, she could never remember the exact year in which he was born. But, she added, a note of censure in her voice, *thari-kku pora vayasu than*: the boy was old enough to have started going to the loom to work by now – and certainly old enough to help her spin bobbins. Maturity or development, as Lancy (2012a) underlines, "relate to the child as worker."

Going to the loom, as weavers put it, began as early as five or six years, with children carrying out preliminary tasks on the loom as 'helpers': collecting "waste" yarn or preparing the weft thread, in particular. Once they were familiar with the expensive yarn and could be trusted with it, children graduated to *sitting* on the loom next to the weaver, plying the *korvai*-shuttle and hand-weaving the spotted *zari buttas* across the body of the sari. Even as children 'sat on the loom,' the chore curriculum enabled an intimate familiarity with the numerous subsidiary tasks that were a precursor to the primary weaving process. It was the particular province of children to 'pick' the *korvai*-border, of course; but, as Vajravel sir pointed out, children also picked up how to prepare the weft thread, size the warp and piece it to the loom, and *achchi ponnaikuradhu*, the complex process of warp-drawing. Children learned it all, *padi-padi-a*, step-by-step, he added. In effect, the inventory of tasks that boys and girls were expected to master on

the loom by a roughly agreed upon age was as mandatory in chore curricula as the “core” that all pupils are expected master in school by a certain grade (Lancy 2012a, p. 23).

Unlike in the typical classroom, however, children learned chore curricula by watching and participating rather than through explicitly organized lessons. Active, child-centered *instruction*, as Lancy (2010) concludes in his ethnological survey, is rare outside contemporary elite cultures. On the other hand, children assumed responsibility for learning their chores (and their culture), relying on those more expert, sib-peers as well as older adults, to model skills and techniques. Imitation – observation, imitation and gradually growing participation, as Clarke & Winch (2004) describe, in contrast to “drilling” trainees or learning by following an instruction manual (p. 510) – was the primary mode of knowledge transfer on the loom. As Murali, a reputed master-weaver in my neighborhood, laughingly reminded me, there was no homework on the looms, nor did anyone assign lessons to learn “by-heart.” “It wasn’t like my father or one of our weavers sat down and taught me [like a teacher],” recalled Vajravel Sir, stalwart of the cooperative movement; *naangale poondhu kathukkitom* – we threw ourselves onto the loom and learned in the process. It was “automatic.” Indeed, children’s chore curricula on the loom was largely described and explained as ‘helping’ rather than studying with a teacher *per se*. As children carried out their assigned responsibilities, whether reeling yarn or weaving *buttas*, they observed the weaver closely all the while, imitating the weaver at every chance. They made “mistakes,” of course, but the weaver intervened strategically to “correct” their errors, accomplishing both production and pedagogy in the process. It all happened, as Murali put it, natural-*a*, quite naturally:

You were there to help with the *korvai*; that was your work. But when the weaver got up to take a break, you felt like giving it a go yourself. You learned quite naturally – you

started doing what he did. You were slow at first, of course, but you were still only trying to get your hand in. You added a few lines to the weft at first, and then a few more another time – you kept at it for a year, then two, even three or maybe four... So that's how you learned. And as you kept doing it, you got faster and better... And then, you asked someone younger who worked there to join you. I was twelve then, and an eight-year-old had joined as I once had. And I would get him to do the interlocking work while I weaved. So we would both learn. That's how we did it, we both flourished together.

Thus staged “naturally” from child-helper onwards, children learned by emulating siblings or peers and shadowing adult weavers who modeled techniques and corrected their mistakes. The chore curriculum was remarkably successful in laddering children up to reach adult levels of competency on the loom, each step, “the unstated opportunity to consider how the previous step contributes to the present one” (Lave 1988, p. 4).

The complexity and demands of each staged task on the loom, moreover, closely reflected children’s increasing biological age and growing capacity to learn and to do. If, as Rogoff (2003) centrally argues, human development can only be understood in light of the cultural practices and circumstances (pp. 3-4), then cultural “timetables” of maturity are locally-sensible interpretations of biological development. That is, chore curricula represent cultural understandings of child development ‘natural’ in context of the immediate social and physical environments. As the top official at one of the state’s Weavers’ Service Centers noted with tremendous satisfaction, no amount of external or adult pressure could *make* the child a weaver – it was the physical and mental capacity of the child that fit him or her for the task. That is, he clarified, nothing could *make* a child tall enough to weave before his/her time; the learning demands of the loom on children’s bodies fitted their developing frame even as they fitted

children to the developmental trajectories on loom. Murali, for instance, despite having learned most of the skills on the loom by fifteen, had still waited two years to take up weaving for hire: a puny teenager, he had needed to added muscle and stature before he turned weaver. Or, as Vajravel sir, put it, there was no *adi* or *idi* on the *thari* – no pushing or poking the child to move up through the various stages on the loom prematurely; it all happened natural-*a*, in tandem with the growing and maturing child. As children moved up as apprentices, they typically also moved out to work with master-weavers as thirteen- or fifteen-year-olds. From waged apprentices to full-time weavers at sixteen or so, they rotated between master-weavers, weaving progressively “heavier” – more intricately patterned – saris till they were self-sufficient to set up as independent weavers.

The neighborhood hiring system of apprenticeship

As ‘natural’ as the chore curriculum of the loom was and as mundane as ‘sitting’ or ‘going,’ it was also recognized as the more or less systematic means of the intergenerational transfer of weaving ways and weavers’ ways, as Ranga (1930) observes. For instance, he records how children’s wages as apprentices were lower: an acknowledgement, in effect, of an implicit training fee (Lancy 2010) that formally recognized the master-artisan’s dual role as producer as well as trainer (Roy 2001). Somewhat to Ranga’s surprise, weaving families themselves described the neighborhood hiring apprenticeship system as an educational institution that not only transferred weaving skills and techniques, but inculcated a particular discipline. Indeed, in the absence of the apprenticeship, parents feared that boys grew up into disorderly youth and men, predisposed to wasteful behaviors (see also Roy 2001).

Andha kalathila-irundhe appadi than, it has been so since ages past, agreed Arul, the owner of a silk retailing business on Gandhi Street in Kanchipuram; whether you had a loom in

the household or not, you went out learn in the neighborhood. In his own case some forty years ago, his master-weaver father had insisted that he spend at least six months as a hired apprentice – despite the many looms in his own household, Arul had headed out to work on a relative's loom in the neighborhood. Such 'neighborhood hiring' was the appropriate way to cap loom-based learning in Kanchipuram: boys like Arul might return to weave in their own households, but training for a period outside the household and with a master-weaver was essential 'guided participation' in widening communities of practice (Rogoff 2003; Lave & Wenger 1991). *Nanga veetila keta than-a*, as many (male) weavers laughingly responded when I asked them why they apprenticed outside their own households – as if we paid attention at home!

The apprenticeship was the means of learning to attend closely to the loom – of learning to embody the particular disciplines and dispositions that made a successful weaver. As Selvam, the young master-weaver I apprenticed with in my neighborhood, described, he had strategically sought out a "strict" master-weaver as a twelve-year old:

I began to learn at home, but if anyone at home said anything to me, I would get angry and get up [from the loom] and leave. So I felt it was better for me to learn with someone else, and my father agreed. On the master-weaver's loom, *kekaradhuku aal irrukanga* – there is someone to ask why. But at home – even if they asked you *enga da pora*, where are you going, you didn't take it seriously. That's why [you went out to learn]. By doing what they [weavers] asked, we learned more, and that's why it was better. That's how we learnt... I learned most from Damodaran-master[-weaver] – he lives round the corner, on your street, and I worked there for over two years. Condition-*a irrupar* (he had strict rules/conditions) – but [that's why] I learned all the work in two years. Just two years!

Not only did Selvam's apprenticeship enable a head-start – at seventeen, he was back in his household, weaving full-time and, by 25, he was a married master-weaver with “own house” and “own *thari*” – the “conditions” of Damodaran master-weaver were key to acquiring an embodied attentiveness, a particular *sense* of time and material on the loom.

The first lesson an apprentice learned, observed a Night School instructor admiringly, was the price of every single minute on the loom. He was talking about the late-nineties when the local administration in Kanchipuram had sought to educate children on the loom by running Night Schools in weaving neighborhoods (see chapter 4). How do you “convince” a boy or girl to spare two hours for study, he wondered aloud, when they quoted back at you that *etti paatha ettu ezhai koraiyum* – that merely “to look up [from the loom] was to lose eight counts [of weave]”? Such was the conscientiousness that resulted from having “someone to ask why.” As Murali recalled,

If you were sitting idle at the loom, the weavers would bark, why are you just sitting there – why aren’t you trying to learn to weave, now that the master [weaver] is away? That’s how you learn... Of course, you tried to learn as fast as you could, because you knew that your work translated into wages. A hundred rupees was a big deal at the time, so you really wanted to learn quickly and earn more.

A deep recognition of the economic value of time on the loom – a sense of time – was a critical condition for successful weaving futures, explained Vajravel Sir. *Thari-velai* (loom-work) was not office-*velai* or company-*velai* – there were few time strictures on the loom. See, he added, his eyes twinkling,

I'm chatting with you in the afternoon when I should be weaving; and in the evening, if a friend drops in, we might go *ur suththaradhuku* (roam about). Very soon, the sari that takes nine days to weave, takes a dozen – you have lost a third of your earnings for the month... Or you might think I'll have a drink with my friend in the evening. You think you can sleep it off, you think I can afford a few late mornings. But soon, it is hurting your income. Your family suffers.

The “freedom” of the *thari* was a two-edged sword, agreed Ravi, an independent weaver in his forties – indeed, it had brought a decline in the household fortunes of some of his friends. Our apprenticeship days were days of freedom, of *ur suththaradhu* (roaming around), he grinned; but they were also about getting used to routines – to master-weavers’ “conditions.” If weavers didn’t find a judicious balance between “freedom” and “conditions,” they were likely to fall into “bad habits” and unlikely to maintain a steady income. Yes, recalled Govind, a weaver for over thirty-five years now; it was not unusual for apprentices to miss three or four days a month. Beyond that, however, *mattam pota mariyadai poi-irum*: missing work cost you your respect (*mariyadai*). There were no cell-phones in those days for master-weavers and parents to check in with each other, but when you reached home with a lighter than usual pay-packet – so much for your *mariyadai*! Govind burst out laughing. A good apprentice, he reiterated, was one who worked regular-*a*, regularly. Indeed, he himself traced his daily *palakam* (habits) on the loom to the practices instilled by his master-weavers.

A good weaver, according to Vajravel Sir, had a “clean finishing.” Weaving itself was easy, he pooh-poohed; but what required greater attention – what set the best weavers apart – was how clean-*a* (cleanly) the sari was finished. “Anyone could learn to weave,” he added, “even you. But your skill would be only at the ‘top-level’ (at the surface-level). The *malligai* (trader)

would take one look at your sari and know it was the work of a rookie.” As the author of the 1961 Census of India (Census Commission of India 1963) wrote of Kanchipuram’s weavers, the “magic touch” of a skilled weaver was evident, not only to the professional appraiser and discriminating wearer of silk sarees, but even to the “untrained eye.” The work of the novice, on the other hand, did not reveal “the perfection of a skilled craftsman. The texture of the sari was not smooth and at the conjunction of the border and the body of the saree, I noticed ragged edges” (pp. 23, 4). To produce the smooth or clean ‘finishing’ of the skilled weaver required an embodied *sense* of the silk and *zari* thread – a feel for the tension of the weft on the loom or the force with which the sley was pulled – developed over years of plying the yarn. Indeed, it was such finely calibrated awareness, judged by practiced hands – *kai-thiramai* (hand-skill; handiwork) as Govind termed it – that made the hand-woven *kanjeevaram* superior to the silk produced on powerlooms. “Feel it,” he said, tracing his fingers on the sari he had just “cut” from the loom; “feel how soft it is, its ‘smoothness.’ If you compromise on the finishing of the sari, you might as well let the machines take over the *thari*.”

Clean finishing required “repair[ing]” of any “faults” in the sari-weave, as Nathan, one of my trainers, put it. Weavers, as I had often watched in my neighborhood, spent a significant part of their day on the loom locating and fixing errors. Trailing warp threads for instance, snapped by a too-strong tug on the sley, had to be carefully twisted or pieced back in place to prevent the appearance of tell-tale gaps in the sari; and the knotting of broken strands together required care so as to not detract from the smooth sheen of *kanjeevaram* silk. Anyone could learn to weave quickly, they explained, but it was the *thiramai* (skill) of a weaver, born of long experience, to recognize and correct every “fault” and ensure a clean finishing. In this regard, Murali pointed out, child apprentices had an advantage: having worked for a master-weaver from the “lowest

level,” they were well-acquainted with the smallest tasks on the loom – the time-consuming task of repairing faults, in particular. Their work, he argued, was *suththam* (clean) therefore. In his own case, he added proudly,

I had the best ‘finishing’ at the master-weaver’s. Everyone said my finishing was good, my sari was good. For the others, some parts of the sari would be bunched up or uneven, but not my saris. My finishing was ‘clean,’ and my sari was sharp and bright like a knife. It meant I would take a day or two more to complete a sari, but the sari I wove was good. Even my older brother would ask me how I learned to do it. It was because of my *rasikga thanmai* (sense of appreciation), I told him.

The clean finishing of the sari not only reflected the weaver’s appreciation for and skill on the loom, it maintained the economic value of the silk and *zari* of the *kanjeevaram*. ‘Faults’ and defects not only detracted from the sari’s ‘clean finishing,’ they devalued it – they might even result in a “return” from the *malligai*, Selvam warned, making a complete loss. Master-weavers, therefore, kept a close watch on their apprentices. As Vajravel sir explained, when the apprentice was learning, “mistakes” were acceptable, to be recognized and rectified – even subsidized – by the master-weaver. Indeed, that was one of the advantages of the apprenticeship: punishment for mistakes was largely tokenistic, Govind pointed out, a matter of losing *mariyadai* (respect) rather than making full compensation. “It’s better,” said Mahesh, a 27-year old weaver, “if master-weavers are ‘strict’ about mistakes. Everyone suffers for it – from the customer to the *malligai* and the owner or weaver who bears the costs. If the sari is a ‘return’ because there was a ‘fault,’ everyone is hurt, even though the fault was the apprentice’s.” A weaver who is careless with the silk is a lost case, Govind reiterated. It was an important for the apprentice to learn, therefore, that if he was inattentive to the materials he was lost as a weaver – even a small mistake meant

that the sari was marked down by two or three hundred rupees. Indeed, Selvam, shuddered at the very thought of a fault. As much as he swore he loved weaving – every little task, “top to bottom” – the *bayam* (fear) of an irreparable “fault” in the sari was real. Back in his apprenticeship days, he confessed, he had accidentally – careless-*a* – cut off a fistful of warp yarn on the loom. The damage was beyond repair – the sari had cost nearly ten thousand rupees and it was all on his head! The master-weaver had been livid: *oru thattu thattunaru paaru*, Selvam said, recalling the thwack he had received to the side of his head. What had really stung, though, was having a part of his apprentice-wages held back as punishment for months. No wonder, he sighed, I still remember.

The “practicals” of the loom

A good apprentice, according to Govind, was someone of “regular” habits – someone with a sense of time that protected the weaver from abusing the autonomy of the loom-space; a good weaver, Vajravel sir had said, was someone with a “clean finishing” – someone with enough sense of (or feel for) the material to protect it from careless abuse and damage. If it was time-sense that sustained regular work habits on the loom, keeping the owner-weaver in business, then it was a bodily awareness of the affordances of silk that produced the “magic touch” of the skilled weaver. Yet, as Murali had observed, an appropriate appreciation or feel for the *thari* materials was time-consuming: while his finishing was the best among his fellow apprentices, he was also slower, taking two days or so more per sari produced. The alliterative axiom of *etti paatha ettu ezhai koraiyum* – that a mere glance up from the loom cost the apprentice eight lines of the weave – was at loggerheads with the attentive care it took to repair every fault and finish the sari cleanly. Balancing the conflicting imperatives of time-sense and material-sense – of attending to time while attending to the materials – was an embodied

calculation, a sensed judgement. Not so much a volitional undertaking, thought preceding action or theory applied in practice, but a performed theory and a sensed knowledge routinized in the repeated interactions between weaver and loom: a sense of appreciation – *rasikga thanmai*, as Murali put it – for the loom and its materials, developed in the repeated motions and processes of picking, shedding, beating, preparation and finishing the produced the *kanjeevaram*.

It was this embodied sense of appreciation that Nathan, the chief trainer at the Weavers' Service Center in Kanchipuram, was gesturing towards when he told me he could easily teach me the “theory” of weaving, no problem; but the “practicals”? That was a matter of years – perhaps as many as eight years, he added for emphasis. The ‘practicals’ of weaving, of balancing timely production with clean finishing, of marrying time-sense and material-sense, was embodied, experiential knowledge – not the kind, as Nathan pointed out, that one could teach or learn in a “class” on weaving, but requiring years of imitative practice on the loom. One did not learn to weave as become a weaver on the loom with the appropriate bodily repertoires that expressed a sense of appreciation for timely habits and valued materials on the loom.

Nathan was one of the trainers – Chandran, the other – that I worked with at the Weavers' Service Center in Kanchipuram, in an attempt to learn to weave. Steeped in the technocrat-ese of handloom policy as well as the local vernacular of Kanchipuram's looms, they had nearly eighty years of experience as weavers between the two of them: a vanishing breed of “expert-level” weavers, as the officials upstairs had described them, who held the “full knowledge” of the loom, from its wooden construction to its computer-generated design-cards. I was very fortunate, indeed, to apprentice with them. Of course, prior to joining them at the Center, I had done my fair share of spinning and reeling silk yarn over the last year – my neighbor Gagini joked that I was becoming good enough that she might consider paying me for it. I had also worked

alongside Selvam's weavers for a little under a month, assisting them with weaving the *buttas* and border of the one *korvai* sari loom he operated. It was time now, I felt, to 'sit on the loom' and give weaving a shot; and had enrolled at the Center.

I remember the bright October sun, streaming in diffusely through the thick glass windows, as I diffidently waited by one of the four frame-looms on the Center's ground floor: the one on the left with the undyed silk yarn and no *zari* that Nathan had made ready – had sized and pieced the warp – for me over the last two days. I was much too inexperienced to be trusted with more expensive yarn or a more "fancy" pattern, he told me; my enthusiasm did not yet translate into a trustworthy appreciation for the materials. Sitting next to Nathan at a decorous distance – the Center was roomier than the average living room in a weavers' neighborhood – I watched him weave; in particular, the basic weaving motions of picking, shedding and beating on the loom. That was the goal: to learn to pick, shed and beat; not, as Nathan made clear, to learn to weave or become a weaver, but to simply familiarize myself with the cardinal weaving motions – to learn the three R's of the loom, as it were. 'Shedding' was the first step, initiated by pressing on the treadle and pulling on the harness: it pulled the warp threads apart into two halves, creating the tunnel-like 'shed' into which the shuttle was thrown. 'Picking' or throwing the shuttle across the warp, was the harder step: not only did the shuttle have to make it across 48 inches of the warp without getting caught in the shed or dislodging the bobbin inside, it needed to be synchronized with the weaver's arm moving to meet it at the other end. Back and forth, back and forth, I practiced with the shuttle, each throw laying down a line of yarn – one pick – that was then locked in place by releasing the shed, and then battened against the growing fell of cloth by 'beating.' The beating motion marked the completion of one count or *ezhai*, as the reed-sley was pulled forward to press the newly picked strand flush against the woven fabric.

Perhaps it was the hours I had watched weavers in my neighborhood, but the shedding-picking-beating sequence on the loom was not difficult to replicate. Much like riding a bike, I thought; you got on the loom and then just got on with it, without needing to mentally rehearse the sequence each time. Unlike the smooth and efficient rhythm of experienced weavers, however, my movements were forced and jerky, more stop-and-go than Nathan's even, continuous motion. My constant shifting from side to side on the loom as I tried keeping pace with the shuttle was as ungainly as it was inefficient. Worse, pressing down too hard, I broke the treadle on the very first day; the loom, forced to idle till it was fixed. It would take months, Nathan cautioned, before my body had acquired a 'feel' for the loom, for the right amount of pressure to exert on the sley and treadle, to weave without snapping the warp thread or producing an uneven or loose weave. It was the end of the week before I figured out the flick of the wrist – the kinaesthetic quirk – that imparted the right velocity to the shuttle, to send it gliding across the warp like a flat rock skipping over the water, not losing steam midway or getting stuck in the warp. It was another week before I could repeat this wrist action with any consistency.

On day three, I had managed to weave about four inches over the course of the morning. (Weavers, on average, wove at least half a yard a day.) As I watched the fell of the sari grow, line upon painstaking line, slowly coiling around the wooden roller as the fabric was 'taken-up,' I was mesmerized, driven to pick another strand, weave another inch, and then yet another. Perhaps I was feeling the *arvam* that weavers spoke of when I asked them to list the attributes of a good apprentice. No special talent or innate ability was called for, weavers assured me, and certainly no *padippu thiramai* (academic skill), some of them had specifically noted. It was *arvam* (keenness; desire) or "interest" of child apprentices that drove them on to learn. *Arvam*, the "motivation of the child," as Lancy (2012a) describes, is a central principle of chore

curricula, propelling the child to progress as a response to his/her current levels of achievement.

As Bharghav, Ravi's older brother, recalled, Ravi was nine or ten years of age when he had developed

an 'interest' in the looms. He was reeling thread at home, and when you are doing that, you have an *arvam* for twisting the yarn into three or four ply yarn. When you watch others doing it, you have an 'interest' as well: you are working with a single-ply thread, and now you want to try twisting three strands, then four, and so on. Soon you are helping with the border. And while you are doing that, you keep looking at the pedal, and you feel a longing to try it. So one day, you give it a go. Of course, his legs wouldn't reach the pedal properly, but he kept trying.

Arvam on the loom was the impetus to keep at it: the apprentice responded to the tangible form of production – the woven fabric, as in my case – seeking to progress to the next material signpost; rather like the obsessive word counting of the dissertation-writer, only more potently substantial. But just as I was primed for a long session at the loom, determined to give my *arvam* full expression, Nathan called a halt: immediate "repair" was required he said, pointing to the large handful of strands that dangled loose from the warp. Snapped off by my over-enthusiastic efforts with the sley – I was still far from acquiring a sense for the silk – the strands needed to be 'pieced.' Dexterously 'twisting' each strand together with a fresh length of silk thread, Nathan knotted them, one by one, till every loose end was tied up, literally. "Any master-weaver worth his salt ensured that the apprentice fixed faults at the earliest," Nathan said, asking me to follow his lead.

Brought to an abrupt halt just as I had built up a head of steam on the loom, fixing "faults" was frustratingly difficult; locating the correct heald, in particular, before the cut ends

were rethreaded through it, was laborious and time-consuming. “*Porumai* (patience),” Nathan remarked, “while an unglamorous virtue in the current ‘fast-food *kalam* (times),’ was still essential on the loom.” As the repairs took the best part of ninety minutes, I had plenty of time to reflect on the discipline that ‘clean finishing’ called for: not only an embodied awareness that alerted the weaver to a cut strand, but the quotidian regimen of stepping off the loom to pore over the warp mid-weave, and the feel for silk yarn that facilitated deft knotting, twisting and rethreading. Not only had my *arvam* cooled off, left to myself, I would have taken off for a break – for a bit of *ur suththaradhu*, perhaps. Above all, I was uneasily aware of the bodily tension I felt between the necessarily slow cleaning of up faults and the pacey rhythms of the shedding-picking-beating motion. The apprenticeship on the loom, I realized, was the long practice of holding such bodily tension till the apprentice had developed a *sense* of the loom – an appreciation for or attentiveness to the routines and time demands of weaving, on the one hand, and the material affordances of silk and *zari* yarn, on the other. Such *sense* – embodied knowledge – was less a mental focusing on timeliness and patience, and more the bodily repertoires of sitting on the loom and of learning a feel for the silk, as evidenced by the way – the work-routines and clean finishing – in which the apprentice carried out weaving (see Clarke & Winch 2004).

Rather like Bourdieu’s (1977) ‘sense of the game’ or ‘feel for the game,’ apprentices’ sense of the loom – their sense of time and of material on the loom – reflected their acquisition of the skills, habits and attitudes – the *habitus* – of the master-weaver. “What is ‘learned by body’ is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is (Bourdieu 1990, p. 73) – a weaver, ‘condition’-ed by the disciplines and routines of master-weavers. ‘Learning by body’ is not, however, merely ‘practice without theory,’ as

apprenticeships or vocational training and other kinds of embodied learning are perceived, often dismissively, in contrast to formal academic contexts and propositional or discursive knowledge. In emphasizing the “practicals” of weaving, Nathan was, in fact, initiating me, the apprentice, into the ‘discovery’ of the competing principles that produced the artisanal way of life in Kanchipuram’s weaving neighborhoods. On the one hand, the imperative of an occupational group for productivity, reflected in the apprentice’s sense of time and *arvam*, ‘condition’-ed in the master-weaver’s loom-space. On the other hand, the craft imperative of an artisanal group that valorized time-consuming ‘clean finishing’ and required a ‘feel’ for the materials on the loom. These principles – theoretical propositions, if you will – were not explicitly taught, to be then consciously entertained in the apprentice’s mind and guide his/her work; the child apprentice discovered these principles in performing imitative work in the company of peers and master-weavers on the loom. Paraphrasing Ingold (2000), the apprentice engaged on the loom underwent an ‘education of attention’: in attending to the movements of others, the apprentice learned to attend to time and materials on the loom. With the apprentice’s body thus disposed or oriented to a particular attentiveness (*rasikga thanmai*), determinations of balancing time-sense and material-feel were the ongoing and embodied “practicals” of weaving.

The knowing or sensing body of the apprentice, however, as Downey (2010) argues, is not the “bloodless, nerveless abstract ‘body’” of practice theories of socialization/enculturation, but a body that experiences a transformation of muscle as well as mind – a transformation of its very organic architecture (p. S34). When such a body experiences a change in the physical and social worlds in which it acts and acts upon – for instance, as in a shift from looms to school classrooms – there is, I suggest, real *pain*, as the animated body in practice on the loom is required to engage in the formal disciplines of “sitting in one place with a book in hand” (see

chapter 5). Such pain is erased or even moralized in the modern distinction between the dimensions of work and creative thought: between, for instance, Hannah Arendt's *Animal laborans* and *Homo faber*. As Sennett (2008) describes, while the former is an amoral drudge condemned to routine, the latter is perceived as harboring a higher way of life in which we stop producing and start discussing and judging together (p. 7). Such distinctions are not only often misguided in their application as, for instance, to justify the labor hierarchies assumed in human capital theory to valorize the modern industrial subject over the 'traditional' craftsman, they are inadequate in describing the cultural-material relations that constitute the feeling, sensing and knowing weaver and his/her artisanal work on the loom. To paraphrase Sennet (2008), the weaver-artisan thought with his/her materials; his/her technique not only expressing the desire of doing something well – of producing a 'clean finishing' – but the means of "conducting a particular way of life", marked by specific arrangements of bodily practices and sustained habits, of skill, commitment and judgment (pp. 8-11).

The socioeconomic context of apprenticeships

With the recent turn in anthropological theory toward bodily practice, there is perhaps more to be said about apprenticeships, drawing on disciplines as wide as "human biology, functional morphology, neurosciences, cognitive and neuropsychology, that specifically study the human body, its malleability, and the material dimensions of learning" (Downey 2010, p. S35). These disciplinary approaches are not – as far as I can tell – the ready vernacular of Kanchipuram's weavers, however. What weavers in my neighborhood, Govind for instance, were more apt to say was that in "setting the child on the loom you settled him for life."

In the days of flourishing cooperatives and the dramatic 'development' of weavers, the *thari* represented a secured future and a sumptuous inheritance. In those days, said Govind, no

one in Kanchipuram considered any alternative [to the loom]; why would they, he challenged, especially when there was no *kattayam* (no [legal] pressure) for schooling. Even those who had finished secondary schooling, Vajravel Sir, for example, had opted for the loom over waiting for a “government job” to materialize. Indeed, as late as 1996, when nine-year-old Chella was cycling from the SC communities in Mel-Kadirpur to apprentice in my neighborhood, no one took children’s schooling “serious-*a*.” The looms were the obvious means of advancement. As Ravi, a forty-year old weaver explained, once children had finished class V – once they could read and write – it was “enough;” if children then dropped out and headed to the loom, their parents did not fuss. Admittedly, weavers were not the most educated people in Kanchipuram; but they did have “prestige” as owners, they married well, and enjoyed fat bonuses that translated into *madi veedu* (see chapter 1).

If children in Kanchipuram’s silk-weaving households were born into such loom-based trajectories to autonomous development, it was the neighborhood hiring system of apprenticeships that opened up these trajectories to the children of non-silk-weaving households. In the neighborhood I lived in, in particular, the gradual shift of the primarily cotton-weaving *Sengundar* – in a trickle over the 19th century, before the floodgates opened in the latter half of the 20th century – was primarily enabled by children apprenticing with master-weavers on silk- looms. The early pioneers, by some accounts, were the cotton trading families who, in marketing their wares in weaving centers like Arni and Kumbakonam in the south, decided to diversify their portfolio to include silk. Ravi, for instance, recalled his father talking about a group of weavers who, in his boyhood days, had arrived from Arni to oversee the setting up of a few silk- looms in the neighborhood. It was likely – in keeping with Ranga’s (1930) account, at any rate – that boys in the neighbor had apprenticed with weavers in Arni or Kumbakonam. By midcentury

however, children – Govind, for example – began walking over to the silk-weaving neighborhoods in town, to learn with the *Saliyar* and *Saurashtrian* weavers in Vishnu Kanchi and Chinna Kanchipuram. It was a three-kilometer walk, Govind recalled distastefully, especially when you had contracted polio as a young child. “But we were the first,” he was proud. “You can ask anyone. We were the first to sit on the silk-*thari* on this street.” The daily trudge with his older brother, hard as it was, also represented social mobility: in walking across town to learn – to sit on the silk-loom – children were also moving up from cotton-weaving into more lucrative silk-weaving.

Govind was describing his childhood in the 1960’s. There was no “child labor” in those days, he said, because there were no “rules” about children, whether they could work on the looms or not. (A comment that strikingly captured the ‘invention of child labor’ in Kanchipuram by state law and policy.) In fact, the general rule in Kanchipuram at the time was that all children learned a trade by working – and if Govind and his brother had had the opportunity to learn to weave the *kanjeevaram*, that was their good fortune. By the 1970’s and 80’s, as households like Govind’s set up their own silk-looms, these opportunities to learn became increasingly available in the neighborhood itself; children no longer walked into town to learn, they apprenticed on “local” looms, instead, replicating the ‘neighborhood hiring’ system. The expansion of silk looms in the neighborhood was rapid and, by 1985, Ravi reckoned, pretty much every household had a silk-loom.

The proliferation of silk-looms across the neighborhood proved especially significant for girls in the area. In the interlocked domestic and occupational cycles that (re)produced the weaving household in Kanchipuram’s neighborhoods, women, of course, had always been a part of the loom-space: not only carrying out the so-called ‘supplementary’ activities that were, in

fact, essential to production, but as weavers in their own right, balancing their child bearing and rearing responsibilities with their productive roles on the loom. As Parvathi, Selvam's wife, recalled, it was her mother on the loom who had brought her up and married her off. "She was the one who did everything for me. I tell you the truth, when we were children, we struggled to eat as a family. After my father left us, it was my mother who weaved and kept us alive and even got us married." The *kanjeevaram* had no gender, said Tamilselvi – it did not care if it was a man or a woman who sat on the loom. Even so, female weavers were subject to the spatial restrictions that expressed gender relations in Kanchipuram: as Arterburn (1982) wrote of Kanchipuram in the 1970's, pubescent girls did not venture outside the home to work (or indeed, attend school), and their productive roles were confined to household-spaces. Girls learned to weave within the household, or at most, in the proximal spaces of their immediate neighbors: the covered corridors that connected weavers' row-houses were seen as an extension of the interior spaces of the household. "Our girls in our neighborhood were also good weavers," granted Vajravel Sir; "they had their own looms in the household – we did not send them out to weave." Thus, while Arul and his boyish compatriots were required to participate in the neighborhood hiring system of apprenticeships and headed *out* to work for master-weavers, their sisters stayed *in* household-spaces for their "safety."

The opposition of proximal/interior loom-spaces and the world outside – *veli ulagam* – was 'good to think gender,' as Levi-Strauss might have said; the social imaginaries of 'danger' and 'safety' – the English words had passed into the vernacular – were expressed in the spatial restrictions that bounded girlhood in Kanchipuram's of weaving neighborhoods. On their family-owned looms in the interior spaces of their households, girls not only produced the ungendered *kanjeevaram*, they were themselves produced as appropriately "safe" female weavers, ready for

“good marriages” into other weaving households. Unlike girls in the longstanding silk-weaving neighborhoods of Vishnu Kanchi and Chinna Kanchipuram, there were no family-owned silk-looms that afforded girls in cotton-weaving or migrant households the same opportunity to participate in *kanjeevaram* production. With the rapid expansion of silk-looms across Kanchipuram in the 1980’s, however, girls began to move off their cotton-looms and move out of their households, to learn (and earn) on silk-looms in the neighborhood. While “safety” continued to be central to girlhood in Kanchipuram, the imperatives for subsistence and ‘development’ had loosed spatial restrictions to redraw girlish geographies to include the interior spaces of looms in the near neighborhood. One of the first girl apprentices on the street where I lived was my neighbor Gamini: nearly forty now, she had started in the 1980’s as an eight-year old, when her father had apprenticed her with an acquaintance of his. Every day for the next ten years, she had walked the three hundred meters – swiftly and silently – between her cotton-weaving household and the master-weaver’s silk-looms at the head of the street; till, at eighteen, she had married into a silk-weaving family herself and set up her own loom (also on the same street). A weaver to this day, Gamini had since overtaken her husband, was in fact the main bread-winner of the family. Indeed, over the 1980s and 90’s, girls had not only entered the loom-space, they were the sought-after apprentices in the neighborhood. As Selvam would often say in praise of his female weavers, “girls *than best*” (it was girls who were the best): nine out of ten boys on the loom were unreliable – “rowdies” in the making, he fumed – but nine out of ten girls on the loom were “correct.” They showed up at the loom correct-*a*, worked on the loom correct-*a*, leaving correct-*a*, only when it was time to go home.

The expansion of the looms had extended household-bound girlhood to include the neighborhood, though the social ‘danger’ of non-household spaces persisted, cloistering girls

(unlike boys) into the interior loom-spaces of home and work. Nevertheless, like their boyish counterparts, girls were wage-earning apprentices in their own right now; not only looking forward to relative autonomy and productivity as silk-weavers in the future, but with the means of putting together dowries that translated into the economic security of a “good marriage.” The expansion of silk-looms also made loom-based development trajectories available to children outside the neighborhood: children from the outlying villages to the south, Mel and Keel Kadirpur, for example, that were settled by lower-caste and schedule caste (SC) communities engaged in brick-making and agricultural labor. As Murali recalled, “at that time, everyone joined the *thari*. The SC came, the *Vanniars* came, the barber-castes came – everyone. ‘Child labor’ was ‘in demand’ on the silk-*thari* – the ‘owner’ didn’t care who you were.” Remesh (2001), who surveyed 165 weavers in one of the weaving neighborhoods of Kanchipuram in 2000, found that 52 per cent of them belonged to Most Backward Castes (MBC) and Scheduled Castes, 40.6 to Backward Castes (BC) and 7.4, Forward Castes (FC) (p. 26).

Arul, my silk retailer acquaintance on Gandhi Road, offered a stylized account of the entry of the lower-castes into the loom-space:

One of the boys from an SC family comes into town and watches the looms and sees the weavers doing well and his ‘interest’ is stirred. So he goes to work for a master-weaver in your neighborhood and learns there; and when he has finished learning, he takes the *thari* to his own neighborhood. He sets up a loom and starts to weave with his family’s help, and soon, the household ‘develops’ and sets others thinking. Other boys in the neighborhood begin to say, why should he be the only one? Why don’t we also learn how to weave? Their elders start saying to them, why should that boy be the only one who learned this work in Kanchipuram – why should that family be the only one that

‘develops’? They are doing well, so why don’t you learn also? Instead of simply roaming around, why don’t you go to Kanchipuram and learn?

Indeed, Chandran, Gopi, Chelliah (see chapter 1), Chitra and Raghul had similar stories to tell. Chandran and Raghul had set up their ‘own loom’ in their households in Mel and Keel Kadirpur, respectively; though the recent downturn on the looms post-2003 had hit them hard. Indeed, many of their compatriots were turning back to brick-making when I met them in 2012, the boom in construction activity coinciding with the dark cloud over the looms. Chelliah, for instance, a hired weaver on my street, was considering following his friends into masonry. For Gopi and Chitra, marriage had cemented their place as weavers: Gopi had married into a *Sengundar* family of weavers and set up home and loom in the *thope* with his wife, while Chitra assisted her master-weaver husband in running their looms in their pink *madi veedu* at the entrance of Keel Kadirpur. Arul himself had facilitated such trajectories. His *Vellala Mudaliar* family owned land just outside Kanchipuram; and when the farmers there saw Kanchipuram’s prosperity, they were desirous for their children to weave. “This was in 1982 or 83,” he recalled. Soon, their children began apprenticing in Arul’s household or with the weavers attached to their retailing operations; and, starting in 1986, thirty to forty looms had sprung up in the area. At this time, looms began to dot Kuruvimalai to the north as well, with children from nomadic *kuruvi-karrar* groups apprenticing in the traditional weaving neighborhoods in Kanchipuram town where Vajravel Sir, for instance, lived. Recalling their “interest” and skill with great pleasure, he argued that as traditional *paasi-mani karrar* (beaders) they were well-suited to loom-work.

It was childhood that was the site of entry into the loom-space and into loom-based trajectories of development – trajectories to ‘own looms,’ good marriages, and *madi veedu*; not only for traditional weaving households but, increasingly for new entrants from

socioeconomically marginalized households and communities. Whether children of cotton-weavers, of agricultural migrants pressured off their lands, of schedule caste (SC) families at the bottom of social hierarchies in India, and even tribal *kuruvi-karrar* and *koravar* hunter-gatherer families: there was room for them in the loom-space, if they desired, and even a path-way to the autonomous development that marked Kanchipuram's weavers. "We needed them," admitted the elderly master-weaver who lived at the far end of my street.

All the owners here were short of helpers, so if a boy or girl wanted to learn, no one asked what caste they were, if they were 'colony *pasanga*' (colony children, referring to the 'colonies' in the outskirts of Kanchipuram, where SC communities had settled). Once you are here in this place [pointing to the looms he owned] everyone is the 'same.' Owner, weaver, or helper. All that is required is you show up in the morning, ready to throw the shuttle. That's all.

"Of course, we knew their caste," interjected his wife. "The men would never think of coming inside. If they wanted water, they asked from the yard. Not the children, of course. They were always coming inside to watch TV when they were working here – children have no caste."

If the *kanjeevaram* had no gender, as Tamilselvi said, then childhood was also casteless on the loom. High-flown rhetoric did not necessarily translate into daily life in Kanchipuram: girls continued to practice *purdah* by preferring interior spaces relatively closed off from the outside world of streets and strangers while inter-caste marriages among weavers nearly always caused rifts in families – at least, the axiom went, until the first child was born. Even so, to paraphrase Kannan (see chapter 1), for a girl or a lower-caste child to start as 'child labor' was to then become an owner-weaver; and, if not a 'top-most owner,' then a *china* (small) owner, relatively autonomous and self-sufficient in providing for the needs of his/her family. It was the

productive/pedagogical practices of childhood on the loom that facilitated diversity in the loom-space and the development of diverse marginal groups. There was no Kalathi Mudaliar or Chinnasamy Nalli to point to among SC weavers, yet, and female weavers, while free to organize their loom-work, were not necessarily *rajah* and *mantri*, trammelled as they were by chores and child-rearing responsibilities. On the other hand, to quote Tamilselvi again, they were, none of them, *adimai* (slaves) to anybody either.

Earning while learning on the loom

Apprenticeships were the pedagogical means for futures as owner-weavers; but childhood on the loom was not only a means to particular futures, it was economically significant for their households in the present. While children commanded modest wages, their earnings could mean the difference between food on the table and going to bed hungry. “My first monthly ‘salary’ was five rupees,” Govind laughed. “Can you imagine that? Five rupees! That may not seem like much to you, but you have to remember, that was over fifty years ago when rice was two *padi*^{32a} a rupee!” When it was slow going on the household cotton-loom, it was Govind and his brother who had paid for rice and oil. On a sliding-scale from dire subsistence concerns to purely enculturation on the loom, most households in Kanchipuram, Murali reckoned, fell somewhere in the middle: for longer-standing silk-weaving households, relatively less pressed for income, the split was seventy-five to twenty-five, weighted towards artisanal ways of life. For cotton-weavers, economic migrants and socioeconomically marginalized groups, on the other hand, the scale went the other way, tipping towards immediate subsistence needs. As Ravi described,

^{32a}A measure equivalent to about two kilos.

I dropped out after Class 4, because I knew the *soolnalai* (circumstances) of the family at that time... Mother wanted me to go to school; we'll manage somehow, she used to say. Father didn't say anything, he was ill then. Father's family had ran our *lungi-thari* (cotton *lungi* loom) business to the ground, and we were grappling with the losses. My brothers and I, we knew things were bad. We were right there, in the middle of it, and we saw for ourselves what was going on. We didn't need our parents to tell us how bad our *soolnalai* were. Some days, dinner was delayed because there was nothing to cook at home. We waited for father to bring groceries home in the evening after he had sold a *lungi* or two. And by the time Mother had cooked, we would be asleep already. So when we saw all that, we thought, we could work and earn some money ourselves, to help us get out of our *soolnalai*. And one by one, we dropped out and headed to work on the silk-*thari*. They were difficult financial *soolnalai* and school didn't help. So we dropped out. Of course, we didn't like going to school either [grinning].

Murali and his siblings, near contemporaries of Ravi, had a similar story to tell. With four sons and two daughters to support, their cotton-weaver father had thought that their chances of survival were better in Kanchipuram than in the small town of Dusi where they lived. As Sushila, Murali's older sister, recalled, they had heard that children were "wanted" on the silk-*thari*: "We thought that if all the children found work, then our income would help the family." The oldest siblings were the first to join the looms, with Murali following them after finishing class 2. As he recounted,

We were all in school in our native village, but the *soolnalai* were very difficult for us there. So that's why we moved here. At that time, there was always a need for children on the silk-*thari*. So when we heard that an 'owner' nearby was offering two thousand

rupees as ‘advance,’ my father and I went there immediately. We had heard that he was a good ‘owner.’ I think if I had gone to school, I would have become a *peria-aal* (a big man), but my father thought that I could do well on the loom. So we started working, all of us. For different owners. That was the way we could all get an ‘advance.’ I got two thousand rupees – *akka* (elder sister) got four thousand, because she knew more of the work. In those days, that’s how we managed, with the ‘advance.’ That’s how we paid the deposit for the house we were living in.

The ‘advance,’ according to Chicherov (1971), was the sum that master-weavers or traders gave – advanced – their weavers to buy raw materials or as working capital. Often narrated as a means of perpetuating the dependence of weavers – their indebtedness, even – to colonial and domestic traders (Arterburn 1982), it was also, as Roy (2001) describes, a means of enticing the weaver in a competitive market. The system of advances “represented an exchange of privileges” between weaver and master-weaver: a steady supply of labor in exchange for banking services and a line of interest-free credit (pp. 24, 25). A longstanding labor institution on Kanchipuram’s silk-loods, master-weavers were obligated to proffer by hired weavers an advance or *baki* (balance), to be gradually paid off over the weaver’s period of service. When the weaver moved to another master-weaver, the *baki* was often partially written off, with the rest transferred to the new employer.

Children, as workers on the loom, had as much right to advances from master-weavers as their seniors. “We thought,” said Murali, “why should we children work for any less on the loom?” More importantly, the advance a ready – often, only – means of responding to household shocks. As Govind described,

Even in our days [in the sixties], even when we were ‘child labor’, we took the ‘advance,’ that was the practice. It was only fifty rupees, but still. If the wages were ten rupees, then the advance was thirty or fifty rupees, and it would be gradually deducted from our wages, maybe two rupees at a time. If there was a ‘function’ at home or maybe there was a ‘death’ in the family or you fell ill and couldn’t work for ten days, then you asked for more. There are always emergencies in the family, that’s life. So there was always some *baki* also. Among our families, who can say they are living comfortably and they don’t require help? So we needed the advance to tide us and our families over.

With emergencies the patchy fabric of mundane life in the neighborhood, children’s line of credit with the master-weaver was a key coping strategy for households; in particular, for the socioeconomically marginalized households newly entering the loom-space, where parents were unlikely to be able to raise resources themselves.

In Malathi’s case, when her father fell ill and couldn’t weave for months – he was very “slow” in recovering, she snorted – it was the last straw. Their *soolnalai* (circumstances) were desperate, as the rent added up and the threat of eviction loomed. Malathi quit school to work full-time: “We really needed money for the rent,” she said, “the thousand rupees that I got as advance, that’s what kept us off the streets and with a roof over our heads.” For Shanthi, also seventeen, it was the literal roof above her that had been the problem. It was *rhomba kashtam* (very difficult/hard; hardship) for us, she said: there were five mouths to feed and their grandfather started going blind and needed treatment just as their roof had started to crack. “Every day we were worrying about dinner or if it would rain that night,” her younger sister, Rekha, groaned at the memory. “So when Shanthi offered to drop out and work on the looms,” interjected their mother, “the family said, yes, go. She was only ten then, but at that time, even

two or three hundred rupees was a big deal for us.” It was about ten years ago that Poonga’s mother had taken ill, requiring hospitalization. “For months, it was as if she was demon-possessed,” Poonga shuddered, remembering. She had been eight years old then – but there was nothing to be done but head out to work on the looms as her sisters had done. Their wages had put food on the table in those months, and it was their advance that had paid the hospital bill. “It was a difficult time for us,” she recalled with a sigh, “as father’s loom stood idle and mother’s income was gone.” The owners had helped during that period. Not “helped” precisely, Poonga corrected herself, but the master-weavers had increased their *baki*: “We took additional amounts, *konjum konjum-a* (little by little) whenever we needed it.” As Shanthi’s mother had said over and over, “if the girls hadn’t started working, then only God could have saved us.”

“If I hadn’t started working on the *thari*,” Ravi mused, “I would have been sent off with my brothers to live with our grandparents or some ‘rich peoples’ – that’s what families like ours did when there was *kashtam* (hardship).” As Malathi’s mother explained:

When families like ours are in *kashtam*, we can’t provide for the children – they must work. And if they cannot work, then they will need to join a ‘hostel’ or be sent to live with a relative who was better-off. No family wanted to send their children to a hostel, we wanted to look after the children ourselves. But when there was *kashtam*, we needed children’s help get through it and Malathi went to the looms to work. If that hadn’t worked out... [Sighing] I would have begged my mother’s relatives to take the children in and sent them off to our *ur* (native village).

The loom was pedagogy, yes: the means of a foothold in the silk-weaving industry and the relative economic security it represented. But the loom was also an immediate intervention in the present *soolanali* (circumstances) of disadvantaged households: from keeping the family together

to ensuring a roof over their head and getting medical treatment. The ‘advance,’ in particular, functioned as a ready system of social credit in the neighborhood – whereas the welfare state was distant – for child apprentices and their families to claim as a matter of course, if not right.

The *baki* was always in “rotation” for us, observed Hari, describing his *kudumba soolnalai* (family circumstances). Typically, households like his had started out in the red: they had debts to pay off, either in their *ur* (‘native-place’) or newly acquired in Kanchipuram as they settled in. And it was only by ‘rotating’ the advance that children got on the loom that their families stayed afloat. Consequently, it was years before the advance was repaid – it was constantly in ‘rotation’ – with repayment typically commencing when children began weaving full-time at sixteen years or so and their wages went up. For instance, it had taken Murali eleven years – eight as an apprentice, before he turned weaver – to settle the *baki*. Eleven years in which the *baki* had grown from two thousand rupees to ten. But also eleven years over which he and his siblings had not only subsisted and survived, but had bought the very house they had first rented where they had started setting up their *sondha thari*. From Murali’s ‘advance’ that contributed to the rent deposit to “own house” and “own looms: it was this dramatic trajectory to ownership and development that leavened the years of work on the loom, including the years of working off the advance. “Six months on my own loom,” a smug Murali recalled, “and the *baki* was all accounted for” – he had repaid six thousand rupees and the owner had written off the rest. Yes, Hari admitted, the *baki* was also a *kashtam* (hardship) of sorts; but, he added, *kashtam ishtam-a eduthukanum*. That is, you took the hardship in the light of the *ishtam* (chosen pleasure) of the household achieving a “level” – achieving a certain status, but also achieving the leveling off or balancing of household debt.

Economists have demonstrated a link between (lack of) access to credit and children's work, particularly in the context of economic "shocks" or changes in the household environment (Dehejia & Gatti 2002; Guarcello, Mealli & Rosati 2010), describing the 'rotation' of debts as a 'poverty trap' (Basu 1999; Baland & Robinson 2000; Emerson & Souza 2002) that is best addressed by educational mobility represented by formal education.³³ In the first instance, such analyses emphasize the need for social insurance and access to credit for households at the 'bottom of the pyramid.' Where longstanding silk-weavers in Kanchipuram had assets in the form of own looms and own houses, handy in *kashtam*, new entrants to silk weaving had no collateral to speak of. In their case, poverty ratcheted up the impact of family *soolnalai* (circumstances) to a degree of precarity that threatened their very survival as an intergenerational unit. While policy efforts that incentivize schooling through conditional cash transfer programs or free midday meals, thus cushioning families from the worst of their *soolnalai*, have shown some promise (Schultz 2004; but see Ravallion & Wodon 2000), the returns to sending children may not be significant enough in the present, given household *kashtam*, or certain enough in the longer-term to justify the decision (Buchman 2000). At any rate, educational intervention of the welfarist state in the form residential 'hostels' – hostels that have been historically underfunded (Nambissan 1996) – hardly answered when families sought to stay together. Families in *kashtam* (hardship), consequently, opted to send their children to the *thari* instead: the relationship between master-weaver and child worker represented a claim to the customary 'advance' in exchange for labor, thus offering a more optimal solution. If, as Murali said of his migrant family, "all we had that we could negotiate with was our labor," then returns to labor on the loom

³³ See Edmonds & Pavcnik (2005) for an excellent and comprehensive review of the economic analyses of child labor in a global context.

– wages as well as advance – were significant in the present but also facilitated trajectories to autonomous development.

Apprenticeships offered households in *kasthtam* a means to achieve ‘own looms’ and *madi veedu* in the future – a means, in effect, of breaking out of the poverty trap. Policy prescriptions of educational mobility as the antidote to the poverty trap have tended to overlook work-based mobility and aspirations – the development trajectory represented by the movement on the loom from hired weaver to owner-weaver, for instance – while reifying educational mobility as the means of achieving socioeconomic mobility. These assumptions are increasingly problematic, given the changing patterns of wage returns to primary schooling (Colclough, Kingdon & Patrinos 2009) and secondary education (Mehta, Felipe, Quising & Camingue 2007) in developing country contexts where educational mobility may be limited in mitigating poverty or achieving socioeconomic mobility in light of extant labor market structure. As an educational institution, the loom supported a cost-return mix that was not only embedded in local labor markets, but the temporal distribution of returns matched household *soolanalai*. As Ravi explained,

I dropped out after Class 4, because I knew the *soolnalai* (circumstances) of the family at that time... They were difficult financial *soolnalai* and school didn't help. So we dropped out. Of course, we didn't like going to school either [grinning]. But I had a great 'interest' in the looms... because it offered money when my family needed it. At that time, children felt, why should we work so hard to learn at school when we could be learning the work on the loom, when we could be helping our families now? That's how I felt. It wasn't that schooling was bad – you could get a 'government-*velai*' (government-job) if you finished school. But that would take a long time. So like all the boys in the

neighborhood, I thought working on the looms was the better option. I would give my ‘salary’ to mother and she would use it to run the household.... We thought, if we gave all our earnings to our parents, then the household could eat well, we could all be well.

If the household was the nucleus of production and reproduction on the looms, as Arterburn (1982) puts it, then labor allocations and welfare functions were meaningful at the household-level rather than focused on the individual: an artisanal logics of the household, if you will, where all members contributed their labor in age-appropriate ways on the loom and had corresponding claims to consumption and welfare. As Ravi put it, “if we gave all our earnings to our parents, then the household could eat well, we could all be well.” Intergenerational relations in household were mutually dependent, much like the production relations on the loom materialized in the contrast *korvai* border of the *kanjeevaram*. The adult weaver, strong enough and fast enough to throw the shuttle and work the pedal and the harness, wove the body of the sari – produced about 40-42 inches of the sari’s width; but unless the child apprentice contributed the less strenuous border of 6 to 8 inches, weaving in tandem to complete one pick, there was no *kanjeevaram*. The intergenerational back and forth on the loom not only produced the *kanjeevaram* in its uniqueness, it (re)produced the artisanal household and its (ethical) way of life.

Childhood subjectivities and intergenerational *korvai* relations

Children on the loom took for granted their participation in the interdependent intergenerational relations – *korvai* relations, to coin a phrase – that sustained the household. Indeed, in response to *kashtam* and *kudumba soolnalai* (familial circumstances), children felt it was their *kadamai* (duty) to contribute to the household. As Ravi described, “My parents didn’t ask me to drop out for work.... [But] when we saw our family’s *soolnalai* we thought, why are

we going to school when we could work ourselves and earn some money to help out?" On the one hand, the economic contribution of children was a mundane artifact of the loom-based household economy; on the other, the majority of weavers, young and old, were quick to assure me that they were not forced into work by their parents, but had responded to *soolnalai* of their own will. Indeed, as Montgomery (2015) describes of child prostitutes in Thailand, as problematic as it may appear and contrary to straightforward analyses of coercive parents and helpless child victims, children in fact described and understood their work in terms of the reciprocal relational arrangements and moral economies of their families. Working children, argues Woodhead (1999) made sense of their physical and social – and moral – world in their work activities, in negotiations with parents and employers, to make the best of their difficult circumstances as part of their ongoing processes of identity making (p. 29).

The *korvai* and the mutual relations it materialized were, in effect, the practical expression of the everyday intergenerational ethics that (re)produced the artisanal way of life in Kanchipuram: the parental obligation to train the child in the (artisanal) way (s)he should go, towards autonomy and development, reciprocated, in turn, by children's *kadamai* (duty) towards household productivity. "We have no property (*soththu*) to bequeath our children and little cash (*kaas*)," said Chandran, speaking of the weavers in the neighborhood in general; "all that we can leave them is the *thari*." In his own case, Chadran had made sure that both his daughters had apprenticed on the loom – it was the best (and the least) he could do for them as their father.

The parental obligation to secure the best for their children was about economic security in the future, yes, but also about "safety" in the present day. Of course our parents sent us to work on the looms of someone they knew (*therinjavanga*) or someone who lived *pakkathila than* (nearby), my participants exclaimed, astonished that I had even thought to ask. Indira and

Padma, the young female weavers (sixteen and seventeen, respectively) who I worked with on Selvam's looms, were aghast. How would their parents let us work in an unfamiliar household – was I accusing them of dereliction of duty? As Padma explained,

My parents knew the owner I first worked for quite well – they had known the family for a while, and so, when it was time for me to start going to the loom, my parents took me there. Parents didn't just pack you off to work in a random household; they sent you to work where they knew the people you worked with, where they knew that those people were good people. Will they take care of my daughter? Will they take care of me like I was a daughter of the house? They found out all that before I started working for them – that's a kind of 'safety' for us.

Whether in the present or thirty years ago when my neighbor Sivamma had been one of the first girl apprentices on my street to venture out of her household to earn and learn on other looms in other household spaces, 'safety' was a paramount consideration for parents in the neighborhood. Indeed, Sivamma rued the fact: she had worked for just the one master-weaver throughout her childhood years – if it had been up to her, she sighed, she would have moved looms to pursue higher wages. Her father however, who had known the master-weaver for a long time, had insisted that it was a "safety" to stay in a familiar household. Even in the midst of the difficult family *soolnalai* (circumstances) that had sent Poonga to the loom – her mother was in the hospital – her father, to her relief, had arranged for Poonga to work with a familiar household a mere three houses away. Dhana, a twenty-two year old weaver, had worked even nearer – right across the street, in fact. "When father heard they were looking for someone to help on the loom," she said, "I started to work there – my sisters worked over there," she pointed to the house two doors down, with a smile. Demu, nineteen now and weaving "part-time" on his

household loom these days, had also apprenticed right next-door – if not right under his mother’s nose, then not too far either, he chuckled. “I always worked *inga than, pakkathilaye*,” insisted eighteen-year Kanaga – on looms that were right here, close by – as she marveled at the contrast with her assembly-line work these days which was an hour away on the ‘company-bus.’ Saravanan’s father had apprenticed him with a friend a dozen houses away – the men had known each other since they were boys, and, as he described, he had been confident that his son would not only be looked after, but that the atmosphere was *relax-a* (relaxed).

Proximity and familiarity were the measure of children’s ‘safety,’ typically mapped onto the social cartography of the “neighborhood” that, as Arterburn (1982) shows, was traced in terms of occupational obligations that had, over time, overwritten caste and kin affiliations in weavers’ localities. Even migrant families, with few neighborly relations to draw on, sought to ensure their children apprenticed nearby – near enough that fathers could make “rounds” to the looms their children worked on. As Murali recalled affectionately, his outspoken father had been a frequent visitor to his looms. “That was a ‘safety’ too, even if it meant that word of my misdemeanors at work reached him too quickly,” Murali laughed. Of course, concerns of ‘safety’ had been even more important for his sister Sushila: “father,” she said, “arranged for me to learn to weave in a relative’s household – he was not a near relative, of course, but we had known his family back in our native village.” ‘Safety,’ as previously mentioned, was the central principle underlying the (spatialized) construction of girlhood in Kanchipuram, and realized in the enclosed, off-the-street spaces of home, loom – and more recently, school and Special Economic Zones (see later chapters). In organizing their children’s work, parents might prefer “strict” master-weavers as trainers for their boys in order to give them a head-start in their occupational

trajectories; but “safety” was, without a doubt, the priority when it came to making apprenticeship arrangements for their daughters. As Rekha and Shanthi’s mother admitted,

Yes, we probably didn’t send them to the top-most owners. But we didn’t want to send our girls so far when there were looms right here, near our house. And they were known to us. And there were female weavers too. We wanted them to work in a safe place, even if the money wasn’t good.

Indeed, to this day, Garima’s father walked the sixteen-year-old over to Selvam’s looms every day, despite the good-natured ribbing both of them received for it. *Pothithi-poththi vechirkaru*, Indira often sniggered from her place on the loom – he has swaddled you in cotton-wool! But Garima lived three streets away, far enough, her parents felt, to justify their escort. In setting their children on the loom in order to settle their futures while ensuring their ‘safety’ in the present, parents showed care for their children and performed their ethical responsibility.

Children, for their part, went to the loom as their age-appropriate participation in household production and as the customary training for their futures: in the intergenerational *koryai* relations of the weaving household, children held up their end by learning and earning to weave, in turn, expecting household support in setting up their ‘own looms’ and ‘own houses’ when it was time (see Arterburn 1982 for more on the intergenerational contract). In households new to the silk-loom, if the loom-space was unfamiliar, intergenerational relations of interdependence were not: indeed, their ethical substance was heightened in the context of their *soolnalai*. “I didn’t want to leave my parents in a lurch,” explained Haridas. His sister had just been married off and Haridas, fourteen at the time, was the only one left at home to help. “I refused to think of anything but the loom,” he recalled, “till the family paid off all the wedding expenses.” “At that time,” Balaji, his friend, added,

even if you – you [nodding at me] – had come and asked us why we were not in school, we would not have listened to you. We would not have considered it till we had paid the *baki* off. We felt we had a responsibility (*kadamai*) – we knew if we didn't help with the *baki*, our parents would be paying it back. If we didn't work, we would have put our parents in a troublesome spot. The master-weavers too. We didn't want that, we didn't want to put our families in trouble, or the weavers out of business.

As Pushpa, nearly nineteen, told me, she had never felt bad that she was on the loom and not in school:

No, I never felt like that. My only concern was *veetu kashtam* (household hardship) and how I could help. That's why I liked to work, and that's why I didn't think of school or miss it. With only father working, making ends meet was difficult. That's why we all thought we should work – and now, that's why things are better.

Shakti was less sanguine about missing school. He had finished Class 5 and indeed, had liked going to school; but when both his parents had developed health issues and the household fell into debt as a result, he had felt that going to the loom was the right thing to do. “I didn't feel bad or anything like that at the time,” Shakti recalled, “I just set off to the looms. My parents were relieved because our family circumstances were not looking good. So they also suggested going to the loom. I wasn't upset with them, that's what other children my age were doing. I was twelve then, and I got an advance of 7,500 rupees – that was a big deal.”

If, like Shakti, earning (and learning) on the loom to help the family during *kashtam* was not something that children in the neighborhood were upset about, but rather, the unremarkable performance of mutually dependent intergenerational relations (*korvai* relations), then – unlike

Shakti – most children also disliked school. *Kashtam* may have compelled, but children's *ishtam* (liking, preference) also impelled. To quote Ravi again,

....They were difficult times financially, and so we dropped out. Of course, we didn't like going to school either [grinning]... Mother said I should go to school – I was not a bad student. But in those days [in the 1970's], you went to school only if you wanted to. It's your decision, parents said, it's up to you; and they gave children the freedom (*swathanthiram*) to choose. So of course we made the best of that freedom! You had to go to school every day, you had to study, you had 'homework' to do – that seemed like a huge burden to us at that time! Children like us felt, rightly or wrongly, that the loom was more 'jolly' than school. Yes! [Emphatically.]

Mahesh, twenty-seven years old – twenty of which he had spent on the loom – had also chosen the loom over school. "My parents were not pleased," he recalled; "I dropped out in Class 2 and they felt I was too young. In fact, they had a lot to say about it – and they said it with a broom!" But every time Mahesh was sent back to school, he was back at the looms again, he grinned: "I told myself that the *thari* was it for me, no matter what they said at home." His decisions twenty years ago were often on his mind these days as he and his wife Chitra considered their two-year-old daughter. "Her studies are important," Chitra acknowledged, "but they aren't the only thing," she felt. "She should know how the loom works, at least a little." Mahesh agreed.

We will send her to school – we want her to be able to take the bus without needing someone to read the bus number. Our parents must have thought like that too. But then, we didn't enjoy going school and we wanted to go to the loom instead. We will send our child to school, but who knows what her 'interest' will be? If she insists that she only

wants to weave, what can we do? We'll have to let her be. That has been the practice in our homes – they let us chose.

As participants in intergenerational, interdependent *korvai* relations, children enacted an ethical response to *kashtam* by going to the looms to help their families; but as participants in such *korvai* relations, children also enjoyed a degree of autonomy in their families – of *swathanthiram*, as Ravi put it, in making decisions about their lives on the loom or in school. Children on Kanchipuram's looms were not only economically significant in mutual relations with co-producing adults, they were self-identified decision-making agents in the context of productive *korvai* relations. As Liebel (2004), in arguing for a 'subject-oriented approach' to child labor has long demonstrated, working children have a "will of their own," used in service of their own visions of a good life (see also Karunan 2005). An ethical life, if you will, as responsible subjects in their social worlds. As social and economic actors, children not only contributed to the productivity of household and occupational group, they practiced the autonomy and the intergenerational ethics that (re)produced them as artisan subjects on Kanchipuram's looms.

Children as calculative agents on the loom

Few studies have focused on children's economic agency per se, though Iversen (2002), who studied the work contracts of migrant child labor in the Indian state of Karnataka, and Amigo (2010), who debunked the "paternalistic attitude that ignores children's own economic understanding" on Indonesian tobacco farms (p. 48), offer welcome exceptions. In formal economic theory, however, children are treated as private or public goods (Zelizer 1985; Folbre 1994) or, increasingly, as a consumer group. They are otherwise rendered invisible "due to the

implausibility of treating [them] as the rational, autonomous agents who are the only residents allowed so far into the economist's world" (Nelson 1996, p. 65).

On the other hand, children on the loom were no slouches in navigating the looms or the system of advances; as canny and capable of understanding and negotiating terms and conditions as their parents. As Murali explained gleefully and in detail,

I had already taken two thousand rupees as *baki*, and later, if the household needed another two thousand, I could ask the owner – my *baki* would total four thousand then. If he said he didn't have the money, I would tell him that I would move to another master-weaver who had promised to give me four thousand rupees. We 'blackmailed' him! The owner would think, this boy is a good worker; and change his mind. We needed the two thousand rupees because there was a special 'function' in the family – our eldest sister was getting engaged. The owner might bargain, he might say, I can only give you another thousand. If he refused, father would move us to a new master-weaver's place and return the old *baki* of two thousand rupees and use the extra two thousand.

We had our own calculations. When we hung around with our friends, we would ask them how much their *baki* was, how much their labor-*kaas* (wage) was. In the evenings, after work, we would all play, usually, with *goli* (marbles) or *pambaram* (top) – and we would talk about our wages. What, you are getting 100 rupees and they pay me only 90, we would say to each other. Just wait, I'll show you, I'll get even more than you make! We challenged each other. And then, after that, I would go tell father that so and so was getting so much – so you better ask the master-weaver to increase my wages or I will move to this other master-weaver.

Mahesh had been as calculatingly driven on the loom-based trajectory to development. His first salary, twenty years ago as a seven-year-old, had been a hundred and fifty rupees – a big amount, he granted. But, he added:

At that time, you are thinking that hundred and fifty rupees is not as much as five hundred. You want to earn five hundred rupees. So that's why I wanted to learn to weave quickly. And when you weave [for hire], they pay you two or three thousand rupees – but if had your own loom at home, you could make five hundred rupees more, you can make 3500 rupees instead... These are the thoughts that go through your mind when you are sitting on the loom. You are thinking, when will the weaver stop so you can take his place and learn? Or how will you set up your own loom? Of course, you also learn that you can't make thirty thousand rupees on the loom at one go – it very much a gradual progress.

Indeed, Ravi and his brothers had even calculated their options before going to the loom: “We could have worked for a tailor or in a *malligai-kadai* (wholesaler’s) – my brothers did for some time, in fact – but we all wanted to work on the looms because silk-weaving was a trade that was growing fast. So we had a lot of *arvam* to learn it.”

Of course, in the context of *korvai* relations of mutual dependence, children also had certain economic claims in the household – and intergenerational ethics demanded that parents accommodated such claims. As a Night School instructor in the neighborhood described, “the child had ‘respect’ as a wage-earner – when they came home from the loom, they were served food like a wage-earner. They had ‘freedom.’ If asked for some money – if they want to go to the cinema – then they will get it because they have earned the money. They can ask for it bold-a (boldly).” Indeed, children’s claims were not restricted to the price of a cinema-ticket. Malathi,

for example, had, since she had turned fifteen, diverted a part of her wages each month to participate in a ‘chit fund.’ With the household caught up on rent and her father well enough to work, Malathi had realized, as she said, “I have to make my own ‘security’”: she could not expect the family, given their *soolnalai* (circumstances), to put money away towards her marriage. And if her father occasionally complained about her lack of faith in the family, mild-mannered Malathi was quite decisive: “that’s my lookout – and it’s my money.” Indeed, as she added, “that’s what we all have to do, all the girls in our neighborhood on the loom. Each one of us puts money aside for her own future.” Indeed, when Indira took up weaving at Selvam’s looms, she had made it clear that her wages were to be paid directly to her rather than to her parents. Boys, for their part, also saved up towards futures – towards ‘own looms,’ in particular. As Murali explained, he had always kept a part of his wages for himself: if he was earning ninety rupees, then he saved up fifteen rupees in a *hundi* (earthen jar) and gave the rest to his mother. Any extra money he earned on the loom – “night money” for working late during the ‘season’, for instance – went into the *hundi* was well. “Father would wonder what became of the money,” he recalled, “was I squandering it?” But Murali was saving up to join a chit fund. When the fund matured after some years, it had grown to ten thousand rupees. “Ten thousand!” Murali repeated, still delighted by the memory. “That was when we set up independently,” he added; “with the ten thousand rupees that I had saved, drop by drop, we began our own loom.”

Such socialization for relative economic or financial autonomy and agency – financial literacy, increasingly, a globally valued skill with respect to child and youth development (Otto 2013; Brown, Henchoz & Spycher 2018) – was perhaps the unremarkable cultural material that (re)produced the materialist culture of an occupational group; that, along with the daily disciplines and routines that constituted the sensing, feeling, cleanly-finishing artisan, sustained

the weaver and the household in the artisanal way of life. But economic calculations in childhood were also about ‘interest’ (Ravi) and challenge (Murali) – an exciting and competitive game of sorts. As Haridas and Balaji related, the conversations in the “child-circles” of their time in the eighties were “all about how much have you done and how much are you making.” Or, as I witnessed during my time with Indira, Padma and Garima on Selvam’s looms, giggling, teasing discussions that converted their productivity into future dowries and wedding trousseaus or possible marriage offers in all their economic minutiae. While discussions about play have been analyzed by developmental psychologists for their purposive or productive character as “naïve economics” that are consequential for children’s futures (Webley 2005), there is little research available on the playful character of work. A reflection, perhaps, of the western underpinnings of child development accounts where, as Woodhead (1998) notes, play, learning and schooling are the primary domains of ‘scientific’ knowledge about children, with work or labor mentioned almost exclusively in terms of their potential negative effects (p. 17). On the other hand, as he found among working children in Ethiopia, Guatemala and the Philippines, work was also a source of “friendship/having fun” for children, the distinction between workplace and playground less easily maintained in their context. Indeed, as Punch (2003) and Katz (1986, 2004) demonstrate in Bolivia and among the Howa, respectively, the binarism of work and play, whether in temporal or spatial terms, is an artifact of crude cultural assumptions, including about child/adult distinctions, that is misapplied to ‘majority world childhoods’ where work and play (and, indeed, school) overlap and are integrated in every day ways.

Inam kaas and ur suththaradhu

“Yes, I liked the *thari*, from the very beginning,” said Chitra. Of course, she admitted, she didn’t have much to compare the loom with, but, she reiterated, “I liked the *thari* very much.”

I liked the work, the friends I had, everything about it. We chatted while we were on the loom, we had a ‘jolly’ time! Those were happy days in childhood – you just went to work, you chatted and you ate and that was it! Our life on the *thari*, now that was really ‘jolly.’

From my time on the loom, I could relate. Selvam’s looms were typically noisy with banter – pitched over the non-stop Tamil film music playing on the radio or the tiny *kalaignar* TV perched over the wall fan. Indira and Selvam were always full of jokes, usually directed at each other, or when Parvathi, Selvam’s wife, was around, the girls ganged up together to pull Selvam’s leg. When Selvam and Parvathi were away, Garima, quiet and unruffled, was usually the butt of Padma’s and Indira’s jokes – the rumor was that she had recently received an offer of marriage, and Indira wanted every gory detail. Of course, Indira herself joked that she had a *mama* (lit., uncle; in this case, a slightly older gent) waiting for her to say yes. Occasionally, the girls made fun of their contemporaries who had taken up ‘company-*velai*’ (company-work) – their “modern” clothes, the flowers they wore in their hair, the handbags they swished as they made for the company-bus, all were dissected to great mirth. The loom was never quiet in all my time there (except the one time when the *malligai* had visited and the conversations had respectfully gone quiet). All in all, as Padma said, to much laughter, “we talk when work and then, when we finish work, we sit and talk some more.” A more recent source of conversation was the “parlor,” where eyebrows were threaded, “facials” were done and lipstick advice was available – Padma had recently visited; and even, Garima, who preferred wearing the traditional *pavadai* to the more urban *kurta-churridar* that Padma and Indira favored, had had her eyebrows done.

“So that’s where all the *inam kaas* goes,” snorted Parvathi. The *inam kaas* – literally, a ‘cash reward’ – the small sum of money that master-weavers gave their apprentices to coincide with special days and religious festivals, in particular, the twice-monthly holidays of *Amavasya* and *Karthikai* (new-moon and full-moon) on the loom. A longstanding institution, *inam kaas* was spending money – not for saving up (though some did) or giving your parents towards *kashtam*, but for children to do as they pleased with it. The girls on Selvam’s looms, for instance, who received fifty rupees every *Amavasya* and *Karthikai* as *inam kaas*, spent it at the beauty-parlor or on “make up” as they called the *pottu* (forehead-dots), *kammal* (earrings) and (talcum) powder they were so fond of. *Inam kaas* also paid for the *bajji* or *vada* (fried snacks) from the tea-*kadai* nearby that came around in the late afternoons; for food-offerings and flowers at the temple or, when it was close to a major festival, saved up towards new clothes and jewelry. Indeed the *inam kaas* was a great draw on the loom, as Saravana, an erstwhile child apprentice who dropped out in the late 1990’s for the loom, explained:

If you were a child seven or eight years old, you would really have more fun on the loom than at school. They gave you holidays on the loom – and gave you money with it! You could be ‘jolly,’ hanging out with the other kids who worked with you, going to the shops with them or just *ur suththaradhu* (roam around). I thought that the loom was more jolly than school. Of course, things were difficult at home for all us – my father was the only breadwinner and there were four kids to feed. But for all us, the allure of the loom was *Amavasya* and *Karthikai* – when you got the *inam kaas*! [Laughter] I got ten rupees the first time! That was enough for us! That was enough to buy snacks to eat – there was no *biryani* or anything like that in our time, but we got biscuits and ices [popsicles] and little things like that.

Ravi, another Class 4 drop-out (two decades before Saravana), was even more expansive about *inam kaas*:

There are a lot of Hindu *pandigai* (festival holidays) – no other religion has so many! And when there was a festival, we got the day off on the loom and the master-weaver gave us some money. We could use that money as we wished, we could spend it as we liked – we didn't need ask our parents. That was also why I joined the loom: my friends were already working on the loom and they looked quite 'jolly.' They always seemed to have *kai-la kaas* (cash-in-hand). At that time, your parents were only able to give you one or two paisa – ten paisa, at best. Here, go and buy something to eat with this, they said. But on the loom, you got as much as five rupees! From ten paisa to five rupees in the pocket – we couldn't contain our joy! Sometimes, we worked extra to make some additional cash, without our families finding out; and with that, we went *ur suththaradhu-ku* (to roam around). We went wherever we fancied and ate whatever we wanted to. We went out as a *gumbal* (group), with all the boys I knew in the neighborhood; and we headed to the shops for the snacks that we liked. Usually sweets – we loved *rasagulla* and *urundai*; or the *gaj-uruga* that we wrapped around their wrists and nibbled through slowly. Or a *potlam* (newspaper packet) of *kaaram* (savory snacks). There were no special food-shops like there are today – it was all small *petti-kadais* (roadside shacks) then...

Our big ticket item was the cinema! We didn't enjoy watching old films – we wanted to watch English *padam* (movies), even if we couldn't understand them – the 'scenery' was first-class! We used to go with all our friends – all of us were working on the loom. We got off the loom at the same time, so we all trooped off together, *ur suththaradhu-ku*. We

never went by ourselves, it was always in a *gumbal*. Of course, those were financially difficult times for all of us, but as kids, it was more ‘jolly’ to go to the loom because of all this. We could always buy our own *tea-kapi* [tea-coffee] and our own [movie] theatre-ticket with the *inam kaas*.

Whenever Mahesh got a scolding from Suresh-master for mistake he had made – never a beating, he clarified, adding with a grin, that was only at home – the master-weaver would throw his arm around Mahesh’s shoulder, give him a few rupees and say, come let’s go for some food. “They did nice things like that on the loom,” he recalled; and whenever the weavers took a break, we could do whatever we liked. We could roam around, gossip, do whatever [you liked]. And again, in the evenings, we could do whatever we wanted and go wherever we liked. We used to sit by the roadside with our friends and be ‘jolly’. We talked a lot in those days – it was ‘jolly’!

“Jolly” – or *jaali*, as children pronounced the English word – was a catch-all term of popular use in the neighborhood, referring to cheeky, youthful fun, often with a suggestion of rule-breaking: teasing the weavers, for instance, or sneaking off to watch a movie with friends or trying new forms of make-up parents frowned on. The looms were a “jolly” space for children, expressed in long and loud banter and gossip, the constant music, the consumption practices – the novel foods and goods – that *inam kaas* allowed and, for boys, in particular, the wide-ranging practices of *ur suththaradhu*.

Ur suththaradhu, literally taking a spin around town, was aimless wandering about the neighborhood, passing time with friends, typically over a snack or a *tea-kapi* or cool-drink. In Kanchipuram, *ur suththaradhu* was also the quintessential enactment of masculinity. Where girls

showed restraint on the streets, moving swiftly and inconspicuously – eyes lowered – from home to loom and back; and where their opportunities to snack were largely limited to their temple visits and the *tea-kapi* and occasional biscuit or *vada* that came around to the loom-space, boys were *theru-mannans*, scholars of the street. They stood around street-corners or sat by the roadside, gossiping over snacks and making jokes (*galata*), or playing *goli* (marbles) and *gilli* (another vernacular sport). If *inam kaas*-driven consumption practices were integral to childhood in Kanchipuram, then they were essential to *boyhood*, in particular, part and parcel of the free-ranging *ur suththuradu* that boys performed to signal their emerging masculinity.

But boyish *ur suththuradu* was also built into everyday loom arrangements. The boys on the loom ran all sorts of daily errands at work – fetching endless cups of tea for weavers, bringing in the newspaper or going out for groceries at the behest of the lady of the house, taking the little children of the household for a “round”, running for pirns and bobbins when the weavers ran short and, occasionally, accompanying the master-weaver to the wholesale market. “We stretched every errand as far as it would go,” Murali recalled, “meeting up with friends for a surreptitious game of *goli* or poring over the cinema sections in the newspapers at the tea-*kadai* – us boys were ‘careless’ (care-free) on the loom.” Indeed, Murali had spent so much time with the newspapers at the tea-stall, he insisted he had learned to read from the cinema section! “Boys were ‘careless,’” he repeated, “never afraid to make up stories” to cover up their *ur suththura* shenanigans. Girls, on the other hand, “never lied” – they didn’t need to, when they went from home to loom and back like clockwork. Yes, agreed Selvam, boys on the loom were “loafers” and “rowdies,” primarily focused on *ur suththaradu* and useful only to send to the bazaar; while the proper etiquette for girls, according to Parvathi, was: work all you must on the loom, then return home – but say no if the work required going out. When girls took a break from the loom,

therefore, they ran home for a nap or a bath, or stayed in, often roped into doing chores – not their favorite “time-pass,” unless it was playing with the small children in the master-weaver’s household – or, preferably, watched TV and gossiped. A special treat for girls was being entrusted with the keys of the house, to stay in and watch the house when the master-weaver and his/her family was out: one drank endless tumblers of “ice-water” from the fridge while watching TV to one’s fill.

The disciplines and routines of the loom as an educational institution were, thus, leavened by children’s ‘jolliness’: the jolliness of gossip, the hustle and bustle of errand-running and *ur suththaradhu*, the periodic breaks when weavers stepped off the loom and, perhaps above all, the consumption practices enabled by *inam kaas*. Such jolliness practices not only prefigured the autonomy of the *rajah* and *mantri* of the loom, as children learned to navigate work-time and down-time on the loom, they were the key spaces of performing gender. The everyday arrangements of work and apprenticeships on the loom allowed for the spatial enactment of both relatively cloistered girlhood and the wide-ranging *ur suththara* practices of boyhood in Kanchipuram’s weaving neighborhoods.

A final note: vernacularizing ‘childhood’

As Punch (2003) notes, despite the demographic fact that the ‘childhood’ of children in the global south or the majority world is more common, they have tended to be described as deviant in the context of a ‘global childhood’ modeled on a western cultural ideal confined within families, nurseries and schools (see also Boyden; Berry). The production of a cultural ideal as ‘scientific knowledge’ about the ‘normal’ development and ‘universal’ needs of children in development psychology (Burman 1998; Woodhead 2015) has resulted in majority world childhoods primarily pathologized as ‘stolen childhood’ (Woodhead 1998). In this reading,

working children in the global south are not children but miniature adults; their lives, described overwhelmingly in terms of work to the neglect of everything else (Punch 2003).

This chapter is a response to that neglect. As child apprentices on Kanchipuram's looms, children worked, yes. But the loom represented a (artisanal) *way of life*, a rich social world of household and neighborhood that, while organized around production arrangements, was suffused with a sense and feel for the materials and routines on the loom; had ethical substance in the form of the mutually-dependent intergenerational relations of the *korvai*; and was driven by an aspiration for ownership that promised autonomy and development. On the loom, children were both economically productive and educationally instructed; indeed, children did not work to the exclusion of play and pedagogy – on the loom, production, pedagogy and, indeed, play/jolliness.

A history of child labor legislation: *worker-children* or *child-workers*?

What are children and what can they appropriately do?

On the one hand, any question about children's beings and appropriate doings is only sensible with respect to where they live (geography), in what ways (culture) and times (history), with which significant others (social organization) doing what (economic conditions). This approach emphasizes relativity: children, it says, like adults, are subject to their cultures, societies, (political) economies, histories and geographies; and thus, determinations of children's beings and doings are not only diverse, they are rooted in their particular contexts. This approach, championed by Childhood Studies scholars (see James & Prout 2015), argues for multiple and socio-culturally constructed childhoods: any narrative about children and their childhood is also a narrative of the prevailing sociocultural and economic conditions of their lives; just as to describe any prevailing set of cultural and socioeconomic conditions is to signal expectations about children and the roles they play specific to the time and place.

On the other hand, children's beings and appropriate doings may be described in terms of a singular set of biological facts, scientifically applicable to all children and universally evidenced in their psychological development. As biologically-determined and evolving beings, their appropriate capacities and needs are determinable with respect to the fully-formed adult that children are not. Thus denominated in terms of a common or shared psycho-biology, this approach to childhood allows for universal norms – universal needs and rights – to be defined for children everywhere and then achieved appropriately and justly.

International laws, conventions and programs about children and their appropriate childhoods have typically favored the second approach. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), for instance, the apex international law with respect to children and ratified by almost every country on the planet, lists the rights that all children are guaranteed by the adults and governments in their countries – in effect, defining what children are and can appropriately do everywhere. On the list are children's rights to – or needs for (see Woodhead 2015) – education and protection from harm, including from work (UNICEF, n.d.). This particular understanding of childhood as a period of education, protected from work, while universally applicable by way of the CRC, in fact, emerged in a particular context – of the Industrial Revolution, in 19th c. Britain – in response to the particular cultural politics of the time. To understand why childhood on Kanchipuram's looms, central to the artisanal way of life in weaving neighborhoods, became a transnational object of intervention as 'child labor' at the turn of the new millennium, is to go back to the beginning, as it were: to the institutionalization of a particular idea of childhood as a universal ideal in the first child labor laws in Britain – the first Factory Acts. As Dahlén (2007) observes, efforts to combat child labor have typically suffered a "hang-over from history" (p. 300-1).

Child labor and the British Factory Acts

'Child labor,' as Cunningham & Stromquist (2005) note rather sardonically, "was born" in turn-of-the century, rapidly industrializing Britain with the promulgation of the first Factory Act in 1802. Tellingly titled the 'Health and Morals of Apprentices Act,' the 1802 Factory Act was less about factory work and more about children working in factories; children working in cotton mills in particular, who as 'child labor,' were seen in dire need of state intervention and protection. In the global context of child labor, this was a seminal moment: not only was a

particular notion of childhood – framed in response to a particular kind of (factory) work – enshrined in law for the first time, but the use of labor legislation to eliminate child labor and the need for educational (“moral”) intervention as an antidote – the dominant global approach to child labor over the 20th century – all owe to this originary moment. As Lieten (2009) observes, the reasons and means for dealing with child labor in developing countries in the 20th century were those adopted from Britain in the preceding century; whether via imperial decree in the colonies or because the International Labor Organization (ILO), the principal multilateral agency charged with addressing global child labor issues, adopted the British model at its establishment in 1919.

In the wake of the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act of 1802, fifteen other factory legislations followed over the course of the 19th century in Britain, extending the coverage of legislation over industry and progressively excluding more children from work by increasing the minimum age of employment. The Factory Act of 1833, for instance, often noted as the first effective child labor legislation, regulated the employment of workers under thirteen because the Royal Commission report declared thirteen to be the age when childhood ceased (Cunningham 1995; Stearns 2009). In the process, these (child) labor legislations also established the grounds for intervention in the lives of working children: it was their particular condition of childhood that justified state protection rather than the conditions in which they (and others) worked. Child labor laws, as Hendrick (2003) puts it, were premised on the distinctive quality of childhood; the ‘satanic mills,’ in turn, bringing into stark relief, the vulnerability of the factory-*child* rather than that of factory-labor, in general. That is, the vulnerable substance of childhood was legally recognized and instituted in categorical distinction to the adult worker of the British mill and factory; with childhood, in turn, defined in terms of age, a bio-scientific fact that represented

their developmental immaturity with respect to adults. The use of factory legislations to thus regulate child labor, in effect, a. privileged legal over political means to set up a common norm for childhood across all sections of society; b. privileged children over labor in general for protection by the state; and c. presaged the ‘politics of age’ in the ‘bright line’ or ‘straight eighteen’ approach of present-day regimes of child rights and international law (see Rosen 2007; Borzaga 2008).

In the process, the British Factory Acts also normalized what were essentially Victorian, domestic ‘ideologies’ about the ‘natural order’ of family and society: the patriarchal family where the bread-winning father provided and the moral and mannered mother cared for children (Davin 1982). Whether Rousseauian naturalists, Wordsworthian Romantics or Sunday School proponents, the privileged classes of reformers saw child labor laws as the means of weaning children from factories back into families. As historians have described – see, for instance, Johnson (1970); Hendrick (1997); Humphries (2003); Stearns (2009) – the factory-child, served as the lodestone for the inchoate anxieties of the privileged classes about the profound social and political economic transformations being effected by the Industrial Revolution. The signs of the new industrial (dis)order were everywhere, visible and undeniable: the urban working class poor out on the street; the factory-child, pathetic and precocious and uneasily reminiscent of the West Indian slave on a sugar plantation – the “poor little white-slaves, the children in our cotton factories,” of Coleridge’s verse. They threatened to upend civilized society – and its system of privileges – by destroying the ‘natural’ order of children and adults in the family. To restore society to order and civilization, then, was to fix the (poor/working-class) family – by restoring the factory-child to the bosom of family. It was this Victorian vision that was universalized

across social classes in Britain through successive Factory Acts and, over the 20th century, across variously circumstanced countries, through international labor conventions and standards.

From the start, education was central to the Victorian vision of child and society: the education of the poor, in particular, “one of the strongest of early Victorian obsessions,” that figured large in any social and industrial enquiry or experiment at the time (Johnson 1970, p. 98). Indeed, as Davin (1982) points out, child labor factory legislations and compulsory education were two sides of the one same prevailing domestic ideology: if factory-children evidenced the unnaturally ordered family and the failing society, then surely, properly educated children (and families) represented the best hope for the civilized society and the Christian nation? And if families proved deficient to the task, given their “ignorance,” “vice,” “improvidence” and “barbarous habits” – words of Dr. Kay, eminent Victorian reformer and educationist, to describe the working-class – a “general and effective system of education” would substitute for their parental role (Johnson 1970, pp. 98-100). Thus, the first Factory Act of 1802, sought to protect the health and morals of apprentices by regulating their work-hours and provisioning for education and religious instruction; while the Factory Act of 1833 Act introduced ‘half-time working’ in order to free up more time for education (Tuttle 1999; Fyfe 2009). As Engerman (2003) observes, labor protections and education went hand-in-hand for working children from the start.

While the educational character of the early Factory Acts was somewhat uncertain in practice – employers’ educational obligations were voluntary, typically, satisfied by Sunday Schools in factory centers (Stearns 2009) – they represented a significant departure from the past. In the agrarian and proto-industrial 18th century, for instance, children learned economic, social and moral principles by working in the rural household and workshop economy. Indeed, as

late as 1796, the Prime Minister argued that sending poor children to work was essential learning for productive futures, the sooner the better (Cunningham 1996). With the first Factory Act in 1802, however, education began to be segregated from work in the lives of working children. For all the fears that the ‘satanic mills’ raised on behalf of children, the factory was key to the idea that education as a distinct sphere was required not only for the children of the upper-classes, but for factory-children as well – indeed, for *all* children.

If, five decades since the first Factory Act, factory-children persisted, employed in unprecedented number, then the idea that childhood was destroyed in the hellish institution of the factory, nevertheless, had taken hold in British society (Nardinelli 1980). From Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* to Wordsworth’s *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*; from William Wilberforce’s sermons, to Mary Carpenter’s journals; from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *The Cry of the Children* and Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* or *Oliver Twist* to the first-hand testimonies of working children gathered in the Sadler Committee Report of 1832: the affective project of saving the child for childhood was well underway (Cunningham 1995; Hendrick 2003; Stearns 2009; Goose & Honeyman 2013; Humphries 2013). The concerns of poets and policy-makers, writers and reformers included the ‘deviance’ of working children, their ‘precociousness’ and self-reliance, a tragic sign of parental neglect. Campaigns for reformatory schools that would restore such delinquents to the “sense of dependence” and the “trust so characteristic of childhood, which springs from a sense of utter helplessness” – the words of Mary Carpenter, keen educationist and reform school pioneer – grew shrill in the 1850’s (Hendrick 2003; Sandin 2009).

Where Mary Carpenter sought to school the factory-child into the appropriate innocence of the child, other reformers – Dr. Kay, for example – worried that the independence of working

children boded ill for the stability of an industrial nation: how could children, wild, self-sufficient and defiant of authority, become dependable, hardworking and amenable, thus ensuring the smooth conduct of industry and society (Davin 1982)? As the chief administrator of the government grant for public education, Dr. Kay's assessment of working-class youth was a comprehensive indictment of their behavior, morals and woeful lack of familial feeling – without educational intervention, he feared they would cause widespread disaffection, crime and even anarchy in society (Johnson 1970). The elementary schoolteacher, funded by philanthropy and Poor Laws, was thus tasked with educating such youths – by educating them out of their working-class attitudes and behaviors in order to reclaim them as children appropriate for progress and civilization. The paternal state, in the form of the school, thus stepped in for the working-class parent: an elite capture of education, as Johnson (1970) and Hendrick (2003) strongly argue, that sought to school working children into a well-ordered industrial society.

Whether humanitarian social reform or elite discipline masquerading as benevolence, the expansion of schools proceeded apace with the institution of compulsory education in Britain in the form of the Elementary Education Act of 1870. Enforced by 'kid-catchers' (School Attendance Officers) and parental fines for truancy, successive Education Acts completed the process begun by the Factory Acts: the factory-child had been reconstructed as the school-pupil. The 1870's saw the sharpest fall in child labor (Cunningham & Stromquist 2005). Whether the success of legislation or, as Nardinelli (1990) argues, the introduction of new technology that increased adult wages and reduced the need to employ children, the sight of children in factories was rare by the turn of the century (Childs 1990). While children continued to work in halftime and part-time positions – as late as 1911, a 'typical career' for a child was a combination of

education and employment (Cunningham & Stromquist 2005) – the factory-children of the past, defiant and desperate by turns, had disappeared.

School-children, as Hendrick (2003) describes, now worked in the specialized pedagogical spaces of classrooms as ‘children of the nation’ – society’s investment in the future of the nation. With the Child Study Movement fueling anxieties about racial degradation, the Boer War threatening empire and rising trade competition from Germany (the first country to introduce compulsory education), children’s schooling, health and welfare took on national importance: the British nation’s place in the world rested on the state of its children as the labor and military prowess of the future. Anticipating the efficiency concerns of human capital in development theory, investigations into the status of children, their part-time work, in particular, lead to further restrictions in the Children’s Act of 1908 (Davin 1982). Over a century from the pioneering Factory Act, the Education Act of 1918 abolished the employment of school-age children. As Hendrick (1997) writes, British childhood was now “conceptually ‘modern’” (p. 49): a period qualitatively distinct from adulthood and defined in terms of schooling, health and welfare. The laws “had cured all the evils existing in the first half of the century,” declared Victorian journalist T. H. S. Escott in 1878, showing the way for the “foundation of the Factory Acts of all other countries” (Cunningham & Stromquist 2005).

The efficacy of legislation in eliminating child labor in the British context has long been a matter of debate. In the first instance, it was 1933 before the census recorded no child labor: an achievement that took full century and a quarter since the first piece of child labor legislation and an element of post-war symbolism (Cunningham & Stromquist 2005; Fyfe 2009). Secondly, as neoclassical economists have pointed out, the role of technology, of higher wages (Nardinelli 1990) and more mature local labor markets for adults (Galbi 1997) were, arguably, more critical

to reducing child labor (see also Moehling 1999; Humphries 2003; Tuttle 2009). Nevertheless, it is the law that has been accorded primacy in accounts of child labor in Britain: the “oldest and most persistent strand” in the historiography of child labor, as Heywood (2009) declares.³⁴ And, when the International Labor Organization was established in 1919 with the elimination of child labor as one of its founding objectives, it was the law that became the instrument of choice.

The emphasis on legislation renders child labor as primarily a normative issue remedied by the institution and enforcement of the appropriate social standards by the state. Child labor, in effect, is perceived and produced as a childhood problem, caused by more or less ignorant or greedy adults (parents as well as employers). In the process, as Kirby (2009) notes, overlooking the wider social and demographic factors that underlie children’s work: the culpability of an extractive socioeconomic structure, for instance, is displaced onto the very families at the bottom of the (industrial) heap (Johnson 1970). Indeed, the guilt of working-class parents is presumed within law: as Derry & Knowles (2008) acknowledge in a cross-national study of child labor legislation, “If we believe that parents are altruistic towards their children, then it is difficult to explain why [child labor restrictions such as] compulsory education laws would make people better off” (p. 1275). In India, for instance, anti-child labor efforts have often revealed moral contempt for poor families and their mores in order to demand stricter and more punitive state intervention (see Burra 2003).

The normative legal approach to child labor narrows possibilities for action; in particular, meaningful social and economic protections for working children and their families. If child

³⁴ The moral fervor of historians of the working class, E.P. Thompson for instance, and their outrage and lament at slow and reluctant state intervention with regard to the exploitation of working children during the Industrial Revolution, has contributed to perceptions about the primacy of legislative action.

labor was the moral failing of working-class families rather than a systemic problem of industrial poverty, then calls to protect and educate children through Factory Acts could go hand-in-hand with Poor Law reforms that intensified poverty (Kirby 2009). Indeed, child labor reformers on both sides of the Atlantic believed that the problem of child labor could be addressed in isolation from the problem of impoverishment of the working classes (Cunningham & Stromquist 2005). ‘Saving the child’ from the evil factory and from unnatural parents was a matter of education, therefore, rather than a fairer economic system: legislations for minimum age rather than minimum wage were the order of the day. In India, for example, ‘blanket ban’ activists have sought to disprove the “poverty argument” for child labor in order to ban child labor as a means towards compulsory education (see Gayathri & Antony 2002). As Johnson (1970) notes, (Victorian) reformers have tended to espouse a “liberal optimism” about the economic order and its potential benevolence, at least in the long run, focusing their reform projects on poor and working-class children (and families) instead.

(Child) Labor legislation, as I noted previously, responds less to the conditions of work and more to the condition of childhood – the Factory Acts did not respond to the status of children as workers but to the ‘fact’ of their being children. When the reform movement in the United States demanded protective labor legislation for children (and women), they specifically eschewed the conditions of work for adult men, despite low wages, long hours and workplace hazards (Cunningham 1996) – men, as free and autonomous agents in the market, were expected to bargain for themselves. If the state intervened on behalf of child workers because they were children, then adult workers’ autonomy and agency as adults was deemed protected enough for them. Trade unions reinforced the distinction by supporting child labor regulations, arguably, to eliminate competition for adult male wages (Myers 2001). As *child* workers rather than child

workers in relation to the state, there was no question of children's entitlements as workers. For instance, even when children wages were the difference between survival and starvation (Tuttle 1999), there was very little discussion about compensating them for their lost earnings as the Factory Acts kicked in: the general understanding was that labor regulations for factory-children were its own reward (Engerman 2003).

Victorian rhymes and reasons remain the orthodoxy in present-day global child labor regimes. From state intervention on the basis of the unique 'nature' of childhood, in contradistinction to adulthood – the UN CRC – to the ILO's rallying cry to "combat child labor through education" (ILO-IPEC 2010), or the increasingly rights-ward development logics of the Millennium Development Goals (see Kendall 2008): contemporary global responses to child labor recall Victorian reform projects. Indeed, the iconography of child labor in global humanitarian projects has persistently rehearsed Victorian imagery and imaginaries (Thangaraj 2019). In this context, it is important to bear in mind that Victorian reform was socially conservative in a time of much social (industrial) change: an ideological project that, by enshrining the 'natural order' as child labor law, sought to assuage the anxieties of the privileged classes – among whose number were the vast majority of reformers – by schooling working (class) children. That child labor regimes today reproduce the child/adult and school/work binaries of an essentially disciplinary project, should give us pause; especially when present-day child labor projects have shown a very mixed record of affecting mass action among the poor communities where children work.

The affective intensity of Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, for example, or Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's 'Cry of the Children' – later, title of Smith's (1879) account of child labor in British brickworks – cannot be underestimated in recruiting the working-classes to

the child labor cause (Balchin 1988; Tuttle 2009; Hindman 2009; Cunningham & Stromquist 2005). The protests at Castle Yard in 1832, for instance, saw thousands of factory workers, men, women and children, marching with banners and songs against child labor – a ‘mass movement,’ as Cunningham & Stromquist (2005) describe, that is unprecedented to this day (p. 61). On the other hand, present-day efforts like the Global March Against Child Labor that seek to “raise awareness” and create a “critical mass” against child labor (Harma 2009) have been selectively affective/effective: if successful in moving western public opinion against child labor in the Indian carpet industry in 1980’s (Wiseberg 2005)³⁵, entire villages also colluded against surveilling government and non-governmental efforts in order to keep carpet production going (Levison 2009).

The Indian Factory Acts: inheriting the British experience

If ‘childhood’ became an object of knowledge in Britain – and a site of reformative discipline and state intervention – primarily in the context of the labor, then, in the Indian colony, labor became an object of knowledge, discipline and state intervention primarily in the context of ‘childhood.’ As Kydd (1920) observed, with the “battle of the Factory Acts” resolved in Britain, it was “but natural” that attention would turn to colonial industry – to the manufacturing sector in India, in particular (p. 1). “The Legislature should step in while the [Indian] industry is, so to speak, in its infancy,” suggested Mr. Redgrave, then Inspector of Factories in Bombay, calling for “wise and moderate regulations [to] stop the growth of habits of

³⁵ Kailash Satyarthi, the founder of the Indian NGO *Bachpan Bachao Andolan* (tr. Movement to Save Childhood) and its later international avatar GMACL, would go on to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 (sharing it with Malala Yousafzai), the most recent in a slew of several foreign awards (and funds), despite his mixed reputation in the country (see <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/not-all-indians-are-celebrating-kailash-satyarthis-nobel-prize-n227676> for some of the criticism his win received.)

long hours and of the employment of child labor" (Kydd 1920, p. 3). At this time, as The Indian Year Book's (1941) entry on 'Labor in India' described, there was little state oversight over the conditions of employment in any industry in India: not the growing, urban Indian manufacturing sector that Mr. Redgrave was referring to, nor the largely rural agricultural or artisanal 'traditional industry' which accounted for up to three-quarters of the country's workforce.

The first cotton mill became operational in 1818 in Bengal; but it was the growth of the cotton industry in and around Bombay that generated interest on behalf of (child) 'labour in India'. Bombay's first cotton mill opened in 1851. In the next thirty years, the number of cotton mills grew to forty-nine, employing about forty thousand workers, predominantly rural migrants who circulated between factory and farm, a quarter of whom were estimated to be women and children (Kydd 1920; Seal 1971; Chandravarkar 2003). Unique in colonial economic history, the rise of the Bombay textile industry owed to indigenous rather than imperial enterprise or foreign capital (Markovits 2002), its political significance in the context of the emerging nationalist movement, far outstripping size or economic relevance. The local businessmen and merchants, largely from the Parsee community, who pioneered and financed the Bombay mills were neither the "junior partners of foreign capital" nor its "compradors" (Chandra et al. 2016; p. 376); and the growth of the industry was a source of great pride for the emerging educated classes in Bombay (Morris 1965; Dobbin 1972). Indeed, it soon presented a threat to British interests: by the 1880s, Indian mills were challenging Lancashire exports, both in the home market for coarse cotton and in the yarn markets of China, Japan and Southeast Asia.

Alarmed by the upstart in Bombay, the Manchester Chamber of Commerce ordered an enquiry into the "causes and circumstances which have enabled Bombay spinners to supersede those of Lancashire" (Smith 1956, p. 528). The Chamber concluded that the Indian comparative

advantage owed to “the excessive hours of labour now worked in the cotton mills of British India” and demanded that “the provisions of the British Factory Acts, so far as they relate to the employment of women, young persons and children... be extended to include the textile factories of India” (Kydd 1920; p.). In the matter of labor legislation, as Kydd (1920) declared, “India [had] inherited the experience of the United Kingdom.” Alarmed, in turn, by the prospect, the Bombay Millowners Association, formed in 1875 as “an instrument of self-protection against Lancashire pressure on Parliament” (Morris 1965, p. 38), protested that Manchester, in the guise of “philanthropic endeavors,” merely sought “to hamper the staple industry of Bombay” (Smith 1956, p. 530). With the competition for export-markets thus drawn between colonizer and colony, the sectional interests of Bombay’s mill-owners and merchants “quickly appeared as national concerns and became nationalist shibboleths” (Chandravarkar 2003; p. 5). With the demand for labor legislation seen as less about protecting children and more about protecting British economic interests, resisting them offered the “most potent weapon in the arsenal” of nationalist organizations in India (Gilbert 1982, p. 358).

Mill-operatives in the country were not organized at this time – the Bombay Mill Hands Association, a proto-trade union, would come into being in 1884 – but they too appeared to oppose legislation, fearing a loss of earnings and a threat to the industry. “No voice, practically, of the working classes in India is heard [in support] here”, observed the British Secretary of State for India, when the demand for an Indian Factory Act was raised in the House of Lords, (*Hansard*, HL Deb 04 April 1879 vol 245 cols 359-63). The Bombay Factory Commission of 1875, for instance, found that there was little demand for legislative protection from mill operatives themselves (Bengallee n.d.; Kydd 1920); and when the Lethbridge Commission was set up in 1890 to enquire into the views of ‘native’ mill workers, it found to its surprise that

women operatives had registered a “strong protest” against regulation, perceiving such legislation as an attack on their meager livelihoods (Bengal Lee n.d.). As an editorial from the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (ABP), a nationalist newspaper, mockingly titled “Manchester in Tears”, read:

The operatives of India are the greatest ingrates in India. The citizens of a foreign country [i.e., Manchester] sympathized with their sufferings, but that sympathy elicited no gratitude in their minds... In vain it was pointed out to them that theirs was a wretched case. They did not seem to be aware of it... They worked hard, very hard indeed, but yet it was more easy [sic] work to attend the looms in the shade [in mills]...than to toil whole day in the sun to cut grass and at last go to bed supperless [sic]... They would also deprecate any legislative measures to interfere on their behalf. They were free to accept or reject service. They understood their interests better than others and if the work did not suit them, they would seek it elsewhere if procurable, but if the mills were destroyed by any restrictive measures, the operatives and their families would be starved... (1879, January 2; pp. 3, 4).

With public opinion in India ranged thus against labor legislation, the colonial administration was reluctant to act – the perception that imperial intervention was merely “the wickedness of the English, who are trying to stifle native manufacturers in India under the guise of philanthropy” was feared to be a likely fuse for a full-blown home rule movement (*Hansard*, HL Deb 30 July 1875 col 213).

It was in this context – and in a foreshadowing of the (child) labor-trade linkages debates a century later (see Ludden 2005) – that the legislative protection of children in Indian factories was taken up by British reformers. Marked by the same middle- and upper-class reformist zeal

that had sought to save the factory-child – indeed, spearheaded by many of the same groups, societies and individuals – the demand for child labor legislations was taken up on behalf of the poor Indian mill-child. Mary Carpenter, for instance, reform-school pioneer, had visited a cotton factory in the Bombay Presidency in 1866, only to note with regret, the absence of child labor laws in India. It was time for a Factory Act in India, she declared in no uncertain terms in her travelogue, *Six months in India*; an Act that was purposed, as in Britain, “for the protection of the children” but also as “an important agency for educating the lower portion of the population” (Carpenter 1868; p. 133). On her return to Bristol, Carpenter founded the National Indian Association; and in 1874, thirty years after half-time work in British mills was mandated for children by legislation, the Association took up the demand for an immediate half-time Factory Act in India (Kydd, 1920). Within the year, the Earl of Shaftesbury, inspired by the Journal of the National Indian Association, took up cudgels on behalf of working women and children in India, as he had for their British counterparts; while the Marquess of Salisbury, then Secretary of State for India, credited Carpenter with bringing to his notice “the ill-treatment of little children employed in the growing cotton industry of India” (*Hansard*, HL Deb 30 July 1875 col 209-213). The Bombay Factory Commission was constituted in 1875 as a result, to investigate the necessity of labor legislation in India for the protection of women and children.

To British efforts for the “Moral and Material Progress of India”³⁶ were added the voices of the emerging, educated classes in metropolitan India. Chief among those campaigning on behalf of Bombay’s factory-children was Sorabji S. Bengali, sometimes known as ‘the father of labor legislation’ in India. A Parsee businessman, Sorabji had risen from lowly origins to become

³⁶ As the annual reports of the colonial administration were called.

the trusted partner for a Manchester brokerage firm; and having initiated significant reforms in the Parsee community, he turned his attention to labor welfare when he was appointed to the Bombay Legislative Council in 1876 (Bengallee n.d.; Dobbin 1972). With the Bombay Factory Commission inconclusive in its findings, Sorabji applied to influential friends in Manchester instead. His petition included a draft “moderate law” that limited the work-hours of children in Indian factories and, in line with the British politics of the day, appealed to a *lassiez faire* state’s liberal exception for children:

The late John Stuart Mill in his ‘Principles of Political Economy’ has given his full approval to the Factory Acts of England and I observe that Professor Fawcett [Member of Parliament and Professor of Economics at Cambridge] is the only outspoken opponent of them in Parliament... because his opinion is that the law should not interfere between free adult labourers and their employers... [But] as to children, Mr. Fawcett is in favour of legislation in their behalf... The Bombay Government must be thoroughly blinded not to see that children are not free agents, and nothing can justify their continuous employment from day to day for 11, 12 or 13 hours per day. It should be a disgrace to any civilized Government to permit this to be done, after the matter has once been brought to its notice... I would suggest your sending to Lord Shaftesbury and Mr. Mundella [progressive manufacturer and Member of Parliament] a copy each of my draft, because I have observed in the English newspapers that they take much interest in this kind of legislation (Bengallee n.d.; p. 51).

Couched in the modernist terms of childhood and liberal government – and civilization – Sorabji’s appeal was warmly received in Manchester, London, and Westminster, and reprinted in *The Times* in London on 13 September 1878 to something of a public stir (Singh 1965). The Earl

of Shaftesbury promptly tabled a motion in the House of Lords, adducing Mary Carpenter's opinions on the Bombay Factory Commission Report and invoking Sorabji's draft – "the more important because it is the testimony of a Native" – "to have mercy on the children of India" by promulgating labor legislation (*Hansard*, HL Deb 04 April 1879 vol 245 cols 349-64).

Between Manchester's fears, local intelligentsia in Bombay and the representations of British reformers – the "pre-history" of the transnational advocacy networks of today, Fischer-Tine (2007) suggests – the Secretary of State for India conceded the need to protect India's working children through legislation: "We do not wish to check Indian manufactures," he assured the colony, "though the children and young persons employed certainly require and ought to receive the attention of the Legislature" (*Hansard*, HL Deb 04 April 1879 vol 245 col 362). On the one hand, the educated classes in Bombay agreed: they "rejoice[d] to see the increase in the number of mills and factories in India... [but could] not be blind to the fact that utter disregard is manifested by the mill-owners to the health and comfort of the multitude of women and young children" (Dobbin 1972, p. 207). On the other hand, as the nationalist editors of the *ABP* intoned: "[N]ow we will have a Factory Act... the boon has come down to the operatives not only unsolicited but against their wishes. We have heard of doing good by stealth, but here is an instance of doing good by – violence" (1879, January 2; pp. 3, 4). Thus it was that "in India, as in England, factory legislation began with the protection of children" (Barker 1911, p. 643): in 1881, India's first Factory Act, drafted by the Imperial Government and approved by the provincial councils, was made law. Applicable to the 58 mills operational at the time (Roy 2000, p. 165), the Indian Factory Act closely resembled the first British Factory Acts in regulating the minimum age of employment and capping the hours that children worked.

If children were the grounds for state intervention and the targets of transcontinental advocacy, they constituted a relatively small proportion of the factory workforce in India, adding up to six per cent across all classes of factories in 1892 (Das 1938). Where, in the first British factories, women and children contributed three-quarters of the workforce, the corresponding number for India was “only 25 per cent,” according to the Factory Commission of 1884 (1985) – unlike their Lancashire counterparts, adult males also worked as piece-rated hands in India. But Bombay’s mills employed about twice as many operatives as those in Manchester of similar capacity, with each machine run by two operatives working alongside (Kydd 1920; *Proceedings* 19 March 1891 vol 30, p. 184). Where children were employed, they were similarly paired up with an adult male or female operative; predominantly boys – girls largely stayed home to keep house while their mothers worked at the mills, though their employment began to grow at the turn of the century – they constituted about ten percent of the mill-hands in Bombay (Benjamin 2010). A small number in comparison to their counterparts in Manchester, but a significant number: it was their “plight” that made the reformers’ case for state intervention. “Think much of those poor oppressed children in cotton factories [in India],” wrote Mary Carpenter to her British and Indian supporters; “keep them in your heart,” she added, “as I did the poor delinquent children [in British mills] a quarter of a century ago” (Carpenter 1879, p. 438).

Childhood and colonial discipline

While a postcolonial accounting of child labor legislation in India is yet to be written, the parallels with British reformers’ efforts for the emancipation of Indian women are easy to make: both fused Victorian domestic ideology with benevolent imperialism (see Midgley 2007). A project of white (wo)men saving brown children from brown adults, as Spivak (1994) may have said, or the ‘maternal imperialism’ (Ramusack 1990) of Victorian and Edwardian reformers that

constructed a helpless Indian mill-child in need of saving, ‘childhood’ is not easily extracted from the processes of colonization. What Watts (2000) says of Mary Carpenter’s efforts for female education in India, a focus of her last years, holds for child labor as well: her campaigns, while politically and educationally progressive and humane, also remained within the imperial frame and the class-ed morality of the Victorian era. The first Factory Acts in Britain, as I pointed out earlier, were also a means of shoring up the so-called ‘natural order’ of family and society: children protected and educated in the patriarchal family, but also the (children of) “lower classes” protected and educated by the privileged classes in a civilized society (see Johnson 1970; Davin 1982; Hendrick 2003). Likewise, the first Factory Acts in India not only represented the Imperial Government’s paternal efforts on behalf of children of India, but – given native mill-owners who knew no better and had “no consciences” (*Hansard*, HL Deb 04 April 1879 vol 245 col 351-8) – they offered the means of improving and civilizing native society. In effect, re-inscribing the colonial order as the natural order of civilized Europe protecting and educating native populations. “At the heart of the colonial [educational] enterprise was the adult-child relationship”, observes Kumar (2006), the adult colonizer initiating – violently, if needed – the native Indian into a civilized way of being (p. 26). Or, as McClintock (1995) has argued, the naturalization of childhood was central to the elaboration of the colonial project, reconfiguring violently-imposed hierarchies as a natural progression towards a universal family of paternal rulers and immature subjects.

The Victorian “campaign to reclaim the wage-earning child for civilization,” as Hendrick (2003) writes, was mobilized by the privileged classes: middle-class reformers, philanthropists, landed gentry, rich businessmen and churches groups who sought to save and reform the lower classes. Some decades later, it was these very groups – alongside their enlightened allies in the

emerging Indian middle-class and intelligentsia, the Hindu *bhadralok* in particular – that assumed the mantle as the agents of civilization on behalf of “the lower portion of the population” in India (Tschurenev 2008). As Fischer-Tine (2005) argues, the “internal civilizing mission” of reclaiming the poor and the vagrant in European society was inseparably intertwined with the “external *mission civilisatrice*” directed at the colonies – indeed, one was constituted in terms of the other. William Booth’s “darkest Britain” of urban poverty and petty crime³⁷ and Booth-Tucker’s “darkest India” of immorality and mindless custom were homologous in rhetoric and imagination (Fischer-Tine 2007). As a typical fund-raising appeal of the time, this, from the Baptist missionaries at Serampore on behalf of the “natives of India”, makes evident:

The present state of society in Britain is perhaps distinguished more strongly by no feature, than by that of a benevolent concern for the welfare of others.... the wretched and the ignorant at home [have] been sought out, and their cases met with an earnestness unexampled; and philanthropy... is still demonstrating its celestial origin by attempting to impart to the natives all those blessings which emanate from knowledge and civilization (in Tschurenev 2008, p. 253).

The British factory-child and its Indian counterpart were part of the same transcontinental project of “benevolent concern,” the contiguous objects of its saving intervention and civilizing reform. Indeed, it was reform efforts like the Factory Acts that signified the “blessings of civilization” in British society and served to legitimate the ongoing colonization of the natives while also offering a model for their advancement. Indeed, the Earl of Shaftesbury urged the Government in India to follow “all civilized nations” in protecting children by law (*Hansard*, HL Deb 04 April

³⁷ See Boone’s (2005) *Youth of Darkest England: Working-Class Children at the Heart of Victorian Empire*.

1879 vol 245 col 351-8). “We have been accustomed to think that our duty to India was our duty to her labouring millions,” wrote the Spectator (1878), hailing efforts in Britain towards instituting an Indian Factory Act.

Given shared origins, arguments against child labor in India – despite the very different conditions and contexts of work – rehearsed the terms and logics of the British Factory Acts. As Kydd (1920) acknowledged, “the periodic demands for the assimilation of the Indian Factory Law to the corresponding law of the United Kingdom were frequently made in ignorance of, or without sufficient regard being paid to the particular circumstances of industrial labour in India” (p. 98). Indian mills were not electrified and working-hours were, therefore, restricted by sunlight, and often, further restricted by working in shifts or sets; and while Indian mills employed nearly twice as many operatives as Manchester mills of similar capacity, the pace of work was slower, broken up by frequent, short breaks for operatives to eat, sleep, smoke and even bathe (Kydd 1920, pp. 42, 3; see also Smith 1956). As Lord Stanley of Alderley, a historian and diplomat (and the first British Muslim peer), argued in the House of Lords, there were different customs to keep in mind – for instance, that unlike British workers who had demanded a holiday on Sunday, Bombay’s mill operatives, largely migrants, preferred continuous work so they could make the long annual journey to their villages (*Hansard*, HL Deb 25 February 1889 vol 333 col 231-6). Such context-sensitive arguments were brushed aside, however; as Chakrabarty (1983) points out, colonial knowledge about the mills in Bombay are full of “silences” – equalizing the conditions of work across the colonial divide served the interests of Manchester capital.

Equalizing the conditions of work across the colonial divide was, of course, also a reformer demand – in fact, from the perspective of ‘childhood,’ the Bombay mill-child and the

Manchester factory-child were as needy of state protection from work as the other. In effect, the reframing of the conditions of work in terms of universal ‘childhood’ facilitated, indeed, moralized the many silences with regard to the lives and lifeworlds of Indian mill operatives, child and adult. This is a key argument in this chapter: the institutionalization of ‘childhood’ in labor law served to regulate/discipline labor, adult as well as child, and the laboring classes in general. The Factory Acts in Britain institutionalized the childhood norms of the privileged-classes as the societal ideal; extended to India, they universalized such norms irrespective of “creed and colour, latitude and longitude,” as the Earl of Shaftesbury declared passionately (*Hansard*, HL Deb 04 April 1879 vol 245 col 351-8). From bilateral treaties between European states to international resolutions to labor, “the expanding institutional structure of differentiated childhood diffuse[d] around the world” (Boli-Bennett & Meyer 1978, p. 797). At the 1890 Labor Conference at Berlin, for example, representatives of European States resolved to raise the minimum age of employment to fourteen years including “in the South” (The Independent 1890, Mar 27; The Spectator 1890, April 5). While the Conference noted the different circumstances of Southern countries, the “general principle” of prioritizing the protection and welfare of children by restricting their employment was largely seen as incontrovertible (Kydd 1920, p. 49; HC Deb 07 May 1891 vol 353).

While the participation of the Indian intelligentsia and the emerging middle-class in the transcontinental project of child labor reform served to “diffuse” modernist ideals and ideologies of childhood, education and welfare, it is important to remember that they were imposed by the machinery of imperial government. Indeed, ‘childhood’ offered the colonial state in India a universalizing language for (child) labor legislations that overrode nationalistic claims – the Berlin resolutions, for instance, served as grounds for the British Parliament to call for child

labor laws in India in line with the new international standard (HC Deb 07 May 1891 vol 353 col 283). If members of Imperial Government in India were circumspect in the light of Lancashire lobbying – Mr. Nulkar, the Indian member appointed to the Imperial Council, lodged a protest against the British attempt to “force on India” the conclusions of the Berlin Conference (*Proceedings* 19 March 1891 vol 30, p. 178) – then they were also increasingly minded to making an exception in the case of children. Mr. Nugent, for instance, a Select Committee member on labor legislation in India, argued against the Berlin resolution: “there was no representative of India at the Conference,” he pointed out, and “no gentleman who attended it had any practical knowledge of this country, its industries, and its conditions of labor.” On the other hand, he granted that standards were “most advisable” for children: the “Indian child” was “precocious in some respects,” but, he added, “like all other little girls and boys of seven or eight years of age, the little Hindu or Muhammadan is much better employed in playing than in working” (*Proceedings* 19 March 1891 vol 30, pp. 164, 5). Indeed, even the Bombay Millowners Association were willing to concede the exceptional status of children – child labor was, after all, not a very significant factor of production (ABP 1879, Feb 27; p. 3).

Thus, the Berlin Conference was a direct antecedent to the Factories Act of India promulgated by the Imperial Council in 1891, defining childhood till fourteen years and mandating half-time work in the expectation that an elementary education system for half-timers would develop in response. To enforce the new regime, the Act required age and fitness certificates issued by a medical surgeon – and paid for by children or their parents – as a condition of employment. “For the first time,” as Indian reformers like Sorabhji celebrated, “the deliberations of an international conference [had] influenced the course of legislation in India” and brought about a new factory act (Bengalee n.d, p. 55). As Sen (2004) observes, the “juvenile

periphery" of child-focused schools, institutions, laws, inquiry commissions etc. was – apparently at least – set apart from overtly political adult zones of contention in colonialist and nationalist projects. The universality of childhood subsumed culture and politics: the bright-line distinction between child and adult workers set at fourteen years of age, for instance, which was established by the Indian Factories Act of 1891, was now a transcontinental legal-institutional fact. The needs, experiences and expectations of Indian factory-children were thus, 'naturally,' read and refracted through a particular (Victorian and privileged) childhood lens, but also normatively enforced by a colonial state. If a large number of half-time working children in India were, for example, found badgering their supervisors for longer hours, the appropriate response to this "temptation" was more stringent surveillance – specialized statist institutions like factory and medical inspectorates were established or expanded, with operatives encouraged to carry their age certificates in small tin cases hung round their necks to prove their age (Indian Factory Labour Commission 1908, 17, 51).

With the Indian Factory Acts, the mill-child in India was known and made knowable in terms of Victorian childhood – justified, given the universal, natural, biologically-determined fact of childhood; as did the conditions of work in India. The same terms – the same modernist terms – of hours of work, wages, bright-line age-based distinctions between worker categories, labor contracts, etc. were used and institutionalized to describe and render intelligible to the colonial state, the relations and contexts of labor in India. It was in the context of such modernized labor institutions that the everyday lives and lifeworlds of the laboring classes in India – children first, but also adults – were made visible as objects of reform. For example, the extension of Factory Acts to cover (child labor in) more 'traditional' forms of work such as (carpet) weaving or *bidi*-rolling in 1920's reframed children's work in artisanal or household

contexts as wage labor (see Balagopalan 2008): what, in pre-colonial times, had been a key set of socialization practices for children was transformed, in the context of labor legislation and with the advent of colonial capital, into wage labor. Not only was children's work stripped of its pedagogical character (in opposition to school) and reduced to a wage, in the process, particular wage regimes were instituted for adult workers as well.

"[T]he gradual extension of the principle of [colonial/state] control" to smaller-scale, non-industrial, indigenous occupations was justified as a means of achieving "the extension of protective legislation to the worker" – the child worker, in particular (Royal Commission of Labor in India 1931, p. 90-2). And if the Royal Commission noted that in these establishments, "the atmosphere [was] more that of the domestic workshop than of the factory proper," then children were still children who needed state protection from work: "official regulation is required primarily in the interests of the child worker" (p. 98). To bring such establishments under the purview of the state, the Commission instituted a motely category of "unregulated factories" that reconstituted the diversity of spaces, conditions, relations and nature of work into the modern terms of age of employment, hours of labor, mandatory holidays and rest days, and protections from machinery. This, despite the Commission itself recording a range of work hours observed in India, from "the worker coming and going as he please[d]" to "not excessive", irregular and seasonal, or "open day and night" and "obliged to work any number of hours per day required." Their puzzlement recalls Chatterton's deep frustration about the inability to instill factory disciplines among weavers in the Madras Presidency. And while the Commission conceded that "no appreciable abuse of child labor exists," that hours of work were "normally not excessive," or even that it was impossible to accurately estimate their work as it "fluctuate[d] continuously," legislation granted the colonial state the power to enter and investigate such non-

factory work with respect to the “worst features of child apprenticeship in England” (p. 96). To do in India ‘as in England’ was sufficient justification.

The presumed universality of childhood, arrived at in the context of factory-work in 19th c. Britain and now, a transcontinental legal-institutional fact, set the terms in which work itself, across continents, contexts and forms, became visible and became visible to the colonial state. Thus, at the turn of the century, children up to fourteen years, whether in the mills of Bombay or Britain or, indeed, in the “partly open verandah” of an unregulated establishment, were protected by the state in terms of half-time limits on factory-work. On the other hand, it was only children in Britain who had a realizable claim to schools.

When half-time working was introduced in British factories (the Factory Acts of 1833 and 1844) it was aimed at restructuring children’s work so that it was no longer entirely incompatible with education: children in textile mills worked half-day and attended school half-day. And while the educational clause was more successful in limiting children’s work-hours than increasing literacy *per se* (Nardinelli 1980), by the time compulsory school attendance laws applied to half-timers (in the 1880’s), a patchwork of free and fee-paying schools had emerged. The thrust of child labor laws shifted to displacing children entirely from the workplace and into schools (Dorman 2001). In demanding half-time work laws in India, therefore, reformers like Mary Carpenter assumed a similar schooling mission: “for educating [the children of] the lower portion of the population” of the country.

When the Indian Factory Act of 1891 mandated half-time work, there was little in the way of free education for the this lower portion in the country and little initiative shown by the colonial administration. As Mr. Hutchins observed in the Imperial Legislative Council, “in this country [India], there is no compulsory education, and we have not seen our way to require mill-

owners to establish schools" (*Proceedings* 19 March 1891 vol 30, p. 187, 8). While half-time laws had displaced children from work, bringing their numbers down from 6 per cent in 1892 to 1.9 per cent of the factory workforce in 1931 (Das 1938), there was little in the way of education for them to be displaced to. What was available was the modern and market-driven system of schooling unaffordable for mill-children; or the voluntary efforts of factory-owners: in 1906, the Textile Factories Labor Committee recommended that mill-owners be voluntarily responsible for the "development of education," since the cost of an elementary teacher represented very little expense for them (Kydd 1920, p. 88).

Indeed, as Mary Carpenter advised, approvingly quoting the educational efforts of Mr. E. P. P. R. Cola, the "native gentleman" and proprietor of the Arkwright Cotton Mills, mill-owners would reap the benefits in the productivity of their young workforce.

Every factory where boys and girls are employed, ought to have a schoolroom attached; and half an hour, mornings and evenings, should be devoted to giving lessons to the children in reading, writing, and simple sums. It will be found that, after receiving this elementary instruction, order will prevail in the factory; they will be enabled to distinguish their numbers on the roll-call, which will save time, and avoid confusion on the pay-day; and they will attend to their work much better. It will impress their character and intelligence; by its influence their whole spirit will be moulded, if properly directed... (Carpenter 1868, 133-4).

As in industrializing Britain, the Factory Acts were only a means to protect working children, but also to "mould their whole spirit," as it were, into a productive and reliable work-force for society, industry and nation. The Indian factory, she predicted, would yet be "a center of civilization and self-improvement", indeed, "a blessing to India" as the "benevolent and

enlightened interest” of native mill-owners took steps to develop the character of working children (Carpenter 1868, 133-4).

In this context, it is worth reiterating the disciplinary reform project of the Factory Acts. If child labor legislations in Britain sought to discipline working-class behavior and morals by educating working-children out of their dissolute and misdemeanor-ing ways (see Johnson 1970; Hendrick 2003), then the educational project of child labor legislations in India was purposed to reform an indigenous character marked by dalliance and lack of moral fiber. Lord Cornwallis, for instance, the second Governor General of India in 1786, had indicted Oriental culture for inducing “idleness, neglect of civic responsibility, [and] fatalism”— and “most importantly [as] bad for business” (Steele & Taylor 1995, p. 6); a sentiment echoed a century later in the reports of various factory and labor commissions. The Indian Factory Labor Commission of 1908, for instance, observed that

The Indian factory worker is, in general, incapable of prolonged and intense effort: he may work hard for a comparatively short period, but even in such cases the standard attained is much below what would be expected, in similar circumstances, in any European country (Kydd 1920, 99)

Casualness and slackness were a “general feature of Indian factory labour”, the Commission declared, suggesting the need for the maintenance of “proper discipline” as a correction to their “strong disinclinationto submit to discipline” (Kydd 1920, p. 100). If factory-laws in India were, as DeSousa (2010) argues, a means of reconstructing the ‘traditional,’ Hindu worker into a ‘modern’ and ‘efficient’ labor subject, befitting empire and the new industrial political economy, then child labor laws paved the way. As the Bureau of Education observed in 1918, if “the adult workman [was] too old to learn, but [it was] hoped by educating

their children to effect a substantial improvement in the intelligence of the next generation and to instill into them some form of discipline" (Balagopalan 2008, p.29). Underlying the educational impulse of colonial state, as Balagopalan (2008) observes,³⁸ was "a utilitarian imagery of a skilled and docile workforce" (p. 29). Indeed, it on the grounds of "the blessings of civilization and industry" proceeding from educating the youth that the 'Clapham sect' evangelical reformers petitioned the British Parliament for the Charter Act of 1813 which required the East India Company to promote education in the country as a condition for the renewal of its charter.

In practice, the educational impact of the Factory Acts was decidedly mixed in India. The earliest factory-schools in Bengal initiated in the wake of the half-time act of 1891, were not a success, as Kydd (1920) records, unable to attract mill-children and largely attended by the children of the clerks and *babus* employed in the mills (p. 130). Little had changed in seventeen years when the Indian Factory Labor Commission of 1908 made its comprehensive study, visiting mills and factories across the country; and while the Commission acknowledged that factory-schools schools were well-intentioned in many cases, it also cautioned that "in other cases it is equally true that the so-called school has been used solely for the purpose of retaining the children at the mill during the whole working day, in order that this additional supply of labour might be utilized... when occasion demanded" (Indian Factory Labour Commission 1908, p. 15). Some twenty years later, The Royal Commission of 1931 declared defeat:

We realize that we are here dealing with a class wholly illiterate, exceedingly poor and only too often heavily indebted. It is inevitable that to these the child's right to its childhood and even to such education as maybe available should make no appeal

³⁸ In the context of the first industrial schools in India.

comparable to that of it earning capacity however small. (Royal Commission of Labor in India 1931, p. 99)

If education was key to the civilizing mission of reform in India – and key to reformers' demands for child labor legislation – then for child workers, it proved doubly painful: the pain of displacement from work but also the double pain of inclusion in modernist schooling projects that, given their *soolnai* (circumstances) and *kashtam* (hardship) – their subaltern status – they would, always and already, experience as failure (see Kumar). A failure that would not be attributed to the minimalist, often missing, factory-school, but to the 'fact' that they were not interested in school – that they did not find modern education appealing. To paraphrase Prakash & Esteva (2008): "Education" was central to the colonizing enterprise. Efforts like the voluntary factory-school were clearly marginal to the main element of "education": to "civilize" Indian (child) labor. This goal was never reached. In spite of the formal domination of the language and modern values of the British, all over the country, it did not produce a rea/transformation of the majority of Indian (child) labor, who were still working, living, and dying within their own (work) culture... always accommodating it to the conditions of foreign domination.³⁹

School education in India

The year that half-time work was mandated in India – 1891 – was the year the Education Act was passed in Britain, making elementary education effectively free for poor and working-class children. Two decades prior, the first Education Act of 1870 had expanded access by

³⁹ The original reads: "Education" was central to the colonizing enterprise, although it was not called by this name. Scattered efforts to impose the official State language and literacy upon the Indians were clearly marginal to the main element of "education": to "civilize" the Indians out of their "barbarian" state. This goal was never reached. In spite of the formal domination of the religion and culture of the Spaniards, all over the country, it did not produce a rea /transformation of the majority of the Indians, who were still thinking, living, and dying within their own culture..., always accommodating it to the conditions of foreign domination (Prakash & Esteva 2008, p. 43,4).

introducing state-aided ‘Board Schools’ that, alongside voluntary schools run by a variety of church and reform societies, offered schooling for British factory-children. In all that time, the colonial state, while interventionist in terms of child labor in Indian factories, remained *laissez-faire* with respect to the education of factory-children. Weiner’s (1991) influential historical comparison of European and Asian countries attributed the persistence of child labor in India vis-à-vis Europe to a hierarchical traditional culture evidenced in the state’s reluctance to institute compulsory education as law – his chapter on the history of educational policy in India, however, makes no mention at all of the colonial state’s omission in this regard. Perhaps, as Crook et al. (1992) observe sarcastically, he was attributing it to “the unique British culture of *laissez-faire-unless-you-stand-to-lose*” (p. 744)?

With the transcontinental project of reform increasingly perceived as the ‘moral basis’ of British rule in India, the pressure for ‘native education’ increased. At the urgings of reformers like the abolitionist William Wilberforce (of the ‘Clapham sect’), the Charter Act was enacted by the British Crown in 1813, allocating one lakh rupees and opening doors for missionary education in India. The Crown’s mandate for education in India was a departure for the East India Company from its early days in India when its London-based Board of Directors had favored a rigorously non-interventionist policy: a commercial entity, the Company not only balked at the resources that ‘native education’ would require but feared that ‘western learning’ might offend the natives or worse, foment resistance as it had in America (Kochhar 2008).

The new educational mandate also marked the beginning of the end of the so-called ‘Orientalist Phase’ of the Company in India, exemplified by high-ranking officials who professed a great admiration for the laws and languages of the land (Pachori 1990; Kejariwal 1998). Under Warren Hastings, for example, the first Governor-General of India, a de facto

policy of “reverse acculturation” prevailed: distinguished by a “cultural empathy unusual for its time” (Vishwanathan 2014, 28), it was also a pragmatic recognition that Company *raj* was better achieved with the knowledge of native laws and norms (Frykenberg 1986). Thus, the first colonial institutions of formal education in India, the Calcutta Madrasah founded by Hastings and the Sanskrit College established by Jonathon Duncan, the Company resident in Benares, sought to patronize native knowledges in the vein of the erstwhile Hindu and Muslim rulers of the country: to win the confidence of the native elite by including them in education and government service (Frykenberg 1986; Adams & Adams 1971). These educational institutions, as Bandyopadhyay (2002) points out, supported the (separate) study of Muslim and Hindu laws – the classical/elite form of native education in Sanskrit and Arabic – required for the smooth functioning of the colonial justice system and for the assessment and collection of land revenues. The Orientalist “dialectic of information and control,” as Said (1978) might have said. It was in this light, therefore, that the Charter Act to promote education in India was largely interpreted by Company officers “as a scheme for the encouragement of Sanskrit and Arabic” rather than “western learning” (India Yearbook 1941, p. 375).

With the enactment of the 1813 Charter Act, however, change was afoot: the days of the East India Company’s administrative accommodation and acculturation were starting to give way to an ethos of reform and conversion, urged on by British reformers of evangelical and utilitarian persuasions. 1813 was also the year that the Royal Lancasterian Society, set up to promote the monitorial system of education in Britain, was reconstituted as the British and Foreign School Society (BFFS) to reflect its transcontinental mission (Bartle 1994; Tschurenkov 2008). When the Company’s London-based Board of Directors were financially-reluctant to commit to ‘native education,’ the educational mandate of the Charter Act was vigorously taken

up by BFFS and other reformist mission societies. At this time, as Tschurenev (2008) describes, the situation in England and India looked quite comparable: the state was largely absent in educational spaces and the spread of education owed to a network of reformers and voluntary societies supported by the growing middle-classes in Britain and India, keen to gain and assert their identity. The “modern education” landscape in Madras Presidency, for example, was growing rapidly, fueled by a variety of reformers, European as well as Indian, British missionaries and education-minded Company officers, and native personages. As Frykenberg (1986) compellingly describes, pietistic and Germanic schools were the first to be opened, dotting the Coromandel coast and offering a broad curriculum in practical sciences and trades to both high-born and poor; the ‘Madras System of Education’ that mimicked indigenous village-schools was being experimented with at the Male Orphan Asylum under Andrew Bell;⁴⁰ the British collector in Cuddapah established district schools in a (short-lived) attempt to train the natives for colonial service; ‘English academies’ mushroomed in the larger towns offering English tutorial services (of debatable quality) for securing government employment; the Madras Book Society, a voluntary organization composed of Indian and European notables, organized for quality English education without missionary support; and, by mid-century, five hundred Tamil and English schools were established through individual donations and missionary societies across Presidency, serving over 38,000 students.

Of course, predating these ‘modern schools’ were those “established and conducted by natives of India on native methods” – ‘indigenous schools’, as the Education Commission of 1882 labeled them (Radhakrishnan 1990; p.5). Much of what we know of indigenous schooling

⁴⁰ As Tschurenev (2008) argues, this system would form the basis of the monitorial school-system in England.

comes from colonial educational surveys the 1820's and 1830's and is full of "silences," constrained by the modernist gaze of colonial surveyors (see Kumar 2017) and the caste-ist categories of their Brahman-collaborators (see Frykenberg 1986). In the first place were the *tol*s or Sanskritic schools, patronized by Hindu rulers and elites as a religious duty, where the children of the 'twice-born' upper-castes – Brahmins, predominantly – studied *vedic* education for free; followed by the *madrassas* and *maktab*s associated with Muslim mosques, where Muslims and non-Muslims studied towards positions in the royal court; and finally, in addition to these elite forms, were the vernacular *pathshalas* – village-schools and bazaar-schools, diverse in language, form and purpose, which catered to the more prosperous (and fee-paying) lower-castes, including trading communities, 'manufacturing [or artisanal] castes,' petty landlords and well-off cultivators (Frykenberg 1986; Radhakrishnan 1990; Acharya 1994; Kumar 2000, 2017). Widespread as this three-part education 'system' appears to have been – the Adam Reports on Indigenous Education in 1837 recorded 100,000 schools (DiBona 1983) – it was also a fairly segregated system. The vernacular *pathshalas* were relatively separate from the elite *tol*s and *madrasas*; and while they served the non-elite castes, girls and the 'unclean' castes (Schedule Castes) were excluded, as were poor families who could not afford the fees that sustained the *pathshala* (Frykenberg 1986; Radhakrishnan 1990). Of course, as Kumar (2006) describes, family, caste, community or occupation remained key sites of education that held their own.

It was in this educational context and – more germane to the Company – a need for qualified and loyal rank-and-file natives, that Thomas Munro, Governor of the Madras Presidency, proposed a radical scheme for native education. "Nothing less than the building of a state-supported educational system," as Frykenberg (1986) describes: one that would link village-schools to district-level and city-based higher education, offering three modes of learning

– vernacular, classical (Sanskrit and Persian) and modern (English and science) – in parallel Hindu and Muslim schools that enrolled students of elite as well as non-elite classes and castes (p. 47).⁴¹ A comprehensive educational plan that sought to integrate the disparate rural masses into the colonial structure – and drawing their loyalties to the imperial state away from local patronage relationships – Munro’s “upward percolation” faltered with his death in 1827. Instead, the Company’s directors leaned towards the so-called “downward filtration” theory promoted by William Bentinck, the liberal Governor-General of Calcutta Presidency (Evans 2002). As he wrote to the Government of Madras in 1830, educating the “higher classes” in India – those with “natural influence over the minds of their countrymen” – was a more effective way of improving the population than “acting directly on the more numerous classes” (Singh 1970; p. 269).

Developments in the Bombay Presidency reflected a similar tension between the two approaches: where Governor Elphinstone favored the mass diffusion of ‘scientific’ knowledge by supporting vernacular educational institutions, Company directors favored higher education in English and funded the Elphinstone Native Education Institution (later, University) in 1827, to raise “a class of persons qualified … [for] the civil administration in India” (Dobbin 1972, p. 28).

This was the “downward filtration” promoted by Thomas Macaulay, president of the General Committee for Public Education that was set up in Calcutta in 1823 by the Company. As he argued in his (in)famous minute on education in 1835, trickle-down education was not only the more expedient approach to native education, given “limited means,” it was better suited to form a class of “interpreters” between the colonizers and the governed: “a class of persons Indian

⁴¹ Similar plans for mass vernacular education were developed in the 1840s for the North-Western Provinces by its Lieutenant Governor, James Thomason; initially rejected by the Company Directors, a subsequent scheme, similar to Munro’s, was approved in 1848, and with Thomason given a relatively free hand, the Province was, contra Bengal in particular, a relative success in terms of vernacular education (Srivastava 2001).

in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” – and language, of course (Singh 1970; p. 269). The impact of Macaulay’s push for English education as the Company policy has been debated;⁴² but his minute offers a useful expression of the ‘Anglicist’ logics – propaganda, as Seed (1958) termed it – that emerged at the time against the Orientalists in colonial administration. These ‘Anglicist-Orientalist debates’ centered on the medium of instruction, with English symbolizing European science and civilization and framed in irrevocable opposition to stagnant vernacular education, in/of Sanskrit in particular. Originating with British reformers and missionaries (Evans 2002), as early as 1792, evangelicals like Charles Grant⁴³ proclaimed the need for English education to open up western literatures, scriptures and reason to the natives, thus “communicating our light and knowledge” to dispel the “darkness” and error of the “Hindoos” (Adams & Adams 1971; pp. 161-2). British Utilitarians also joined the Anglicist chorus: James Mill,⁴⁴ for instance, a high-ranking Company employee, argued in that the “great end [of the Calcutta Madrasa or the Sanskrit College] should not have been to teach Hindoo learning, or Mahomedan learning, but useful learning” – science, history and philosophy, rather than vernacular literature or poetry (Sirkin & Sirkin 1971, p. 409; Srivastava 2001). The medium *was* the message for Anglicist reformers like Alexander Duff, a proponent of the “downward filter theory”, who established schools in Calcutta in the 1830s that were conducted entirely in English and aimed directly at the influential classes (Frykenberg 1986). As the *First Report of the Elphinstone Native Education Institution* observed in 1840, young men formerly educated only in superstition and imitation “must be made perfectly familiar with the

⁴² Some scholars suggest that pro-English education policies were inevitable – see Singh (1970).

⁴³ Erstwhile Company employee in India and a member of the Clapham sect.

⁴⁴ Father of John Stuart Mill, also a Company employee.

English tongue, in which alone they will be able to obtain that supply for their intellectual cravings which will be of any service to themselves or to others" (in Dobbin 1972, p. 29).

Macaulay's minute, as Singh (1970) reminds us, also voiced the demands of a small but influential group of Indian reformers, chief among them, Raja Ram Mohan Roy. A high-born Brahman much admired by British reformers, the Unitarians, in particular – Mary Carpenter (1866) memorialized him as a "light shining in thick darkness" – Roy was ranged on the side of the Anglicist/utilitarian modernization project. He saw English education as a vehicle of scientific and rational knowledges – a means of critiquing and renewing Indian culture rather than merely presenting a Christian challenge to it (Evans 2002). Instrumental in mobilizing for the Anglo-Indian College (in 1817) and the Anglo-Hindu School (in 1822) – institutions sponsored by local Hindu elites, British officials and Unitarian reformers that offered English education – Roy also opposed the establishment of a Company-aided Sanskrit College in Calcutta (Sirkin & Sirkin 1971). Indeed, it was at his invitation that Alexander Duff arrived in Calcutta to set up his Church of Scotland 'downward filter' schools (Ghazi 2010). Roy was also influential in the enactment of the Charter Act of 1833. Addressing the Select Committee of the House of Commons that year – following right after Macaulay, in fact – he convinced the members of the desire and ability among the natives for modern/English education, demanding equal consideration for the natives in the Indian civil services. With the Charter Act, the civil service was opened to "proficient" Indians, with English education required as a condition of employment (Adams & Adams 1971).⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Of course, the Act also catered to the Company's less-robust finances at the time, replacing mid-ranking British employees with proficient and cheaper Indians (Evans 2002).

The link between literacy and colonial employment was, of course, already well-established before the 1833 Charter Act – the customary literate castes (Brahmins in particular, as well as the Kayasthas in the east or the Prabhus in the west) administered Company *raj* through temples, courts and other Hindu institutions. With the Charter Act, as English was designated the official language of administration, “English [became] the new bread-and-butter language” for upper-caste Hindus (Kochhar 2008, p. 2613). In Bombay, for instance, the colonial administration opened up professional sectors like law, medicine and education to the emerging ‘intelligentsia’ to reward their higher education qualifications in English (Dobbin 1972). Nowhere was the anxiety to learn English as great as in Madras, where demand not only fueled the growth of private English tutorial services, but the Hindu Literary Society was established in 1830 to start a modern English school run by the natives (Frykenberg 1986).

If English education originated as modern reform, then it was strongly supported by the emerging urban Hindu middle-classes in India, Brahmins in particular, who sought to entrench their position in the Company *raj*. It was their willingness to pay for English education that made Macaulay’s case: if the “state of the market” would determine language policy in India, then it was English no doubt (Evans 2002, p. 271; Srivastava 2001). While the Macaulay-Bentinck downward filtration plan was never fully implemented, it shaped education policies in beyond the Indian Mutiny in 1857 when Company *raj* was replaced by direct British rule. Ending all support for indigenous education was deemed too politically drastic and a compromise was preferred: extant endowments and stipends for elite indigenous education would be retained and new grants-in-aid would support private English schools for the upper classes [“whose culture would then filter down to the masses” (in Adams & Adams 1971, p. 170)] even as vernacular educational materials would be developed for the diffusion of modern science to the masses

(Evans 2002). This trifecta, an early expression of the importance of education for all, perhaps, while progressive in plan, differed in practice. Not only was English a condition of employment in the colonial administration, a policy of preferential employment of candidates with a western education was introduced in 1844, fueling the expansion of modern English schooling. “In practice” therefore, notes Acharya (1995), “English education grew,” led by private entities, Indian reformers and missionary societies, while “vernacular education remained neglected” (p. 670).

As the Calcutta newspaper, *Bengal Hurkaru* circa 1850 expressed it, the knowledge of English does not lead to eternal bliss, it paves the way to wealth. English is to us a money-making knowledge... Perhaps it would be asked, why are Hindu boys sent to the missionary schools? To which I would reply, there is no alternative. Educated in English they must be... (Adams & Adams 1971, p. 171).

Indeed, there was no alternative: English education was the demand of the urban middle-classes and metropolitan intelligentsia while vernacular education, especially in the non-elite *pathshala*, was in short-supply. Any hope of education for all was stymied from the start by lack of funds from the colonial state. Macaulay’s political rhetoric, observes Evans (2002), has been overplayed for the pecuniary considerations motivating downward filtration; it was “the realization that the funds the government was willing to part with were quite inadequate for mass education” that was the genesis of downward filtration (Kumar 2006). Macaulay’s Minute was less the principled resolution of a civilizing state in favor of modern science over superstitious Sanskrit, more the parsimony of a profit-minded administration. Parsimony dictated a minimally state-funded educational system; and modern English education, primarily underwritten by

private entities or the fee-paying urban *bhadralok* and *babu*-classes, fit the bill. The state retreated from mass vernacular education, all the while claiming progressive reform.

The parsimony of the colonial state effectively institutionalized a middle-class driven market in India for a particular form of formal, modern education in English. Historians like Whitehead (2003), perhaps in an attempt to “retrieve imperialism from its critics” (Sen 2005), have characterized colonial support for English education “as simply responding to market demand” – “it is difficult to imagine how the British could have shaped their Indian education policy any differently and still won popular support for it,” he adds (p. 320). British educational policy in India, he suggests was “invariably constrained, first by a chronic lack of financial resources and second by the fact that it was ultimately dependent on Indian cooperation for its success” (p. 324). In the process, naturalizing the chronic lack of financial resources made available for ‘native education’ by the colonial state: the outlay was a 42 lakh rupees, a mere eighth of what mass education called for (Nurullah & Naik 1964, p. 155). Whitehead also depoliticizes the institutional incentives – the link between English education and colonial employment – that produced and sustained it as a superior, even normative form. The role of the urban *bhadralok* in the growth of modern/English education in India cannot be underestimated, as scholars like Acharya (1985) have highlighted; but it is disingenuous to overlook the institutional conditions that fed their desire for English schooling.

Not only was English/modern education produced as civilizing reform in the Anglicist-Orientalist debates, in opposition to the “evil” that Duff called Sanskrit (Frykenberg 1986), education in the (non-Sanskrit, non-Arabic) vernacular was, in the process, relegated to primitive status. Too “poor and rude”, in Macaulay’s words, for “useful knowledge” (Sirkin & Sirkin 1971, p. 409). Despite the strides taken by missionaries in translating literary and scientific

works into various vernaculars – the pietist Ziegenbalg on the Coromandel in the 18th century, for instance (Frykenberg 1986), or even the Baptists at Serampore in the early 19th century (Srivastava 2001) – the vernaculars were deemed impracticable for ‘useful’ scientific and literary instruction within utilitarian reformist ideologies. By mid-century, schooling, in effect, was synonymous with (modern) English education. As Hodgson Prat, the Inspector of Schools for South Bengal, observed in 1857,

The poorest classes, those who form the mass, do not want schools at all because they do not understand the use of [English] education, because they are poor to pay schooling fees and subscriptions, and because the labour of their children is required to enable them to live. The middle and upper classes will make no sort of sacrifice for the establishment of any but English schools (in Acharya 1985, p. 1787).

The working-poor, in turn, were produced as uninterested in education. As Steele & Taylor (1995) observe sardonically, the real colonial education agenda was “the initiation of the educated Indian into the Englishman’s perception of the Indian masses as both superstitious and ignorant...” (p. 14). For Acharya (1985), the lack of participation in education among the poorer classes is inseparable from the growth of an education system that catered to metropolitan needs and, in the process, brought on the “destruction” of indigenous vernacular education (p. 23). The 1835 Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction in Calcutta Presidency appreciated the need for village-schools across the country, but – in a now familiar refrain – concluded that the size of such a mass education system was impracticable given the limited funds (Sirkin & Sirkin 1971). What the Committee overlooked, however, were the fairly widespread vernacular village-schools and *pathshalas* across the country that, as Naik & Nurulla (1964) note, may have well served as the basis of mass education. In the pronouncements of the colonial state on

education, vernacular *pathshalas* were disappeared on the grounds of financial expediency and couched as modernist reform.

The marginalization of vernacular village-schools and *pathshalas* was increasingly an institutional fact: the modern criteria applied to direct the meager educational funds of the colonial state favored, unsurprisingly, “modern” education. In the two decades following Macaulay’s Minute, the number of Company-aided schools grew from 400 to 1400 (Adams & Adams 1971); few vernacular schools in the *mofussils* however, received any substantial or sustained state grants-in-aid (Kumar 2006, 2012; Acharya 1995). In 1850-1, for instance, the district English schools in Bombay Presidency serving about 1800 students received twice as much state support as the nearly 11,000 *mofussil* pupils in vernacular schools (Dobbin 1972). Between market forces and the educational policy and funding practices of the colonial administration, a new “system” of education was taking normative form in which the vernacular school was unrecognizable as education. This system or “technology” as Kumar (2011) calls it, was not only European in origin and English in language, it was modern in function and form – modern in architecture as much as pedagogy – with spaces, buildings, furniture, textbooks, time-tables and instructional methods all producing a model of education, of scholar and teacher, that was quite distinct from vernacular forms.

Vernacular education, in effect, was constituted as a lack of such technology – the “absence of [a] mural dimension”: the lack of the “solid and permanent school buildings and paraphernalia” that not only symbolized the “ignorance of the Hindus” but was not easily recognized by colonial officials as educational spaces for the dissemination of ‘useful knowledge’ (Radhakrishnan 1990, 10-11). “Education” came to represent the educational institutions in the Presidency capitals of Calcutta, Madras or Bombay, their buildings – “citadels

of empire,” Kumar (2006) calls them – symbolizing a planned modernity that offered an unequivocally negative comment on vernacular educational spaces. Spatially unspecific and loosely-constituted – essentially, the assembly of a few pupils and a teacher in widely varying spaces, from the shade of a tree, to the *pials* (courtyards), verandahs and open sheds of barbers’, potters’ and oil-pressers’ homes, or the pilgrim-house, meeting-place (*baithak-khana*) or temple in the locality (Radhakrishnan 1990; Kumar 2006) – vernacular schools appeared far too primitive and undisciplined for the colonial state. “There are no proper school buildings”, remarked colonial officials frequently and disparagingly in their surveys in the 1820’s and 1830’s (Kumar 2006), perhaps implying that there was no proper education either.

Instruction in village-schools, as Radhakrishnan (1990) describes, was predominantly oral or of the “dust-writing” kind, led by a single teacher or even a pupil-teacher; directed at a wide and varied student age-range; and focused on a largely secular and basic curriculum in reading, writing, arithmetic – the rote-learning of multiplication tables, in particular – and the occasional accounting or business-related subject. In this context, it is appropriate to reiterate that monitorial schools, popularized in Britain by Bell (and Lancaster) and a precursor to the national education system, originated as an improvisation of an 18th century village-school in Madras where Bell observed the teacher instructing his most advanced pupils who in turn supervised their peers (Tschurenev 2008). Bell’s ‘Madras System of Education’ was well-received in Britain for its economy; as A.D. Campbell, civil servant and educational authority in Madras, reported in 1823:

The economy with which children are taught to write in Native schools, and the system by which the more advanced scholars are caused to teach the less advanced, and at the same time to confirm their own knowledge is certainly admirable. Europeans, in this

respect, may with advantage take a lesson from Hindu simplicity. The shade of the spreading banyan tree, to be found in every village, is in this climate the most wholesome and convenient... and the sand beneath it renders stationery altogether unnecessary (in Frykenberg 1986, p. 48).

Ironic, perhaps – but also an outworking of colonial knowledge, power and parsimony – that a vernacular form and mode of education was cross-pollinated with British middle-class reform ideologies to form the inexpensive basis of the national schooling-system in Britain, even as it was being marginalized in India. Refracted through the emerging technology of English schools – a modern analytic of government, in fact, constituted by the inspectorial and funding practices of the colonial state, affiliation to certifying metropolitan universities and uniform in technology and form – the decentralized and particularistic modes, languages and methods of instruction of vernacular village-schools appeared too backward and intractable for educational utility or administrative ease. Colonial policy, writes Kumar (2006), was “a deliberate and total discursive break with all of them [vernacular schools], and from the 1860s until approximately 1900, indigenous schools gradually became extinct”; the handful that survived, largely the province of the poor and powerless (p.). Gandhi, in his Chatham House address in 1931, recalled the first colonial education surveys a century ago to observe: “British administrators, when they came to India, instead of taking hold of things as they were, began to root them out” (in Radhakrishnan 1990, 4). In fact, British administrators had not been able to “see” vernacular schools to even being taking hold of them.

In the provinces, as Kumar (2006) describes, modern education was largely a matter of rhetoric – increasingly, one of failure: “as if it were a structure to be created with words... when all [that] the words echoed was... “It is not happening”. Unlike the older schooling which did

have relevance, modern education sought to train pupils for professions that the provincials saw no future in – as early as 1839, the Company resident in Bhopal pointed out that were provincial youth to acquire an English education, it was “almost utterly useless” for local business activity and livelihoods (Kumar 2006). For the traditionally elite literate castes, English education facilitated their entry in numbers into colonial service – by the 1860s, Brahmins comprised two-thirds of the Hindus employed in the executive and judicial services in Bombay and Madras; and for wealthy, non-Brahman classes – the landed elite in Bengal or the Parsee trading families in Bombay – English education expanded opportunities in commerce, law, administration and education (see Dobbin 1972). But for other occupational groups and castes, who often had their own specialized training, there was little value in English education. The commercial families in Bombay, for instance, who were wont to send their sons into the family business at an early age, had no interest in English education (Dobbin 1972). The poorer working classes responded by showing a lack of interest in English education, dismissing it on the grounds that what one learned officially was required but not useful, while what one learned on the ground was unofficial and unrecognized, but very useful (Kumar 2006; Acharya 1978).

Over the 19th century, education “became exclusively a *bhadralok* affair” in India (Acharya 1995), the province of the rising professional “intelligentsia” (Dobbin 1972): an elite cultural form identified with the emerging metropolitan, middle-classes that few in the rest of the country found affordable, accessible, useful or indeed, appealing. The working child had been saved from work by a protective state, for at least half his/her time; but with the state providing little in the way of affordable/appealing/useful education, (s)he was low on work and out of education, modern as well as vernacular.

The disciplinary logics of *child* labor

It is worth repeating Dahlén (2007) that efforts to combat child labor (with education) have typically suffered a “hang-over from history” (p. 300-1). If the factory-child in 19th c. Britain was progressively removed from the factory and reconstructed as the school-child, appropriately disciplined for productive futures in service of the nation and prepared to take his/her place in the social order in service of civilization, then the mill-child in India was consigned by a parsimonious colonial state to a liminal space, marginal to both waged-work in the factory and school education in English. With the vernacular school declining in the context of modern education, (s)he had nowhere to be and belong; on the other hand, even his/her refusal of the modern school was read as his/her own ignorance or superstition. The chronic funding gap in efforts towards education for all, the debates over English (private) schools and vernacular language (state) schools in India, the organization of the education system around the normative, centralizing ‘technology’ of the school/classroom to the exclusion of alternative spaces: history suggests that these contemporary education policy concerns may well bear a closer analysis for underlying colonizing/disciplinary logics.

For the purposes of this chapter, however, I want to focus on the disciplinary logics implicit in the historic construction of the working child as the *child* worker. Given its particular origins, what is a hyphenated or rather, two-word, term – child worker – is essentially reduced to a *child* who works; and therefore, a child who work because (s)he knows no better or because (s)he has been coerced into working. In effect, a child, who is ignorant and/or exploited and, therefore, requires education and protection by the state. The problem with a *child* worker is a deficit childhood; and by moving the child into school, education, protection and childhood are all restored in one go. A *child* worker suffers a problem childhood, rather problems with/at work – the *child* worker is exploited because of his/her childhood, rather than as a worker who may be

working in bad conditions. As an analytic, the *child* worker disappears work in favor of childhood.

In the first instance, in moving from child labor/worker to *child* worker, work in terms of its type and purpose, its specific relations and trajectories are disappeared into the factory-work. In the process, informal sector work – traditional/artisanal manufacture, for example – are read in the terms of the relatively standardized processes, roles, conditions and relations of factory-work. In effect, the great diversity in arrangements of informal work are effectively collapsed into wage-work and factory-contracts that are not only reductive but irrelevant. This is problematic when the majority experience of child labor owes to informal sector work, primarily in agriculture and in other family-based enterprises (ILO-IPEC 2013) – especially so when the informal sector in the South, in a significant departure from the typical pattern of modernization in the North, has continued to grow (Ennew, Myers & Plateau 2005). In effect, knowledge about the majority of child labor in the world, in households, families, kin-circles, occupational groups, communities or caste-groups is produced in the terms and logics of a minority experience of waged factory-work in childhood. In the process, knowledge about the factory disciplines and contracts of work discipline and regulate the enduring social relationships between the generations that are key to the recognition, welfare and identity of children in the household and community. Children's responsibilities and work relations, typically located in the landscapes of (re)production in the global South, are misrecognized in factory-terms as exploitative (Nieuwenhuys 2007; see also Nieuwenhuys 1998; Katz 2004).

In the second instance, as a *child* worker, protection is premised on the withdrawal of the child from work – the possibility of protecting the child at work is not a serious possibility. In effect, the *child* worker is abstracted from the socioeconomic and political circumstances that

produce work situations. Protection is an individuated experience of the *child* worker, separated out of the class or community of workers; any shared intergenerational interests or solidarity are precluded.

Thirdly, the role of work in the development of the child is denied (see Woodhead 1998) even as the contribution of the child at work or his/her capacity to earn are ignored. That is, the economic value of the child is erased, despite the fact of their economic significance, as evidenced by the protracted lobbying of the Manchester and Bombay mills. Unlike the (adult) worker, a *child* worker has no claim to compensation for his/her lost earnings – removing the child from work into school is perceived as compensation enough. After all, as Zelizer (1985) describes, the child is priceless: (emotionally) invaluable but simultaneously rendered (economically) valueless. On the other hand, as Nieuwenhuys (2007) argues, it is the very denial of the value of children work that is exploitative.

Finally, the entrenchment of the terms of factory-work in law and policy valorizes the autonomous basis of the formal work contract. That is, the immaturity of the *child* worker in contrast to the adult, reflected in the child's lack of rationality and autonomy, precludes the *free* exchange of the child's labor for wages (rendering child labor exploitative). On the other hand, adults by virtue of their adulthood are allowed – indeed, required and assumed – to exercise individual, autonomous choice in freely exchanging labor for remuneration, irrespective of the relations of power that produce labor relations. In an argument analogous to Gyan Prakash's (2003) in his iconoclastic *Bonded Histories*, the fascination of the modern world with child labor as the unfree vestiges of a dark past, naturalizes adult labor as “free labor,” obscuring, in the process, the exploitative terms and conditions of work that adults “freely” choose in the modern economy.

A final note: vernacularizing child labor

Article 39 of the Indian Constitution, one of the key statements of the independent Indian state on economic justice, was also one of its first statements on children's welfare: Article 39(e) enjoined the state to ensure that "the health and strength of workers, men and women, and the tender age of children are not abused and that they are not forced by economic necessity to enter vocations unsuited to their age and strength." That is, the state, while recognizing the "tender age" of children, placed the welfare and protection of working children in the context of socio-economic justice – and inseparable from the economic rights of workers in general. In effect, the protection of the child worker is not only about his/her special circumstances of childhood but also about the shared condition of workers in an unequal socioeconomic structure. The eradication of child labor is not as much a matter of legal prohibition that enforces the special rights of children, as that resulting from the general human rights "of an entire society" to protection from socioeconomic oppression (Weston 2005, p. 431). This 'context-sensitive' rights-based approach, in fact, integrates the "economic, social and cultural" (ESC) rights that were given short shrift in a Cold War climate. In this framing, the Indian Constitution, in fact, offered an early analysis of "child labor as a human rights issue" (Arat 2002): one that holds to a wider understanding of children's rights and foregrounds the interrelatedness and interdependency of children rights and the human rights of their parents and communities. If, as Freeman (2000) argues, the global rights agenda has increasingly narrowed to focus on children, then protection rights afforded to the *child* worker offer little grounds for social transformation or justice. A vernacular understanding of the child labor as a socioeconomic issue is all more critical, then, to refocus anti-child labor efforts onto the socioeconomic and cultural context and away from the protections and outcomes for individual children.

The Supreme Court in India, in handing down its landmark judgment in the M.C. Mehta vs. State of Tamil Nadu PIL (Public Intervention Litigation),⁴⁶ drew on the economic rights of children enshrined in Article 39: acknowledging their economic contribution as workers, the Court directed the state to find alternative employment for an adult member of the family in lieu of the child and made the employer liable for compensation to redress the wrongful employment of the child. “It may be,” the Bench acknowledged,⁴⁷ “that the problem [of child labor] would be taken care of to some extent by insisting on compulsory education.” That was the dominant historical view after all, and the dominant scholarly view in India as well: “Neera [Burra] thinks that if there is at all a blueprint for tackling the problem of child labor, it is education.” Resisting the ‘childhood’ construction of the problem, the Court noted that “the child of a poor parent would not receive education, if per force it has to earn to make the family meet both the ends.” Taking the view, therefore, “that till an alternative income is assured to the family, the question of abolition of child labor would really remain a will-o’-the wisp,” the Court directed the state to compensate the families of child workers for the lost earnings. To that end, the Court required a Child Labor Rehabilitation-cum-Welfare Fund to be set up at the district-level with state grants of five thousand rupees per child and the twenty thousand rupees penalty exacted from offending employers. The returns yielded by the corpus of twenty-five thousand rupees per child was envisaged by the Court as an alternative source of income for the child and its family. The Court

⁴⁶Filed in 1986 by the lawyer-activist M.C. Mehta in the light of the newly-enacted CLPRA as well as on the constitutional mandate for education (Article 45) – and given fresh and tragic impetus in 1991 by a fire that claimed 39 lives in a Sivakasi fireworks unit – the Supreme Court responded in 1996 to prohibit the employment of children in match and fireworks industries. Strongly directing the state’s attention to children in hazardous sectors, the Court addressed the “rehabilitation” of working children for the first time, including compensating them.

⁴⁷ Supreme Court of India (10 December 1996), M.C. Mehta v. State of Tamil Nadu and others. Citation: 1996IXAD(SC)582, AIR1997SC699, (1997)3GLR2306, JT1996(11)SC685, (1997)IILLJ724SC, 1996(9)SCALE42, 1997(1)SCALESP-9, (1996)6SCC756, [1996]Supp9SCR726, 1997(1)UJ243

moreover, in recognition of the economic rights of the child in Article 39, reframed employer penalties as “compensation” to the child *worker* to redress the wrongful employment of the child.

The Court’s radical approach, however, implemented at the discretion of the district administration, has not been translated into practice. Indeed, state action with respect to child labor in Independent India has hardly been radical by any stretch, reflecting the gradualism and pragmatism of the ILO’s legislative labor market framework, and retaining its industrial focus even when the vast majority of the Indian workforce is employed in agriculture and the unorganized/informal sector. The Gurupadaswamy Committee, India’s first national committee on child labor, was perhaps the closest the country has been to developing a vernacularized policy – even if it was appointed in 1979 by the Ministry of Labor to observe the International Year of the Child. The sixteen-member Committee considered the child worker, not in contradistinction to the autonomous adult worker, but by distinguishing them by their locally-intelligible categories of employment: as “paid family workers,” “apprentices in traditional crafts,” or those “working and schooling” (Committee on Child Labor 1979, pp. 347,8). Emphasizing neither part of the two-word term of child labor at the expense of the other, the reclassification disfavored “given” descriptions of child labor for categories that foregrounded how children experienced work in the informal economy: the intergenerational, familial and occupational group relations within which they worked; the longer-term educational and developmental purposes and impacts of their work; and the interaction between children’s work and the formal schooling system. The Committee suggested a “multiple policy approach,” therefore, recognizing each category had its own “peculiar problems” and called for its own peculiar policy.

As a direct result of the Gurupadaswamy Committee Report, The Child Labor Prevention and Regulation Act was passed in 1986 as India's apex child labor law – disappointingly however, very much in the labor market tradition of the ILO. Indian parliamentarians and policymakers had chosen to implement only those recommendations that reflected the international (ILO) legislative approach of the time: in effect, the CLPRA was organized in the same factory-terms of minimum employment age, hours of work etc. of the British/colonial/ILO approach. In the process, the more radical aspects of the Gurupadaswamy Committee's recommendations – institutional mechanisms for organizing working children in industry, for instance – were shortchanged and dismissed; while the emphasis on a unified/comprehensive law – primarily purposed for ease of enforcement – was effected to the erosion of the 'multiple policy approach' of the Committee. The Gurupadaswamy Committee Report only served to signal the complexity of the child labor situation in India as a means to wrangle exceptions and accommodations with respect to international commitments.

From earning to learning; or, from earning (while learning) to learning (only)

How did a socially conservative reform project in the shadow of the 19th c. British mill become established as a moral and progressive movement for children – and a model policy-prescription for nations everywhere despite ‘local’ reluctance? The answer lies, I suggest, in the interlinked logics of two of the major orienting discourses of the twentieth century: modernization/development dogma, on the one hand, and the political-moral/humanitarian narrative of (child) rights on the other, as they have waxed and waned and intertwined in global frameworks: the double-barreled human capital-human rights logics that target children everywhere today.

Double-barreled human capital-human rights logics: development frameworks

Cunningham & Stromquist (2005) observe that it is difficult to imagine a history of child labor that escapes the thrall of modernization theory. *Lessons from the historical experience of today's industrial economies* – the title of Humphries' (2003) article – continue to be drawn that:

Child labor was more prevalent in 19th century industrializers than it is in developing countries today. It was particularly extensive in the earliest industrializers. This pattern may be a source of optimism signaling the spread of technologies that have little use for child labor and of values that endorse the preservation and protection of childhood (p. 175).

Modernization, then, of machines and mores – and the ‘developing’ world would follow the industrial nations into a child labor-free world. While Humphries (2003) goes on to present a

more nuanced picture, the thrust of the abstract quoted above is clear, indeed, seductively simple: with the spread of modern technology and modern values from the ‘industrialized North’ to the ‘developing South,’ (the need for) child labor would be eliminated. On the other hand, such confidence in modernization as child labor remedy is unwarranted, given the persistence of child labor in the industrialized North. In Britain, for instance, the early 1970s witnessed a “rediscovery” of child employment, fueling anxious enquires into ‘out of school work’ and the state of the economy and the education system (Mizen 2004); while in the Netherlands and the United States, a majority of children were regularly involved in part-time or seasonal labor markets before the school-leaving age of sixteen (White 2009).

Modernization is not only about new machinery, but new men, as Inkeles (1969) wrote; its optimism not only derives from technological progress that precludes child labor, but also the universalized norms of modern schooling adopted across societies (Boli, Meyer & Ramirez 1985). Myron Weiner (1991), political-scientist and proponent of modernization, compared the political-economic histories of Europe and Asia, to make a strident case for the latter to follow the former in instituting ‘modern’ compulsory primary education laws as *the* decisive means to eliminate child labor. Contrary to neoclassical economists who argue that economic development preceded education in the advanced economies of the North (Nardinelli 1990; 1980), Weiner argued that technological/economic growth was not a sufficient condition: child labor was less a phenomenon of poverty and more of social attitudes and sensibilities that needed re-education and reform (p. 30). In the Indian case, it was Hindu cultural ideologies and caste hierarchies rather than poverty which constructed the low-caste child as a worker and dismissed their educational needs. Characterizing “modern states” as the “ultimate guardian[s] of children,” Weiner (1991) urged the Indian state to modernize and protect the working child by adopting

compulsory education policies (p. 3). In the process, the state would – rightly, in his opinion – impose education as a parental *duty* on all households, irrespective of their socioeconomic status (Weiner 1996, p. 3011, emphasis in the original). This ‘education argument’ against child labor, by “denying parents the income of their children” would, Weiner contended, incentivize fewer, more ‘priceless’ children, thus curbing poverty and child labor in one fell swoop (pp. 186, 7). Moreover, he promised, by instilling appropriate modern values, compulsory education would simultaneously create employment in the light of a global economy (Weiner 1996) – education would precede technological/economic growth.

‘A Parable,’ said Oxfam’s manifesto for its *Education Now* campaign in 1999, subtitled *Break the Cycle of Poverty*:

There once was a country that had a protracted debate for over 50 years about the desirability of introducing free and compulsory primary education. Millions of its children were out of school, many of them forced to work under highly exploitative conditions. Successive governments took the view that public education was beyond the means of the state. When the foundations of a national school system were finally laid, the results were extraordinary. Within a space of ten years, the number of children in state schools increased from fewer than 10,000 to over 1 million. Over the next ten years, enrollment doubled. And child labor declined dramatically. This country was England, during 20 years after the 1870 Education Act. (Watkins 2000, in Fyfe 2009, p. 49).

International development circles, in Weiner-ian mode, recruited child labor reform efforts in 19th c. Britain to support the education-precedes-development thesis. Children, in this view, are “human potential that must be prepared for productive adulthood” – in a “national school system,” preferably – while childhood is a “period of economic investment that produced future

returns" (Ennew, Myers & Plateau 2005, p. 29). This idea of *human capital*, while originating in Adam Smith-ian classical economics, owes British child labor reform the distinct application to children: as factory-children were gradually rescued and restored as schoolchildren, 'childhood' was not only about protection, but also preparation – in school – for productive participation in British military and industrial might. Halftime and part-time child labor, for instance, was abolished in 1918, in order to guard the 'quality' of children's school investment against its downgrading by work. The notion of a 'zero-sum' model that pitted children's work against school to the detriment of the latter was thus instituted (Marsh 1991); and, with the advent of cost-benefit calculations in human capital theory, would soon be axiomatic policy in international development.

The formative years for human capital theory were the late 1950s with the work of the economists Theodore W. Schultz, Jacob Mincer and Gary Becker and, in the wake of the 'Sputnik Shock' (Teixeira 2014), had wide public appeal in the United States. The theory assumes that education increases or improves the economic capabilities of people and is, therefore, a fundamental source of economic productivity (Schultz 1971). In fact, according to Schultz (1961), of all the factors contributing to the rise in national income over the first half of the 20th century in the global North, human capital far outstripped conventional capital. With an explosion of studies in the 1960's, a la Gary Becker, calculating the individual/private earnings returns to different levels of school and college education, a "new field in economics known as the economics of human capital, or more narrowly, the economics of education," was born (Psacharopoulos 1973, p. 1). In the context of wider panics about investment in education in a Cold War climate, formal education rather than on-the-job training or apprenticeships – central to Mincer's (1958) foundational work – became the default focus of the new field. With

Psacharopoulos (1973) tabulating the rates of return to formal education by country, human capital theory went international: not only did Psacharopoulos find that incomes rose with education across countries, but he identified the now ‘classic pattern’ of returns to primary education being the highest (Psacharopoulos 1985, 1988; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos 2002).

Despite several methodological and philosophical critiques – including Benson (1978), for instance, who argued against the emphasis on formal education over vocational training, or Bennell (1996a, 1996b) who called out the poor quality of Southern country data, including its overreliance on formal sector wage employment – human capital theory took firm hold: on public imagination, as Sweetland (1996) demonstrates and in World Bank development dogma. Universal primary education was the one exception, as Mundy (2006) describes, to the state cut-backs required by the World Bank and its allied agencies within ‘neoliberal’ programs for economic development. This “education-for-development regime” – whether a means of development or a palliative in the face of dirty development (Therien 2002) – was exemplified by the Education for All (EFA) movement, inaugurated in 1990 by the UNESCO, with near universal state commitment to universalizing primary education. Reiterated a decade later in the EFA’s Dakar framework that committed to universal primary education as a *right* and by the Millennium Development Goals that targeted universal primary education as integral to global development, the two-pronged or double-barreled human capital – human rights logics were in place. There was, however, little mention of child labor *per se* in primary education programs – the elimination of child labor was assumed to be intrinsic to the development process (OECD 2003; Fyfe 2005). That is, child labor was problematic primarily as an impediment to

development – as an inefficient allocation of children’s time to work rather than school.⁴⁸ The MDGs, in effect, reframed the elimination of child labor as a development/ human capital goal rather than an intrinsically moral ideal (Tomasevski 2003).

This instrumental approach to child labor had, however, already received a jolt in the run up to millennial projects of development: child labor in sweatshops across Southern countries had become increasingly visible in the ‘neoliberal’ era of global development. On the one hand, Nardinelli-an arguments were rehearsed to justify ‘dirty development’ in the South: Hindman (2009), for example, in his introduction to *The World of Child Labor*, urged for “optimism grounded in historical fact” that

All advanced industrialized nations have gone through a ‘dirty phase’ involving heavy use of child labor in key industries, though some nations were considerably less dirty than others. Likewise, all advanced industrialized nations have, to a greater or lesser degree, come to terms with their child labor problems (p. 45).

Thus, economists attempted to demonstrate the export-led decline in child labor: Edmonds and Pavcnik (2004), for instance, showed that the opening up of the Vietnamese rice market to exports increased household incomes and brought down child labor in rural Vietnam by 45 percent.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ The “interlink” between child labor and development produced several inter-agency collaborations: the Understanding Children’s Work (UCW) project in 2000 (the ILO, UNICEF and the World Bank) and the Global Task Force on Child Labor and Education for All in 2005 (the ILO, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP and the World Bank).

⁴⁹ As Brown (2009) cautioned however, the effects of trade differed by sector and social group – the gains of trade enjoyed by rice farmers and their children may have come at the cost of poor households in other sectors forced to increase their children’s work to afford expensive rice.

On the other hand, contemporary reformers – human rights activists – perceived sweatshop child labor as the unconscionable excesses of a new global economic order in the making. To their number were added the relatively privileged classes of labor and business in the North, threatened by the shift of manufacturing to the global South. Their anxieties coalesced as “popular opinion... that child labor in developing countries is nearly always a form of child abuse, in which children work in hazardous conditions in run-down factories for callous businesses” (Edmonds & Pavenik 2005, p. 1). Calls for consumer boycotts, trade sanctions, social clauses and trade-(child) labor ‘linkages’ followed, with the Harkin’s Bill (or the Child Labor Deterrence Act),⁵⁰ introduced in 1993 in the U.S., the most (in)famous.⁵¹ The demand for trade-labor linkages sought to make free trade conditional to the adoption (by the global South) of the ‘core labor standards’ endorsed by the ILO – freedom of association, freedom from forced labor and non-discrimination in employment, to which the abolition of child labor was added as a fourth (Charnowitz 2000; Böhning 2005).⁵² Celebrated, on the one hand, as a brave new global era of (labor) rights, trade linkages were stridently opposed by (economists and business interests in) the global South who, perhaps unsurprisingly, saw them as the thinly-veiled protectionist measures of competition-averse Northern nations (Bhagwati 2001; Panagariya 2003).

⁵⁰ The Bill was introduced by Senator Tom Harkin, who continued to reintroduce the bill that sought to “prohibit the importation of goods produced abroad with child labor.” Tom Harkin has nominated Kailash Satyarthi for the Nobel Peace Prize every year since 2005 – Satyarthi was awarded the prize in 2014.

⁵¹ The mere threat of the Harkin’s Bill prompted garment manufacturing companies in Bangladesh to lay off an estimated 50,000 children in their export factories; see Bissell (2003,) for an account from the perspective of child workers in Bangladeshi garment factories.

⁵² On the one hand, they brought all the moral force and pathos of child labor in sweatshops to bear on a movement towards a global framework for labor protections. On the other hand, as Alston observes (2004), their focus on child labor detracted from labor protections at work: the four ‘core labor standards’ are in fact “neoliberal” in ideology in that they have little to say about fair wages, working hours, benefits or compensation.

The World Trade Organization (WTO), responding to strong pressure from Southern countries, ruled against trade-labor linkages in 1996. Arguments for economic development, including as a remedy for child labor, carried the day over a standards-based global child labor regime, entrenching the education-for-development regime as the best bet for tackling child labor globally. The unprecedented global attention to child labor in the linkages debate did, however, increase focus on alternative approaches within transnational agencies. It was in this context that “first formal economic theory of child labor” was developed by Basu & Van in 1998 (Emerson 2009): an ‘altruistic’ explanation of child labor, it demonstrated that parents did not require children to work if their wages were high enough – but where adult wages remained below a poverty threshold, child labor bans and sanctions left the household worse off.⁵³ If Basu & Van’s (1998) seminal model served to argue against sanctions, it also opened up a space for “context-sensitive” rights-based approaches to child labor that argued that children’s rights needed to be weighed relative to concerns about their own subsistence and welfare and of their families and communities (Barry, Reddy & Reddy 2008; see also Bisell 2003; Arat 2002). While context-sensitive rights-based approaches are yet to translate meaningfully into global policy frameworks, their specific applications are promising and worth pursuing (see chapter 3).

Double-barreled human capital-human rights logics: child rights frameworks

The education-for-development response to child labor, as Ennew, Myers & Plateau (2005) observe, evidenced the unprecedented (re)constitution, on a global-scale, of social

⁵³ Basu & Van (1998) offered a supply-side model that was ‘altruistic’ in that it assumed that child labor was a ‘bad’ in household decision-making preferences – child labor was not chosen to serve parental interests, but was forced on parents by survival concerns. A multiple-equilibria model, it demonstrated that if adult wages were high enough, then children were not required to work. Where child labor was prevalent, a child labor ban would be beneficial when withdrawing children from work raised the wages of adults adequately; on the other hand, if adult wages remained below a poverty threshold, then the child labor ban left the household worse off.

problems as economic problems. Unlike the economization of child labor in development narratives, the power of rights-claims derives from their universality and their inalienability as fundamental values of a superior moral order – the last remaining Grand Narrative, as Lindgren-Alves (2000) puts it. The CRC presents the protection of and respect for children as a touchstone of the success of the human endeavor as well as a means for creating a new international ethical order (Koren 2001; Pupavac 1998). The sentiment that ‘mankind owes to the child the best it has to give’ – words of Egelantyne Jebb, founder of Save the Children – is a powerful and powerfully mobilizing narrative across states and societies; taken up not only in humanitarian projects, but increasingly take for granted in global and national policy as an imperative for action (Wells 2009). As Kendall (2008) describes, the international development apparatus shifted rights-ward at the turn of the millennium: a discursive shift that, by arguing for the universality of particular rights, seeks to mobilize for particular development programs.

In the very construction of childhood as a separate and distinct condition of life is implicit the idea that specific rights accrue to children simply by virtue of their status as children. This is the basis of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which, signed into effect in 1989, is the most ratified treaty in history. The idea, of the “particular nature of children...which distinguishes the child from the adult,” is, as Ariès’ (1962) claimed, of relatively recent vintage (p. 9): a “modern” construction of childhood that thus requires and is characterized by the separateness of children’s lives from adults (Archard 1993). A separation that is justified by – even as it constitutes – children’s innocence and incompetence (in physical, biological, sociocultural, moral, psychological and sexual terms) as measured against knowing and competent adults. As radically separate beings from adults, children demand their own worlds, their own (protective and pedagogical) practices and institutions that prepare them for

the fullness of adulthood. When the family, the essential Victorian institution for the protection and training of children, is no longer adequate to the increasingly complex demands and pressures of society and political economy, it takes a state and all its institutions to bring up a child.

Thus, ‘The Child’ of the CRC – the universal representative of everyone, across geographies and persuasions and irrespective of economic, social and political circumstances, under the age of 18 years – is entitled to the special care and protection that states are legally bound to provide and promote (UNICEF n.d.). States are not only required to intervene in order to regulate work (Article 32 of the CRC) or provide education (Article 28) as they have historically done, but the 54 articles of the Convention widen their responsibility to act for children ‘in their best interests.’ These articles/rights have been typically categorized as the “3 P’s” of protection, provision and participation.⁵⁴ Rights to protection and provision emphasize children’s innocence, vulnerability and need for protection against various potential dangers – in effect, they embody the concerns about children’s welfare that constitute the modern child. An early articulation of child welfare in terms of their best interests was, of course, child labor reform in 19th c. Britain, when the Factory Acts established the separation of children from adults in law and segregated children from work into education (Sandin 2009). State protection and education for children was biologically warranted – children were developmentally immature and thus, incapable of rational decisions of their own – but also politically warranted: where adult male workers were free to contract as they chose, children could not be recognized as agents who freely decided for themselves (Engerman 2003). In a liberal society where autonomy

⁵⁴ Developed by the organization Defence for Children International as a pedagogical tool (Lurie 2004).

was a fundamental organizing principle, the ‘scientific fact’ of children’s biological immaturity was politically and socioeconomically meaningful in terms of their lack of autonomy, political voice and economic agency. When it came to children, therefore, the largely *laissez faire* state was also a ‘liberal caretaker,’ intervening to protect children (from work) and prepare them (in school) for full participation in society with autonomy, voice and agency in the future.

Lacking autonomy, voice and agency in childhood, any working child was presumed to be in an exploitative contract or have been coerced into one by unscrupulous employers or selfish parents. A deeply misanthropic view of employers and parents perhaps, as Pupavac (2001) argues; but one that posited a benevolent state: “a wise and humane state,” as Macaulay wrote in his *History of England* – that protected children because “they cannot protect themselves, and hence,” he added, “have a right not to work” (in Cunningham & Stromquist 2005). It is worth noting here that the wise, humane state protected factory-children not at work – the right, one would think, of all workers – but by protecting them from it. (For instance, there was never any question of child workers being compensated for their lost earnings as they were displaced from factory-work in Britain.) As a *liberal* state, while adult workers were (required to be) free to contract for their own protections, the right(s)ful protection of children required their exclusion from work as a condition of the autonomy of adult workers. The exclusion or separation of childhood from work, Zelizer (2005) argues, is inherent to the divisions and assignments that constitutes modernity: the divisions of family and market, the separation of the intimate from the economic. In revisiting *Pricing the Priceless Child*, she observes that child labor exemplifies the mingling of economic transactions with the morally and emotionally charged relations of childhood and family; and thus, represents a *corruption* of the modern scheme of assignments and valuations (p. 197). Children, in modernity, are properly assigned to

the intimate spaces of family, constructed in opposition to the “hostile world” of the market; and thus, are (required to be) “priceless.” As child labor, however, their market value is a corruption of their emotional and sentimental value – modern societies and states that allow for child labor are, therefore, immorally organized.

If the state protects children from work and provides for their education to (re)produce a moral and free society in which children participate as adults, then the CRC also grants children participation rights in the present, to be exercised by children acting on their own behalf in decisions that affect them (Lurie 2004). While the welfare calculations of children’s rights to provision and protection owe to the reform context of the British Factory Acts, children’s participation rights derive from ‘liberationist’ civil rights movements in the United States in the 1960’s. The latter reframed the separation of children from the adult worlds of law and market as ageist segregation and – in an inversion of the Victorian childhood ideal – sought to free children from the “walled garden” of childhood imposed on them by family, school and state (Archard 1993; see Holt 1974). While scholars and activists have celebrated participation rights as the important innovation in the CRC (John 2003), children’s participation rights have primarily been worked out, as Appell (2009) demonstrates, within the bounds of the largely private and individuated concerns of the family court. The welfarist caretaker view, on the hand, is entrenched in a wide array of child-focused institutions, from pediatrics to juvenile courts and, above all, education – and has, unsurprisingly, predominated in state policy, multilateral programs and humanitarian projects.

The welfarist orientation of the CRC was thus taken up by the ILO, for instance: the ILO’s largest global anti-child labor effort, the IPEC (International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor), was established in 1992 as a means of giving the CRC institutional capacity.

While child labor has been on the ILO agenda right from the start – the very first International Labor Conference fixed the minimum age for the employment of children in industry at 14 years - ILO efforts have been characterized by the ‘traditional labor market’ approach of the ILO. By gradually raising minimum age standards, (the trade unions in) the ILO sought to remove children from the labor market: to protect children, but also to eliminate competition for (male) adult wages – resulting higher adult wages, in turn, were linked (rhetorically, at least) to the welfare of workers’ children (Myers 1999). Debatable motivation notwithstanding, the ILO labor regime has been one of the most successful of international legal regimes, the incrementalism and gradualism of its age-based approach proving popular among Southern nations with fewer resources for implementation and enforcement of standards (Alston 2004).

With IPEC, however, the ILO shifted from gradualism to specify child labor standards as children’s rights that were universally applicable: Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor banned child slavery, child forced labor, child soldiering, child trafficking, child prostitution and child pornography, was the fastest ratified ILO convention in 1999. Of course, the Convention was largely a restatement of international law – its specific application to children; it was, nevertheless, significant in decisively resituating the ILO’s child labor agenda away from the labor market and within child rights discourses: an acknowledgement by the ILO – the apex body representing labor – that the rights of ‘child labor’ derived from the special substance and universal fact of their childhood than from any economically significant role in the labor market. In seeking to represent child labor, IPEC represented their interests not as children consequential in a variety of labor markets, but as children situated in modern childhood defined in terms of exclusion from adult “hostile worlds.”

Combating child labor through education in India: RTE in India

In the context of rights-based approaches, child labor is essentially exploitation and thus normatively (politically, morally) bad in liberal society, full-stop; with the alternative, historically, education: child labor laws were twinned with education laws in 19th c. Britain. Indeed, the CRC explicitly references this history by linking Article 32 (right to protection from work/exploitation) to Article 28 (right to education) by defining children's work in terms of jeopardizing their schooling. In the context of modernization/development, child labor is a bad human capital investment that harms development; primary education, on the other hand, by offering better returns, produces (economic) development precludes the need for child labor (as it did in Northern nations). The education-for-development regime is the antidote to child labor.

That is, between human capital logics and human rights logics, child labor is unequivocally bad – with primary schooling, on the other hand, representing children's best interests. If the “language of utilitarianism” has been more influential in global approaches to child labor then, as Cunningham & Stromquist (2005) point out, it has not been sufficient on its own – a “language of rights” is integral to achieving traction. Whether rights-based or development projects, “it is common to find “two-pronged” arguments,” Kendall (2008) observes, “with either human rights or human capital development highlighted as the primary rationale” (p. 365, 6). Grimsrud (2003), for instance, signals the double-barreled human capital-human rights rationale in arguing for the MDGs as the grounds for intervention against child labor: if child labor is (primarily perceived as) a threat to the future productivity of working children and thus, to economic development, then it also represents the failure of states to ensure children's right to protection from harm and exploitation. The happy marriage of economization and normative/moral concerns in development were already prefigured in Amartya Sen's ‘development as freedom’ thesis: the achievement of political freedom and civil rights, he

argued, was both the ends and the means of economic development – freedom and development were the necessary condition for the other (Sen 1999, 2006). Education is central to Sen's formulation: individual freedoms (capabilities) to do and to do what one chooses to – “the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead” (Dreze and Sen 1995, p. 10) – derive from access to opportunity (economic development) as well as the capacity to choose among options (morality/autonomy). Education “empowers” the child in terms of abilities and opportunities but also appropriate (modern) values, offering autonomy in the form of new ability and opportunity sets that (s)he can then appropriately choose from in the future (Saito 2003). The expansion of schooling for children, therefore, is morally resonant as the expansion of their freedoms (in the future). The right to education in the CRC assumes this narrative, committing states to free and compulsory primary schooling in order to develop the child's abilities “to their fullest potential,” including by preparing the child for life in a “free society” (Article 22). ‘The Child’ is in primary school as a right and enroute to development – the primary school-child is protected and provided for by the duty-bearing state, primarily via education.

Whether on the grounds of development or rights and freedoms, the role of education – primary schooling – with respect to child labor is overdetermined in the double-barreled logics of human capital and human rights in global frameworks. The irresistible rhetoric of children's right to education, infused, on the one hand, with the utilitarian calculations of the modernization/development narrative and the normative power of the child rights narrative, has thus come to represent the global orthodoxy on responding to child labor in the new millennium. It was only time before IPEC recognized “the extent to which child labor elimination and implementing the right to education for all children are intertwined”: not only in terms of children's future returns and autonomy, but in terms of a direct and immediate intervention as primary schooling pushed

out work for in the competition for children's time. Converging the global frameworks for education (EFA), development (MDGs), labor (ILO Conventions) and rights (CRC), IPEC thus issued a rallying cry for states, NGOs and multilateral agencies to "combat child labor through education" (IPEC-ILO 2010).

The IPEC, as the largest global effort against child labor, is a powerful regulatory device across the global south. From its inception in 1992, education, as the ILO website insists, "has been central to the work of IPEC." A perusal of IPEC Project documents – the IPEC review of 'A Decade of ILO-India Partnerships: 1992-2002,' for instance – suggests shifting logics about educational intervention: from a rehearsal of Victorian reform logics, trading work off against school as a means of "rehabilitation and social reintegration," to a more labor market discourse of education as a means of empowering working adults and their children against the exploitation of labor, to, more recently, an emphasis on children's rights – their right to education, in particular (ILO Subregional Office For South Asia 2004). In the context of the MDGs, when increased donor funding allowed for an expansion (ILO Subregional Office For South Asia, 2004), IPEC's educational agenda of was reframed and forefronted in terms of "combating child labor through education": "Education is a human right and a key factor in reducing poverty and child labour," begins the IPEC resource kit for policy-makers and practitioners, an unequivocal declaration of the dominant double-barreled human capital-human rights logics at the turn of the millennium (ILO-IPEC 2009, p. 3).

Given that India was the first country, in 1992, to sign a memorandum of understanding within the IPEC framework, IPEC approaches and logics have been central to child labor elimination efforts in the country since. The decade of the 1990's, as I noted earlier, saw unprecedented global interest in child labor in the context of the trade-labor linkages debate and

the expansion of global supply-chains and markets in the neoliberal development era. Given fresh and tragic impetus in 1991 by a fire that claimed 39 lives, including children, in a Sivakasi fireworks unit in Tamil Nadu, activist-led campaigns such as the ‘Bachpan Bachao Andolan’ (lit., Save Childhood Movement)⁵⁵ sought to bring the “plight” of child labor to international attention. As transnational consumer-led initiatives like ‘Rugmark’ for the ethical production of hand-woven carpets in northern India gained momentum (see Seidman 2007), even as the state was slow to respond, child labor was seen as “a major issue within governance” (ILO Subregional Office, 2004; p. 16). In the context of trade wars and sanctions, a “lack of political will,” as Wiener (1991) had argued, did indeed appear to be a major contributing factor to the persistence of child labor (Iype 1996). When the bulk of the funds promised by the Indian government in 1994 to the ‘Elimination of Child Labor Program’ remained unused, activists declared the state scheme an “eyewash” and a “smokescreen,” appealing for further “global pressure” against the “callousness” of the Indian state (Iype 1996).

Recalling Wiener-ian culturist logics, IPEC prioritized the need to “to raise consciousness, [and] change social attitudes” as a first step, targeting government institutions, trade unions and child welfare NGOs to “reorient” them towards them towards child labor and build “awareness” (ILO Subregional Office For South Asia 2004, pp. 5, 17-8). Between 1992 and 1995, IPEC funded NGOs across the country to operate about a hundred non-formal educational programs for working children (p. 24). These ‘Action Plans,’ while designed to illustrate to the local communities that child labor is not inevitable by flexibly accommodating

⁵⁵ The Bachpan Bachao Andolan was organized by the South Asian Coalition for Child Servitude, under the leadership of Kailash Satyarthi, who would capitalize on its success in drawing international attention by setting up the Global March Against Child Labor in 1998 and go on to win the Nobel Peace Prize for his work for children’s rights.

their diverse needs, in practice, primarily functioned “a prelude to enrollment into schools” (Zutshi, Dutta & Nangia 2002, p. 126). Indeed, in a telling move, IPEC redefined non-formal education as “transitional education”: a “transitional phase between work and school” that offered working children the means to “gain the necessary proficiency to enter regular school” (ILO Subregional Office For South Asia 2004, p. 24). Children would thus be “eventually brought into the mainstream” (p. 25). IPEC, thus, entrenched formal education in schools as *the* goal of non-formal educational Action Plans for the “rehabilitation” of child workers. Expanded subsequently into the Integrated Area Specific Project (IASP), IPEC began targeting areas with a ‘high visibility of working children’ – Sivakasi, for instance – integrating transitional education programs with state welfare programs operational in the district, in rural development, women’s empowerment and, above all, elementary education. As the ILO Subregional Office (2004) explained, “children would be put into non-formal, and later into formal schools; rehabilitation would [thus] be sustained; and the accretion of children into the workforce would continue to be prevented” (p.). Transitional education centers (TECs) to prepare working children for school were established across targeted areas, the TECs presented and packaged with existing welfare programs in the particular district – income generating activities, retraining programs, technology interventions, women’s self-help-groups, etc. – to wean households off child labor.

TECs, while classified as non-formal education, were *not* alternative education programs: (re)defined by IPEC as “transitional education,” they were proto-classroom spaces manned by ‘para’ or quasi teachers, and purposed as a “bridge” into the spaces of “regular school.” Indeed, IPEC censured partnering NGO staff for losing “sight of the fact that these centers were meant to be a bridge to formal education and not an alternative to formal education” (ILO Subregional Office 2004, p. 53). The TEC was not a stand-alone intervention. It did not, for instance, seek

Freire-ian *conscientization* to empower children against social and economic exploitation as adult non-formal education in India attempted (see Cody 2017); nor was it part of an independent certifying system that catered to the local employment structure. The TEC did not offer innovative, alternative curricula tailored to the needs, interests and aspirations of working children. It was, in conception, design and practice, a handmaiden to the school-system that prepared working children for the formal classroom; feeder-line into free elementary education (five years of primary + three years of middle school) that, in turn, connected to (fee-paying) secondary and higher secondary school (two years + two years) and, for those who could afford it, an additional three to four years of post-secondary education.

If the transition education model committed working children to an extended rehabilitation via formal education, the valorization of schooling reflected the developmental impetus of the MDGs as well as the anti-child labor campaigners for compulsory education in the country. CINI-Asha, for instance, one of IPEC's NGO collaborators in Kolkata slums, had adopted an expansive definition of child labor that included all out-of-school children in the 5 to 14 age-group: if children were not in school, they argued, even if they were not presently working, they were child labor in the making. Lauded by the IPEC as "revolutionary" (ILO Subregional Office 2004, p. 51) – and scathingly critiqued by Lieten (2002) as an analytic kedgeree – the move was in keeping with the millennial visions of the time: it was speedily taken up rights-based NGOs and child labor activists to highlight the magnitude of child labor in India as well as by education scholars (see Govinda 2002) pushing for the expansion of the schooling system. With IPEC incorporating CINI-Asha's child labor programing as "highly replicable" across the country, the emphasis on children's out-of-school status as the yardstick for identifying child labor became more widespread (ILO Subregional Office 2004, p. 52).

Reflective of the MDG prioritization of universal primary education goals, by 2001, the definition had been taken up even by the Indian Ministry of Labor in its Labor Commission Report. For the elimination of child labor, “the primary issues” now, observed the ILO, “were are giving children access to school and providing parents with knowledge about the importance of education” (ILO Subregional Office 2004, p. 52). The rise in child labor over the 1990’s in the country recorded by the 2001 Census only ratcheted up the urgency for universal education – and if growth in child labor coincided with the neoliberal policy of frozen state welfare budgets, then the ire of child labor activists and education scholars remained focused on the failure of the state to provide compulsory education.

Of course, the Indian Constitution has always called for compulsory schooling as an article (Article 45) of policy, resolving in 1950 to endeavor “for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years” within ten years. Drafted in specific response to the “hundred years of … denial and exclusion” of education under colonial government (Constituent Assembly Debates On 19 November, 1948), the link between education and child labor was also written in, the school-leaving age in Article 45 corresponding to the age of employment in Article 24 on the prohibition of (hazardous) child labor. As Dr. Ambedkar, one of the principal framers of the Constitution pointed out, “If the child is not to be employed below the age of 14, the child must be kept occupied in some educational institution” (Constituent Assembly Debates On 23 November, 1948). “That is the object of [the] article”, he added. It would take half a century and the intervention of the Supreme Court before Directive Principle was Fundamental Right in 2002, when Article 45 was substituted by Article 21-A, guaranteeing that “the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years.” Effected as law in 2009 as the Right of Children to (Free and Compulsory)

Education Act (the RTE Act), it marked the pukka consensus in India that (formal) education was an unambiguous good as well as an absolute right in childhood. *And* the means to abolish child labor: since the passage of the RTE Act, national and transnational child labor NGOs like the MV Foundation or Save the Children, India have called on the state to replace the Child Labor Prohibition and Regulation Act (CLPRA) of 1986 (see chapter 3) as the apex child labor law in the country. As the CEO of Save the Children in India insisted, “you cannot have one law that promises elementary education to all children and another [merely] regulating child labor” (The Hindu 2011). Or, as the MV Foundation’s “non-negotiable” charter frames it, “a total abolition of child labor” ensured and required that “all children attend full-time formal day schools” (Murphy 2010, 59-60).

A decade before the RTE Act, these logics were already being institutionalized via collaborations between IPEC’s Integrated Area Specific Projects (IASP) and National Child Labor Projects (NCLP) funded by the state to implement the CLPRA. The main thrust of the NCLP was operating ‘Special Schools’ that offered literacy and vocational education – and a mid-day meal and a small monthly stipend of hundred rupees – for children withdrawn from work. In partnership with IPEC, Special Schools were cross-pollinated with TECs, retaining the IPEC focus on mainstreaming children in formal schools, with the added incentives of the state mid-day meal scheme and an attendance-based stipend. In 1999, the IPEC-NCLP collaboration was piloted in Coimbatore and Virudhunagar in Tamil Nadu, Mirzapur and Ferozabad in Uttar Pradesh, Jaipur in Rajasthan, and Markapur in Andhra Pradesh: with 400 TECs in operation, 9600 child workers (against a targeted 10,000) were removed from work into TECs with 8,500 of them going on to enroll in state schools (ILO SubRegional Office 2004, p. 30). A remarkable success, by any yardstick. With little data available on the educational trajectories of child

workers in formal education, beyond anecdotal “success stories”—“follow-up is difficult,” state and non-state agencies insist – the enrollment of child workers in schools was (and continues to be) the key metric for anti-child labor programming in the country. Combatting child labor with education was not only global orthodoxy, it was the proven, practicable model in India, implemented by state agencies (NCLP) and supported by child labor NGOs.

In 2000, when the Indo-USDOL – or INDUS – Child Labor Project was signed into being by the governments of India and the United States, symbolizing the “enhanced Indo-US cooperation on the elimination of child labor,” it was the TEC-focused IASP model of the IPEC that was favored. Implemented by the ILO and launched under the aegis of the NCLP, INDUS was tasked with the twin objectives of eliminating child labor and “rehabilitating” child workers in twenty districts⁵⁶ where child labor was “endemic” (National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights 2008, p. 8). With a budget of 40 million USD, INDUS would target 80,000 working children in these districts, by funding TECs to be run by NGOs and state Child Labor Projects in these districts, in coordination with the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (the SSA, India’s Education For All program). All roads would thus lead to the formal school classroom.

Kanchipuram: ‘area of high child labor concentration’ to a ‘child labor-free society’

At the height of the trade-labor linkages debate and with the (carpet) weaving industry in India under global scrutiny, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported in 1996 that forty to fifty thousand children worked on Kanchipuram’s looms in the direst of conditions. The report, evocatively titled *The Small Hands of Slavery*, pulled no punches: unless the children were

⁵⁶ In Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh, in four Indian states with significant child labor populations

saved, “by the time they reach adulthood they may be irrevocably sick or deformed – they will certainly be exhausted, old men and women by the age of forty, likely to be dead by fifty” (p. 2).

Describing their conditions of work, the report added:

“Given the conditions under which they labor, it is not surprising that many children attempt to escape from bondage. The work is grueling, requiring speed and precision if the child is to avoid damaging the expensive weavings. The children work eleven hours a day, six and a half days a week. Some children work even more days, depending on their employer...

Most silk looms are crowded together in dark, damp, and poorly-ventilated rooms or buildings. This crowded work environment encourages the spread of contagious illnesses among the child silk workers – one expert named tuberculosis and digestive disorders as “the occupational disease of the weaving community.” Proper physical development is inhibited by the requirement that the children sit at the looms for long stretches at a time with their legs tucked under them or hanging down below in the cold and damp recesses underneath the looms... Poor lighting and the constant visual strain it produces damage the eyesight. A more obvious and immediate health threat, and one frequently mentioned by the child workers themselves, is the damage to the fingers from the constant handling of the fine silk threads... Employers do not provide medical care or even first aid to injured workers, and those who are unable to work receive no wages for the day.

The children told us that they work in fear of their employers and the master weavers, who frequently scold and berate them with harsh language. This “discipline” is reinforced by occasional blows, particularly when the children make mistakes, as they inevitably do while learning the trade. (pp. 116-7).

Written by two “consultants” in India hired by HRW and based on two days of interviews in Kanchipuram in November 1995, the report also drew heavily on the views of scholars like Neera Burra, author of *Born to Work: Child Labor in India* that rehearsed many of Myron Weiner’s arguments, and activists like Kailash Satyarthi and Swami Agnivesh who professing an “uncompromising stance” on child labor.

Perhaps the HRW report hoped to reprise the success of anti-child labor efforts in the carpet-weaving industry in northern India, the Rugmark certification, something of a *cause célèbre* in international child labor activist circles. “Increasing public awareness – in India itself, but particularly in the international arena,” might force the hand of the state and lead to strict child labor laws (HRW 1996, p. 3). Consequently, the report made no mention of the longstanding apprenticeship system in Kanchipuram, nor indeed that the “dark, damp, and poorly-ventilated rooms” that “encourage the spread of contagious illnesses” were the living rooms of weavers’ homes. The harsh employers they described were, for the most part, parents and relatives⁵⁷ or master-weavers in the immediate neighborhood. Worse yet, the advance, a perk of employment on the loom and a key constituent of the social support structure in weaving neighborhoods, had been (mis)represented as an exploitative contract of sale, in effect, turning child apprentices on the loom into indentured labor. Vajravel Sir was nonplussed. If advances were ‘debt bondage,’ as the HRW reported, why, he wondered, did the NGO not take issue with adult weavers who continued to take the *baki* without censure? After all, debt servitude in all forms was strictly prohibited by law in India. Other weavers I shared the HRW report with were more concerned about the repeated description of the loom-space as “damp” – no weaver in his

⁵⁷ As the INDUS survey in 2004 sheepishly admitted (INDUS-ILO 2006).

senses would – indeed could – work with silk thread in humid conditions. It was all very puzzling. And forty to fifty thousand children on the loom? YMN shook his head: in the mid-nineties, the neighborhoods visited by the researchers had housed between twenty and twenty-five thousand looms – perhaps the researchers had assumed there were two apprentices to each loom, given the *kanjeevaram* had two borders? And then, of course, was the damning indictment of their education-stripped childhoods: “They do not go to school; more than half of them will never learn the barest skills of literacy” (HRW 1996, pp. 1,2).

“I cannot believe that I am free and can see daylight.” Thus begins a news feature on Kanchipuram, quoting a child “freed” from the loom, going on to add how “thrilled to be out of the loom pits” he was, thanks to a local NGO (Krishnakumar 2003). Subsequently reprinted for a global audience by *World Press Review* in 2003, the imagery of the article is unmissable – and inaccurate. Kanchipuram’s longstanding ‘pit-loods,’ a particular technology that enabled the weaving of more intricate weft patterns, had been turned by media and activists into “loom pits” that trapped children in bondage – perhaps in the “cold and damp recesses” that the HRW report mentions. From pit-loods to loom pits, then: a snapshot of Kanchipuram’s weaving neighborhoods that, viewed through the universalistic categories of (work-free) childhood and (formal) education, were defined by and represented in terms of their absence for well-intentioned and distant global publics. “That’s globalization for you,” observed an erstwhile Project Director (PD) of the NCLP: the surveys and reports that brought attention to places like Kanchipuram were the work of “city NGOs” and “city researchers” who were more familiar with international concepts than loom-based work. “They didn’t care,” he added, “if the entire weaving industry in Kanchipuram collapsed. International projects [to eliminate child labor] were more important.” As a senior member of district administration said to me, a silk sari was

not an absolute “necessity,” but the worth of a “liberated child” was universal and absolute – it did not require justification. The modern socio-legal institutions of childhood, child labor laws and formal schooling had captured – colonized – the vernacular practices, obligations and pedagogies on the loom only to negate them; to diminish, denied and even criminalize them (Nieuwenhuys 2007, p. 149).

If it was incongruous that the experts who spoke for and produced knowledge about children on the looms – in the loom pits – were city-researchers and media reporters, then it was also the mundane reality of the global cultural politics of childhood: the “politics of contempt,” as Nieuwenhuys (1998) puts it, that sustains the imposition of Northern norms of childhood as signifying civilization and development. As for their local collaborators, there’s a saying in Kanchipuram that a *nalla kariyam* (good work) was worth a hundred lies (the good work in question, typically, being marriage). Child labor project staff, the PD quoted above for instance, felt similarly about the sensationalism surrounding child labor in Kanchipuram: if it took hyperbole to draw international attention and resources, then the education of child apprentices on the loom was the *nalla kariyam* that justified it. “If I have to sell my newspaper,” hypothesized Mohan, one of the first Child Labor Project staff in Kanchipuram, “I would add the most attractive pictures, perhaps ‘jewels,’ to draw an audience.” That’s how it was with accounts like the HRW’s, he analogized: if they were sensationalist, then publishing them also “had a greater chance that serious action would be taken as a result.” “We were not researchers ourselves,” justified the district collector, “we could only base our actions on the information we had.” And if the information supported the case for educational interventions – if weavers’ children were “empowered to move out of the looms and to be educated so they could work in freedom,” then any action was worth it. Education and freedom – education for freedom –

education as freedom: the moral economy of children's right to education underwrote a hundred lies in aid of its liberatory work.

It was in this context that INDUS was implemented in Kanchipuram: with the “high visibility of working children” in the area, it was an easy choice (INDUS-ILO 2000, p. 4). The INDUS Child Labor Project Society was registered in 2002, under the nominal leadership of the district collector and with support and oversight of a State-level Resource Cell in the Department of Labor at Chennai. In the manner of IPEC's IASPs, it was to be implemented in collaboration with district-level state agencies and local NGOs, as an “integrated” program spread over ten components ranging from IGAs (income generating activities) to social mobilization. The core intervention, however, remained the “withdrawal and provision of transitional education” to children on the loom, with the imperative to translate transitional education into enrollment in ‘regular schools’ given concrete form in partnership with SSA, India’s Education For All program (INDUS-ILO 2000). ‘Lead schools,’ including the one in my neighborhood where I conducted classroom observations (chapter 5), were identified across Kanchipuram’s weaving neighborhoods for the “strengthening” of the education system in order to better support the mainstreaming of working children. This three-step process of withdrawal from work, transitional education in TECs and mainstreaming in regular schools – raid/rescue, rehabilitate, mainstream in INDUS parlance in Kanchipuram, as the following sections describe – was so effective that, by 2009, the latest INDUS surveys found fewer than 130 child workers in the district.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Survey data shared by the INDUS Child Labor Project Society office in Kanchipuram, in 2009.

From forty to fifty thousand child workers bonded on the loom to under one hundred and thirty! The INDUS effort to “convert the dream of child labor free society in reality” had been achieved! And in the process, each child was granted “her/his inalienable right to education and childhood” (INDUS-ILO 2000, p. 14).

‘Moonlight Schools,’ child labor raids and a “dynamic” Collector

From Lord Shaftesbury and his Ragged Schools or child-savers like Mary Carpenter and Eglantyne Jebb whose ‘White Flame’ burned bright for children, to their present-day avatars like Shantha Sinha of the MV Foundation or Kailash Satyarthi, founder of the Global March Against Child Labor, who called on the world to march from “exploitation to education” and from “slavery to liberty” for the sake of the children,⁵⁹ crusading for children is the stuff that legends are made of. In Kanchipuram’s weaving neighborhoods, the legend of the Collector and his efforts to bring about a “golden childhood” – his words⁶⁰ – was as large as any of them.

Close on the heels of the HRW report (September 1996), a new and charismatic district collector arrived in Kanchipuram in 1997, with plans to restore Kanchipuram’s working children to a “golden childhood.” A ‘motivational speaker’ of some fame and the author of several books – I was gifted one when I interviewed him – his aim was nothing less than the “liberation” of Kanchipuram’s children. As Vajravel Sir granted, “when there is a report like that [HRW’s], the government has to be seen taking strict action against child labor.” The first district collector in Kanchipuram to accord priority to the eradication of child labor and armed with the Supreme

⁵⁹ In his Nobel Lecture in 2014.

⁶⁰ Interviews with the ‘Collector’ were conducted in April – August, 2013, in Chennai. While he did not request anonymity, I follow the practice of calling him by his official title as in the case of many of my other respondents (who did request that they not be named).

Court ruling on in the M.C. Mehta PIL (December 1996; see chapter 3), he set about putting master-weavers and parents of child apprentices on notice and creating “awareness,” that word beloved of child labor activists of all stripes. “Till then,” he said, “the people of Kanchipuram had not considered weaving as a hazardous occupation.” Child labor, he made it clear – in fact, insisted on putting it down on paper –⁶¹ was nothing but “robbing” children of their “golden childhood.” As to the efficacy of banning child labor, he had no opinion of his own to offer – he was merely an instrument of the state.

“The question,” Vishwa observed, was “how can we bring the child worker out – out of the loom-space and out of the darkness – long enough for him/her to learn about education?” Children and their families, he argued, first needed to know what school was about before they agreed to leave the loom for school. “Every weaver in town has an opinion,” smiled Mohan; “you can’t just tell weavers that children have to go to school.” Mohan would know: having spent his childhood in his ‘native place’ with his grandfather, he had returned to Kanchipuram and his family of weavers after high school. Vishwa and Mohan were part of the young team of “local peoples,” all in varying stages of post-secondary education, assembled by the Collector (and led by the PD), who would spearhead his plans for liberating Kanchipuram’s working children. It was the Collector who answered Vishwa’s question: If children worked on the loom in the day, why not work around it, enticing them into classroom-spaces once they were done? The Total Literacy Campaign, a nation-wide, volunteer-led adult education program led by the National Literacy Mission, had been active – and activist (see Cody 2017) – in Tamil Nadu as

⁶¹ Child labor was a “controversial topic” for government personnel to express their view about.

the *Arivoli Iyyakam* (the Light of Knowledge Campaign, or the Enlightenment Movement); why not adopt and adapt their model to attract children on the loom into school?

“An adult literacy movement that seeks to … bring participatory development, and a broader sense of “empowerment” to the countryside through the spread of written language,” as Cody (2017) described it (p. 3), *Arivoli Iyyakam*’s Freire-ian flavor also appealed to the Collector’s own progressive motivations. In January, 1998, the *Iyyakam*’s night-schools (*iravu-palli*) were relaunched in Kanchipuram as the rechristened *Nila Oli Palli* (NOP) or Moonlight Schools. Why call them *iravu-palli* as if they existed in the dark, the Collector argued, when weavers, children and adults, would stream into the NOP every evening as the moonlight streamed into the neighborhood? Indeed, when the first Moonlight School opened its doors – the doors, in fact, of a classroom in the Yagatalai municipal school – to cater to the weaving neighborhoods in *Chinna Kanchipuram*, some four hundred students streamed in from the looms. “Adults as well as *chinna pasanga* (small kids),” recalled Vishwa, “from ten-year olds to sixty-year olds, males as well as females – everyone came! A quarter of those who attended were below fourteen year, children by child labor law standards – “We couldn’t bring them out in the day, but the NOP brought them to us in the night,” as Vishwa exclaimed. For children, the Moonlight School was a congenial space. Not age-segregated or dominated by the imposing figure of the teacher – there were multiple instructors, including Kannan and Sudhan, weavers who spent as much of the day on their looms as their students did – children could learn at their pace without feeling that they were behind for their age or cohort. The Collector, as the official patron, had sourced textbooks from the state while “resource-persons” – local teachers and college professors – volunteered their time and supplemented instruction. The “profile” of the

Moonlight School was such, insisted NOP instructors, that they were able to draw sufficient resources for a “quality education.”

Nevertheless, the aim of the Moonlight School remained supporting children to make it into formal school spaces smooth-*a* (smoothly). To this end, meetings were organized across weavers’ neighborhoods to “motivate” them for schooling – women’s meetings, parents’ meetings, children’s meetings, Mohan ticked them off, where the Collector’s abilities as a motivational speaker came in handy. Despite the countless “speeches” and the innumerable “small-small meetings,” not everyone was convinced. The Collector himself began visiting the looms in the evenings undercover, unrecognizable in the *lungi* he wore in the style of the weavers – like the Emperor Akbar who, legend has it, went out in disguise into the city with his chief minister Babar, to see for himself the state of his subject. He realized that the loom was both production and pedagogy – how could children leave the loom for schooling alone? With the Supreme Court’s directions for compensation in mind, the Collector sought to incentivize weaving households by systematically prioritizing them in various welfare schemes. For instance, the wives and mothers of Moonlight School students were organized into Self Help Groups (SHGs) as part of the state’s newly-introduced *Mahalir Thittam* (Program/Scheme for Women) and granted loans to start income generating activities (IGAs).

Weaving households, however, primarily used the “SHG loan” as a line of credit that replaced, at least in part, children’s advances. As Saravana’s mother recalled, “when they took my boys off to school, they also took me to join a *kuzhu* (group) – *rhomba* useful-*a* *irindiche* (it was very useful) because we used it to pay off their advance.” The NOP-SHG combination was compelling enough that NOPs expanded rapidly: from the first one in Yagasalai in 1998, to Pillayarapalayam soon after, then further out to the weaving neighborhoods of Ayyampettai,

Iyengarkulam and Oli-Mohammedpettai. By late 1999, there were over twenty NOPs functioning across Kanchipuram's weaving neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the 'SHG loan' was often a stopgap rather than a substitute: unlike the advance/*baki*, SHG loans accrued interest, even if at state-subsidized rates. With few IGAs operational and producing returns, children, in many instances, returned to work on the looms in order to repay the state. In Vimal's household, for instance, he and his brother began weaving at home so the SHG loan could be repaid, first at the rate of 1,500 rupees a month, then 1,800 rupees, he recalled. "We wove till ten at night sometimes," he added proudly.

If the Moonlight School was purposed to move children from the loom into formal school, then its success did not match its popularity in Kanchipuram's weaving neighborhoods. Indeed, as far as child rights activists were concerned, the night-school model not only failed its objective, it perpetuated child labor, aiding and abetting exploitative master-weavers and parents in the process. *Small Change*, the HRW follow up report to *The Small Hands of Slavery*, did not mince words: "In Kanchipuram, a major silk sari weaving area in Tamil Nadu, child bondage is open, and the district collector, instead of prosecuting employers, has opened night schools for working children" (HRW 2003, p. 9). The report went on to add:

In Kanchipuram, which at the time of writing had no NCLP school, the local government has established night schools explicitly designed to allow children to receive some education while continuing to work. While the fact that the local government is making an effort to address child labor in some fashion should be recognized, these schools also enable employers to use child labor... They also provide very few hours of instruction—ninety to 120 minutes—to children already tired from working... Most important, they signal that the local government has abdicated its responsibility to enforce child labor

laws, which, if enforced, would provide rehabilitation, including education, to these children. (p. 65).

A course correction was called for before global outrage followed – something that would leave no one in doubt, whether in Kanchipuram or beyond, that the district administration was unequivocally committed to rooting out child labor on the looms.

The Collector turned to ‘child labor raids’ as a ready and readily dramatic proclamation of the will the state for Kanchipuram’s children. ‘Raids’ were not a new invention, of course, having been instituted by the Imperial Government by means of the Factory Acts, more than a century ago: now, as then, the state had the power to enter and have oversight of the spaces and means of production and the right to intervene and dispose them appropriately. Implemented in Kanchipuram, they would announce to master-weavers that child labor was no longer tenable on the looms – if they employed children, they did so at their own peril. The district administration would enforce the Supreme Court’s ruling and require master-weavers to pay twenty thousand rupees as a fine for employing children or face being jailed for up to a month.⁶² In the process, of course, they would also forfeit any claim on the *baki* they had advanced their child-apprentices.

Child labor raids involved an impressive entourage of state and quasi-officials – a veritable “striking force”: staff of the newly cobbled together Child Labor Project in the district, Labor Department officials, local NGO workers, a medical representative, officers from the Revenue Department and the police-force – for added “teeth,” the Project Director said – and, occasionally, the Collector, for his flair. Where Imperial Labor Inspectors had required mill-children to wear age certificates around their neck for easy verification, their present-day

⁶² The ruling of the Supreme Court of India (10 December 1996), M.C. Mehta v. State of Tamil Nadu and others.

successors were accompanied by a doctor, ready to x-ray children's wrists if their age was in doubt. "With a doctor in tow," chuckled the PD, "no one could claim that a girl was old enough just because she wore a *davani* (a traditional long-skirt worn by adolescent girls)." The PD had contributed his own innovation to the raid – a photographer or videographer who accompanied officials and gathered pukka proof of children on the loom. Photographic evidence built a stronger case against master-weavers when legal charges were filed against them as per the Supreme Court's ruling. "If you registered a case within the day," he grinned, "it left them no time to pull any political strings." It was something to be proud of, he added, that "we filed 246 cases – and we didn't lose a single one."

The photographer also added to the high drama of the raid, recording the stirring "rescue" for official reports and newspaper coverage – the latter, increasingly, the index of state effectiveness with respect to child labor. The day after the raid, local dailies carried pictures of variously serious-looking and contrite, even tearful, young faces, flanked by dutiful raid officials: a testimonial to their 'liberation.' And, officials insisted, a "warning" to Kanchipuram. The photographs were, above all, an artifact of the state's spectacular pastoral care, performed on behalf of some of its most vulnerable subjects –exploited child workers. Equally, they were a trophy of sorts, a record of the activism and emancipatory action of state officials, duly produced when Best Collector Awards were at stake.⁶³ The government couldn't be seen to be doing nothing, given the international attention, then, as the P.D. explained, the government needed to be *seen* doing something. "We 'liberated' 108 children from the looms in just one month, in just September," the Collector recall the precise number, fifteen years since the first child labor raids

⁶³ Introduced by the Tamil Nadu government in the mid-2000s to underline child labour eradication as a "thrust area" and incentivize local administrators for the elimination on child labor (State Action Plan, 2003).

– the newspaper clippings had been filed in the office in Kanchipuram. “For them, it was the start of their golden childhood,” he added with quiet pride.

Kanchipuram’s narrow streets were all not built for child labor vans or a large posse of officials. It was an undeniable spectacle as the raiding-party made its slow procession down each crisscrossing alley in the *thope*, trawling through each room of every narrow row-house on the way, ferreting children out of their hiding-places – under the looms, behind locked doors – all the time trying to outpace the news of their presence. The “rescue” *per se* required the “rounding up” of any children who, once their ages were determined, were led out of the looms: to join night-schools, in the early days or to the nearest Special School or TEC when they became operational in 2000. “The raids left such an impression,” chuckled the PD, “the mere presence of police in the area, even when it had nothing to do with us, sent the children scurrying and put the master-weavers on alert.” As Mohan jubilantly described, “the owners were afraid of us! We started raiding them and they were afraid! They realized that if they hired any children on the loom, they would be in trouble!” Saravana’s master-weaver, for instance, panicked when he saw raid officials talking to Saravana on the street. “I didn’t tell them anything,” Saravana insisted; “they asked me how old I was and whether I was enrolled in school – and I said yes.” But the sight of them – the thought of being fined or dragged to court – had spooked the owner. Later that day, he had called in all his apprentices and told them not to return. “He told us,” recalled Saravana, “you can return the *baki* gradually, but can’t return to work here anymore.”

It wasn’t only small-scale master-weavers who were afraid of the consequences – indeed, it was the Collector’s fearlessness in taking on even the most powerful and well-connected master-weavers/merchants for the sake of the children that remains the stuff of legend. “He just showed up on the looms out of nowhere,” said Mrs. K., who taught at the neighborhood

municipal school, admiringly. She had heard the stories from her father, a local *tahsildar* whose tenure had overlapped with the Collector's. "Where other collectors would have stayed in their office rooms and sent their peons to check up on the looms, this Collector went himself!" She gushed. "The weavers could have paid the peon off for a clean chit, but now, they had the Collector to answer to – he was fining them left, right and center!" "Yes, he was very 'dynamic,'" nodded Ravi, acknowledging the Collector's "personality" like most weavers in the neighborhood did. His brother agreed – "he was brave man," he chuckled; "he even raided the *thari* of the sitting MLA⁶⁴ at that time!" In the Indian context where politicians were expected to get away with murder, the fact that the Collector had not spared local politicians or their families had endeared him to many. Indeed, weavers, even those who had been raided, did not blame the Collector: the consensus in the neighborhood was that he was a good man who was only doing his job; and if his job was to eliminate child labor, then he had proceeded without fear or favor. At the end of his tenure, recalled Vajravel sir, the cooperative societies had sent him off with a "special function" to show him their appreciation.

The interstitial spaces of 'Moonlight Schools'

"We brought them out to our *Nila Oli Palli*," declared Vishwa triumphantly, "we brought them out in the night – but we brought them out of darkness!" As Kannan, Vishwa's colleague, described,

We canvassed the children on the looms, constantly reminding them that they were free in the evenings to attend the NOP – the NOP wouldn't interfere with their work. We assured them that we had no desire to cut into their earnings. That was our strategy. Once

⁶⁴ Member of the Legislative Assembly

we had them at the NOP, we knew that children would realize just what they had missed. And they would keep coming back long enough for us to get them into school.

The children had responded: some were curious and others didn't want to miss out on an opportunity that had showed up at their doorstep. "They came to us clean-*a* (cleanly)," Mohan said, "without having to be dragged in; they came on 'track' willingly." As Rathinam, thirteen at the time, recalled, he had come with an "aim": if he was learning to weave "fully" in the day, then he was determined to learn to read and write "fully" in the evening. "We were keen to work on the looms," he added, "we wanted to earn, but we were also keen to attend the NOP. We were keen to do both." Vishwa agreed: "Even if the children took an evening or two off to work on a sari that needed to be finished urgently, they always returned to us." The children had left an impression on Ramesh, a labor researcher at the time in one of Kanchipuram's weaving neighborhoods. "They always seemed to be in good spirits," he told me, "laughing and talking loudly as they walked to the night-school. I used to wonder how they were still excited about studying in the evening after a day on the looms at work." It was all "motivation," claimed Mohan. "We told them they too could be *peria-aal* (big man/person) if they were educated.⁶⁵ We told the children that if they took on a few more struggles – if they made the trip to the NOP every evening – they become like the Collector."

Not everyone responded readily to "motivation," however, as even Mohan granted: "Children from the loom had a mind of their own," he sighed, "they made their own calculations." Bhaskar, for instance, despite three months of targeted "motivation," had remained reluctant to join the NOP. "He couldn't see the point of studying for a job, a proper job,"

⁶⁵ See Sarangpani () on *bada aadmi*.

lamented Mohanel, “when he was already working and earning and would be an independent weaver.” About a third of the children on the loom, Vishwa estimated, felt they were too near “adult-age” to sit in a classroom, even at the NOP. As Kannan explained,

The children had worked since an early age – they had been earning since an early age – and schooling was just not their ‘track.’ It didn’t suit them – their interests were different. They had the interests of workers with money. Like going to the cinema or the *koil* (temple) and roaming around (*ur suththaradhu*) with their friends.

It was a *gourava prachanai* for them, added Mohan, a matter of (lack of) prestige. “They had respect, they had responsibility as wage-earners – they didn’t want to be talked down to in a classroom.” “They would have simply walked out on us,” smiled Kannan, “if we had treated them like school-children at the NOP.” After all, as Mohan pointed out, laughing, his students would be full-time weavers soon – they would be out-earning their instructors soon!

“We knew that our students were nobody’s fools,” said Kannan, adding

The girls and boys who came to the NOP did not know how to read or write perhaps, but they were workers already, they had a practical knowledge of the world. A school-child might be able to write ‘thousand,’ he might write ‘1’ followed by three ‘0’s – but a working-child knew what a thousand meant, he knew its value.

Of course, child-apprentices felt anxious as well. As Mani, an erstwhile NOP student said, “I was worried – what if I had left it too late to learn to read and write?” He needn’t have worried, insisted Kannan: between their worldliness and their eagerness to make up for lost time, *cheekrama* pick up *pannitanga* (they picked things up quickly). “Once they sat here with us,” he continued, “they started to feel, oh, reading is nothing out-of-the-ordinary. So we taught the

students the ‘primers’ first, and they caught on quickly and caught up to Class 5.” At which point, students were encouraged to join “regular schools” in the area, often the very municipal schools on whose premises the NOP assembled in the evening. Slightly older children, those in their teens, often continued on at the NOP to reach class 8 levels before making the shift into formal secondary school spaces; while yet older students, in their late teens, preferred to matriculate (finish class 10) or even graduate from high school (class 12) at the NOP. Still others, several of whom I met, had stayed on at the NOP or returned after a few years to study for bachelor’s – or in a handful of instances, master’s – degrees via correspondence courses.

This flexibility of “tracks,” traversing loom-spaces, NOP classes and regular school appealed to the calculative child apprentices on the loom. Central to this flexibility was the system of public examinations conducted by the Directorate of Government Examinations that was open to “direct private candidates,” non-traditional students who sought formal educational qualifications by undertaking private study instead of enrolling in formal schools: the Elementary School Leaving Certificate (ESLC) Public Examination for class 8 held every December and open to those 12-1/2 years and older; the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) Examination held in March and October each year for class 10 and open to those 14-1/2 years and older; and the Higher Secondary Examination (HSE), also held in March and September every year for class 12 and open to those 16-1/2 years or older. The NOP, therefore, was organized around these examinations: once instructors and students had negotiated the “primers,” the key literacy intervention, they focused on getting ready for the public examinations in time. When a reporter from Delhi visited the Moonlight Schools during his tenure in Kanchipuram, recalled the Collector, “he was stunned how beautifully maintained the students’ notebooks were, the questions written out in red and the answers in blue ink. That doesn’t happen even in

regular schools,” he grinned. The question and answers that students were practicing, of course, were in preparation for the public examinations: with the “basics” completed in five or six months’ time, the aim was to have a go at the public examinations. “They outperformed even our expectations,” beamed Sudhan: the majority of his NOP students had passed their exams without any “arears” in the first attempt; and those that hadn’t or were afraid to be examined waited another six months to make the next attempt.

With few systematic records – the bane of child labor projects in India – it is difficult to incontrovertibly establish the formal educational impact of the NOPs in Kanchipuram. There were several individual success-stories, no doubt, as indeed the Collector related with great pride: Basu, for instance, *the* poster-child for the NOPs, who after sustained “motivation” by NOP staff, had joined the Moonlight School in my neighborhood and had successfully negotiated public examinations – all the while, continuing to work on the looms. After a Bachelor’s in Accounting, also in evening college, he had entered government service at the state-owned nuclear reactor in Kalpakkam. Every student and instructor I met at the NOPs noted with pride how Basu had recently donated his first month’s salary to the NOP in gratitude. Indu, another NOP student, had recently passed state recruitment exams to join the state administrative service as a Village Officer. As for the rest, I asked some thirty present-day and erstwhile NOP students, between 16 and 25 years (with a few exceptions) for their views in focus groups. For the vast majority NOP-spaces, as “non-formal” as they were, represented access to formal educational “certificates”: the 8th class/ESLC certificate that was required to apply for a driver’s license, for instance; or the all-important 10th class/SSLC certificate that was the institutionally preferred age and identity proof for everything from a bank account to a ratio-card – even company-*velai* (work) in the SEZs. Also for most of them, NOP-mediated formal school certificates represented

a fallback option. As Muthu said, “it’s not that we want to leave the looms, but we are here in case they go down.” Meena and Umapathy, for instance, were studying towards a diploma in information technology – as an insurance against the collapse of the looms, IT seemed a good bet. At the worst, they could all take up contract-work in the SEZs.

Of course, there were status returns as well. “Look at him,” said Muthu, pointing to Babu – “he looks so ‘smart’ that you want to call him ‘sir,’ don’t you? He would lose all *mariyadai* (respect)!” Bharathi agreed. “If you can’t read and write these days,” she said, “people look at you oddly – they don’t give you any *mariyadai*.” “Not even your own children!” laughed Tamilselvi. “If you can’t ‘text’ on your cell [phone],” interjected Karthik, “you don’t get any *mariyadai*, either.” “Or a ‘girlfriend,’” Muthu added, hooping with laughter – “that’s definitely one ‘use’ of the NOP!” “That’s why Babu is here,” teased Senthil, “to have a ‘B.Com.’ [Bachelor of Commerce] next to his name on his wedding-card – he will immediately get more *mariyadai* from his in-laws!” Babu was unfazed: “if there are kids in my future,” he mused, “then I can teach them their homework – that’s another ‘use’ of the NOP.” “At least the very least,” added Bharathi, “we can travel confident-*a* (confidently), like you. We can go to Tirupathi⁶⁶ now, without worrying that we are outside Tamil Nadu, we can read the bus and train-station signs in English.” The Moonlight Schools, in effect, offered a space for young weavers to participate in the “cultural production” of the literate person (see Bradley & Holland 1996).

There were also less utilitarian “uses” of the NOP. Tamilselvi, for example, insisted, she was content as a weaver, but she was at the NOP in order to contribute to society – perhaps by

⁶⁶ A popular place of pilgrimage in the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh

tutoring the kids in her neighborhood, she suggested. Muthu, young as he was, averred that he would never leave the loom – but he was equally insistent that he would study at the NOP for as long as he could: “I am here because I want to find out more about *veli vishayam* (lit. external affairs; or “general knowledge,” as another NOP student put it),” he shrugged, “that’s all.” Indeed, in the weeks that I visited the two Moonlight Schools in Yagasalai and Pillayarapalayam, there were wide-ranging discussions: about electricity generation in Tamil Nadu, for instance – in particular, about why the SEZs and industrial areas had better power-supply than domestic consumers in Kanchipuram; or about the low wages at profit-seeking “MNC companies”; or, closer home, exchanging notes about the different wage rates in the local informal sector – for instance, comparing daily wages in construction-work with what they made as weavers, and so on. Even about the new craze for gyms in Kanchipuram vis-à-vis the exercise benefits of weaving on the loom! Or, of more concern, the changing marriage prospects of young (male) weavers in comparison to their contract labor-counterparts in company-*velai*.

In effect, Kanchipuram’s Moonlight Schools served as an extension of the loom-space: a critical-educational space that situated the “general knowledge” of the world – of policies, prevailing socioeconomic conditions, labor markets, popular culture and so on – in the context of participants’ experiences and expectations as *workers* on the loom. NOP students did not have to check their identities as weavers and apprentices – as members of an artisanal occupational group – at the door in order to participate in the NOP ‘community of practice’ (see Lave & Wenger 1991). The flexibility NOPs offered in changing ‘track’ from loom-spaces and NOP-spaces to educational credentials and formal education spaces – at the convenience of children and in line with their circumstances and aspirations – and without the heavy opportunity cost of lost earnings on the loom – appealed to the calculative and hard-nosed children on the loom and

their developing autonomy. Given that the NOPs appeared to perform no worse than municipal schools in the area, in terms of ‘pass-percentages’ and arrears,⁶⁷ the children on Kanchipuram’s looms felt that the returns on their investment of time and effort at the NOPs earned good returns in terms of formal credentials and certificates. Equally, the NOP offered the “cultural artifacts” (Bartlett 2004) – textbooks and well-maintained notebooks, public examinations and certificates, *veli vishayam* and ‘general knowledge’ – that served as the means to “seem” literate and to “feel” literate, as Bartlett (2007) puts it: NOP students developed “a sense of themselves as literate,” that translated into self-confidence and *mariyadai* (respect) from others (p. 51). Their sense of literacy, however, was not gained at the cost of their artisanal sense of appreciation for the loom (chapter 2) or their desire for autonomy (chapter 1) – they did not have to exchange one for the other, turning in their loom-shuttles for notebooks and pens.

Children experienced the relations in the pedagogical spaces of the Moonlight School as similar to those on the loom: multi-generational, informal and with instructors, several of whom were weavers themselves, not dismissive of the loom-space or children’s obligations as worker-apprentices. The two-hour commitment to the NOP classroom and its enclosed spaces, moreover, were not very dissimilar from an unbroken session on the loom, leavened by discussions of the cultural politics of the day. Of course, the NOP cut into girls’ TV-watching and boys’ roaming around (*ur suththuradhu*) in the evenings – but it was far more palatable to child-apprentices than the eight hours of sitting in one classroom that regular school demanded. Equally salient

⁶⁷ The 2010 report of the Education Department’s statistics bureau, for instance, puts the pass percentage of private candidates appearing for the Higher Secondary Examination in Tamil Nadu in 2008 at 50.22 per cent (Bureau of Planning, Monitoring & Statistics, Ministry of Human Resource Development (GoI) 2010, p. 12); in 2010, municipal schools in Kanchipuram district recorded pass percentages averaging between 60.69 and 41.22 per cent (<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/47-schools-register-100-pass-in-kancheepuram/article430330.ece>).

within NOP-spaces was their treatment as nearly “adult-age” children, as NOP-staff put it, wage-earners with interests, responsibilities and capacities of their own. NOP-staff realized that to have treated them otherwise – as school *pasanga* (kids) – was to strip child apprentices of their efficacy and status as socioeconomic agents in their own right, effectively turning them off. It was children who decided when they were ready to sit the biannual public examinations, knowing that if they ‘failed,’ they had a second chance (or a third) six months later.⁶⁸ And given the multiple tracks the crisscrossed through the loom-space, there was leeway to chart the trajectory that best suited children’s aspirations and circumstances: whether they wanted to remain on the loom to become independent weavers, or move into formal education spaces at a time when financial circumstances were favorable.

In effect then, if not necessarily in intent, the NOPs functioned as pedagogical spaces that did not deny the productive lives and *soolnalai* of Kanchipuram’s child apprentices or erase their autonomy and agency to take decisions about their future educational and employment trajectories; instead, they accommodated their artisanal lifeworlds and wove them into national and international mandates and institutions for education. Perhaps best described as interstitial spaces: state-supported, yet – insofar as they were embedded in local communities and cultures – critical and political spaces that, as Cody (2017) describes, reshaped state mandates in local contexts. That is, statist-spaces of formally-institutionalized education that were also being reconstituted as extensions of the loom-space. And while they were institutionally-designated non-formal spaces of educational, a large part of their appeal lay in the flexible access to formal educational qualifications they facilitated. It was this interstitial, between-and-betwixt character

⁶⁸ For a small registration cost, of course.

of NOPs that appealed to child apprentices and drove their expansion across Kanchipuram's weaving neighborhoods; that allowed for educational spaces, initially purposed as antechambers to formal school classrooms, to be reshaped and repurposed by child apprentices to best accommodate their daily lives and aspirations, bypassing formal classroom spaces for the most part. Of course, some children did make the transition from the loom to the NOPs and into regular school spaces, following the trajectory marked out by the state; but they were far outnumbered by other children who perceived the NOPs as alternatives to formal schooling, calculatingly short-circuiting formal-institutional trajectories without foregoing institutionally-recognized education certificates.

And that was the problem. If Moonlight Schools satisfied human capital criteria, facilitating the acquisition of educational credentials and producing "motivation" for formal employment in the form of government jobs, then they did not reflect rights-based prerogatives for formal schooling and protection from work. NOPs produced literacy and certificates but not childhood. And if they were preferred by children themselves, then that was entirely beside the rights-based point. NOPs did not directly compete with the loom-space for the time and interest of children in a zero-sum model; and, operating as they did, alongside or contiguously to loom-spaces, they did not overwrite the work-based routines, relations and identities of child apprentices but accommodated them – to the detriment of their formal school chances (see chapter 5). In the context of the double-barreled human capital-human-rights logics – in the context of the *right* to schooling – the Moonlight School did not meet the appropriate global grade. At the turn of the millennium, therefore – "sudden-a," said Vishwa – children at the NOP, those below 14 years that is, were no longer allowed to continue. Instead, Kanchipuram inched

closer to INDUS, with the establishment of two ‘Special Schools’ as directed by the State Child Labor Cell.

Unlike the Moonlight School and the flexibility of the multiple tracks it supported, the Special School was *the* transitional education highway that led straight into the formal school classroom, no diversions or turnoffs enroute. Between child labor raids that ferreted out children on their way to “own looms” in order to set them on the path to development and freedom, and Special Schools that closed off alternative spaces and foreclosed alternative trajectories and shortcuts in order to keep them on the road to formal employment returns and future autonomy, the double-barreled human capital-human rights logics pointed in the singular direction of the school classroom. If that seemed a narrow and roundabout route to development and autonomy, then children’s right to education was the *nalla kariyam* that justified a thousand ills. As the liberatory rhetoric of child labor raids tends to obscure their violence, the disciplinary enclosure of transitional education within Special Schools is reframed as ‘rehabilitation’ in the context of children’s right to schooling (chapter 5). In the process, the space for children to shape their educational trajectories via Moonlight Schools has been closed off: if the number of Moonlight Schools had gone up to twenty within a year-and-a-half of their launch, and further up to 36 by 2003, with INDUS in full spate, their numbers had shrunk sharply. When I began visiting them in 2012, they were just the two *Nila Oli Palli*, in Yagasalai and Pillayarapalayam. The interstitial spaces of the Moonlight School are anathema to the modern analytic that separates pedagogical spaces from productive spaces, the emotional from the economic and the child from the adult.

A final note: vernacularizing children’s right to education

The reification of children’s right to education as Special Schools in Kanchipuram’s weaving neighborhoods exemplifies the “export of global childhood,” as Boyden (2017) terms it

via transnational projects, in the process, regulating and disciplining the daily lives, experiences and aspirations of children in the global south (Wells 2015). Children are rendered passive recipients of protection and enclosed within reformative classroom spaces while alternative spaces and trajectories that support the social and economic agency of children are dismissed as inappropriate or even exploitative – children, subjects in their social worlds, are thus reduced to objects of rescue and reform or ‘rehabilitation.’ In this context, it is worth recalling the educational demands made by working children as part of the International Movement of Working Children. At the first International Meeting of Working Children in 1996 in Kundapur, India, child representatives from the three continents of Africa, Asia and Latin America, issued a ten-point declaration that, among other demands, called for

... an education system whose methodology and content are adapted to our reality.

... professional training adapted to our reality and capabilities.

... We are against exploitation at work but we are for work with dignity with hours adapted so that we have time for education and leisure. (Miljeteig 2000, p. 20)

These demands are encapsulated in working children’s “right to a ‘good education’” (ProNATs 2006), distinguished from transnational guarantees of children’s right to education in terms of children’s participation in what education means and how it is achieved in the contexts and circumstances of their daily lives. Children, the Kundapur Declaration insists, are social subjects, *protagonists* of their own lives, including their educational lives and experiences.

The work that school does

Special Schools became operational in Kanchipuram in 2000, within the year the Collector was transferred out of Kanchipuram; an interim measure before INDUS Transitions Education Centers (TECs) mushroomed across weaving neighborhoods – the INDUS Memorandum of Understanding had been signed in 2000 would translate TECs on the ground in 2002. While de facto extensions of the two largest Moonlight Schools in Kanchipuram at the time, sharing students and staff, Special Schools were deliberately distinct, given the excoriation of Moonlight Schools by transnational rights-based mandates such as HRW's (2003) *Small Change* report. If, as Vishwa had put it, the question facing the NOP was “how can we bring the child worker out – out of the loom-space...” (see chapter 4), then the sole focus of the Special School would be bringing the child worker *into* the formal school classroom. Unlike the NOPs, observed Vasan, a new field-worker recruited to the Project team, “‘mainstreaming’ working children into ‘regular’ school was the only measure of the success of Special Schools.” Or, to quote Vishwa again, “‘mainstreaming’ was the ‘main job’ of the Special School.”

Catch me if you can: gender and the raid

The child labor raid remained the primary means of drafting children for the Special School: raids brought children *out* of the loom and *into* the Special School classroom on their way to the regular school. As a means of children's liberation, however, it was counterintuitive, to say the least. For children on the loom, the sudden arrival of a policeman, officials in tow, demanding how old you were, could only mean that you were in trouble of some kind. It was not readily apparent to them what the raid was about: were they being liberated, as the Collector and

his Project-team said, or were they being caught and taken to jail? As child workers submitted to the UN Study on Children and Violence,

The Government conducts raids on our work places as part of its Child Labor Eradication Program and “rounds up” working children like stray dogs. We are pulled out of work, taken away against our wishes and illegally confined. The actual raid experience is very traumatic for us. No one talks to us beforehand to ask us if we need to be rescued. No one talks to us after the raid about what next steps will be (Bourdillon et al 2010, p. 8).

“The children had no reason to be scared of the raids,” insisted Naga’s father, a weaver – “it was their elders, their parents and their owners, who were in trouble.” On the other hand, as he added after a pause, “it was the children who were taken away.” He had sent Naga to the loom when she was eleven and a neighbor had taken her on; but it was she who had been caught in the raid by officials. Indeed, in the transnational attempt to eliminate child labor, it wasn’t necessarily clear whether law and policy targeted the practice of child labor or the person.

“They came many times, many times,” repeated Selvam, thinking back to the days when the raids were in full spate in the neighborhood. He was nearly seventeen then, too old to interest the state. It was the children doing the *korvai* who were in its sights: “They were nine or ten, or twelve or thirteen – of course they were scared,” he said. “They would run and hide as soon as news of a raid reached us. You wouldn’t even know they had been there.” As Prabhakar recalled of his thirteen year-old self,

There was a famous Collector at that time when the child labor raids started in neighborhood. That was when I was caught – my brother as well, who was working a few houses down the road from me. So I was caught and taken away the raid – it was quite

hard at the time. When the raid started, me and the other boys working there, we all ran into the owner's room and they bolted the door after us. I hid under the bed when I heard the officers arriving. A lot of officers had come – we could hear them talking; we hear them tell the owner that they had heard that there were several boys who worked for him. The owner denied it, of course, but when the raid officers began checking the rooms, we were all discovered. We were all caught and the officers took us all away [shrugging]. We didn't know where we were being taken, but they promised us that the government would put money in the bank in our names.

Poonga, three years younger than Prabhakar when she had been “liberated,” had had no clear idea about the raids either. “When they started,” she said, “we were terribly frightened – why are they catching us, we asked each other all the time. I was a little girl then, and I was worried. Because I was easily frightened. You can imagine how terrified I was about being caught in a raid!” Poonga had received no reassuring answers from fellow apprentices or even her parents and master-weaver. It was only much later that they were told by officials that the raids were about taking them to school. “We said to ourselves then,” she added, “ok, it won’t be so bad. It won’t be as bad as we had feared.” Not everyone had been as sanguine about school either: Malathi had been frightened at the sight of the classroom where the raid officials had dropped her off in. “I was worried if Miss would beat me because I couldn’t study properly. So I was already feeling anxious about seeing her. And when I saw all the children in the class, when I felt like everyone was a stranger, I was even more worried.”

What started out as dramatic warning in weavers’ neighborhoods – and a traumatic experience for children – with time, however, began to pall as a spectacle. Master-weavers and their child apprentices soon found ways to blunt the state’s efforts in order to keep their looms

and livelihoods going. Weavers were nothing if not resilient; and apprenticeships were a longstanding institution, economically significant and culturally salient. If children had been fearful initially, they began to consider the raids – if not as fun or jolly, then – as a challenging game of catch-me-if-you-can. “They came and I escaped,” was how the child apprentices I spoke to typically phrased it, exultantly and using the English word. Mani, for instance, who I met at the Night School in the neighborhood, recalled the raids with relish: “They came to catch me – and I escaped! They came to catch me, but I escaped!” He repeated joyfully. “As soon as they came to the area, we just ran away and escaped! Every time they tried, we escaped!”

“Oh yes,” recalled a Labor Department officer rather more grimly; “the children ran and hid from us – the moment they heard a raid van was in the area, they simply vanished.” Once, a Project team member had reported the presence of child apprentices in a particular master-weaver’s house – it was a “confirmed report,” he added. “When the PD organized a raid, however,” he shook his head; “there were no children there at all when we arrived.” A backdoor led out into a field, and the children had hidden themselves among the standing crop. “We couldn’t locate the *vaal pasanga*⁶⁹ at all,” he said, half admiringly. The performance was repeated so often, it was a well-oiled routine. The performance at the looms where Selvam worked was even more elaborate: while the younger children ran and hid during a raid, their older counterparts like Selvam, fifteen and sixteen or so at the time, proceeded with their work on the loom in exaggerated innocence, pretending no knowledge of their young helpers – the drama of those days still brought a smile to his face. Soon, other boys had found new and more daring ways of outwitting the state: when raid teams were in the vicinity, they simply got off

⁶⁹ Literally, “lads with tails”; or, children monkeying around

their looms and sauntered out to the streets, hanging about nonchalantly, spinning their tops or playing *goli* (marbles). “How could we tell if they worked on the loom or were simply bunking off from school,” wondered another Labor Department official, with a rueful laugh. Project staff were less good-natured. “*Paavi pasanga*,”⁷⁰ growled Vishwa, recalling the number of times he had been stymied:

You can’t catch them on the street or in fields, can you? You can only catch them if they are at their work-place. If he’s outside, he gets away saying he’s playing, or that he is ill and staying home from school. You can’t ask him why he’s ill. So that’s it, you leave empty-handed – yes, that happened with us over and over again.

It was no mistake that Project staff and Labor Department officials used the masculine ‘he’ when they spoke about children frustrating their rescue attempts. It was easy for boys to “escape” into the rabbit warren of back alleys and the long corridors of weavers’ row-houses that characterized weaving neighborhoods. *Theru mannan* or kings of the street, as my neighbor had memorably described them (see chapter 2), boys were familiar with street-spaces – their ‘escapes’ merely expressed their *vaal- thanam* (monkeying around). Girls, on the other hand, were inured to staying in and staying off the streets – making a getaway was not easy for them. To saunter about the streets pretending unaffectedness or to hide in a strange house till the raid was over was not “safe” or socially acceptable. Poonga, for instance, with nowhere to run, had simply jumped into an empty *unda* (a large metal container for storing water) in master-weaver’s house when raid officials had showed up. “Of course they found me in it,” she giggled, remembering. She had been worried at the time, of course, especially when a raid official marched her home to take her

⁷⁰ Literally, sinful kids, irredeemably naughty children

parents to task; but there had been no o. Given the spatial construction of gender in Kanchipuram, girls were more likely to be “caught” in a raid as they performed the social rules of ‘safety’ that bounded girlhood; boys, on the other hand, escaped capture as an expression of the spatial autonomy that marked their emerging masculinity.

Thus it was more girls had been “rescued” from the loom, initially outnumbering boys at the Moonlight School in my neighborhood – 55 to 45 at least, reckoned NOP instructors. Hounded off the loom by raids and with little to occupy themselves, girls decided to “to come here,” recalled Kannan; “they were the first to come, they came in a big group – they came here more willingly than boys.” “It was difficult for boys to think about the Special School,” a fellow NOP Instructor explained, “when their thoughts were primarily about running off to the ‘cinema’ or loafing about (*ur suththaradhu*) with their friends.” More boys than had to evade raid officials, “escaping” from raid officials by running away or by “rotating” from one master-weaver to another: *Naan escape-aaiten*, as Mani had exulted, “I escaped! They came to catch me – but I escaped!” Far from experiencing their withdrawal from work as “rescue,” boys in particular, used to their free-ranging boyhoods on the loom and in the neighborhood, experienced raids as a corralling into the enclosed spaces of classrooms.

The raid prefigured the changing spatial construction of gender relations in Kanchipuram, as children were moved off the loom and into (special) school. “The hardest lesson, the first lesson” said Esha, one of the first Special School instructors to be recruited, “is learning to sit in one place, with a book in hand.” She was emphatic. “That’s it. Everything else will come in time.” As Vishwa described,

What they needed most, what they needed to do first... and what we found most difficult to do was to just keep them sitting in one place. That’s what it was. “You must sit in this

place only, you must study in this place only” – tell him that, and he won’t listen... If, without him noticing, if we can somehow bring him inside and make him sit. And once he learns to sit, there is no trouble afterwards... If we make him sit properly, beautifully, then we can bring children around. That’s the job of the Special School.

That ‘sitting in one place’ was the important preparation for mainstreaming into municipal-schools, revealed as much about schooling modalities as about gender. It was no slip of the tongue that Vishwa had lapsed into male pronouns: it was boys, socio-spatially wide-ranging on the loom, who felt the constraining modalities of school-spaces deeply. “School *pidikila* Miss,” Tamilselvan had passionately declared – I don’t like school. “They don’t let you out, here,” he added, “not even for a minute.” He had been mainstreamed a month ago in class 7, having spent over two years at the Special School.

The Special School: performing the classroom

Special Schools were the core INDUS intervention for working children from the loom in Kanchipuram’s weaving neighborhoods: the means, as an Education Department official put it, of “no work, more school” policies. While the origins of the Moonlight School were in the *Arivoli Iyyakkam*, which forefronted literacy as a means of empowerment and enlightened political participation, Special Schools had emerged as part of a transnational shift towards child rights in international development. Unlike the NOPs, they foregrounded a particular ideal of formally educated childhood as the means of appropriate state protection and the means of appropriately empowered and autonomous futures. Often described as a “bridge (program)” into school-spaces, they funneled children from the loom into formal classrooms. And, like a bridge that could be pulled up once children had crossed, Special Schools, by precluding alternative educational spaces and trajectories, sought to prevent children from retracing their way back into

work-spaces. As Vishwa, endorsing the IPEC approach said, “they were not an “alternative” to regular school for child apprentices like the NOPs had ended up being.” He continued:

You can’t say that I don’t like going to the government school and so I will study in a Special School [as with the NOPs]. If you are child labor and we catch you in January, then we want to mainstream you in regular government school in June – you can’t say I don’t want to study there, let me continue here in the Special School instead. There are children like that. Or they say, let me join the Special School, but with one condition: I will come here two days a week; you people are looking for child labor, so let me join the Special School, but I will attend only two days in a week. There have been children who think like that, that I can work while I am studying at Special School. You can’t bargain like that; that’s not what the Special School is for. Children shouldn’t think like that. If you are child labor, then the only job of the Special School is to bridge the gap between you and the government school. The Special School is not an alternative to regular school. That is not allowed. Otherwise, they will think about going to work once they are over fourteen. Such ideas cannot emerge. We have to ensure from the start that we bring them around to the idea of school.

This then was the core mission of Special Schools: to bring working children round to the idea of formal schooling from the very start, by initiating rescued working-children into its customary disciplines and daily classroom routines, including “sitting in one place, with a book in hand.” Where the flexible modalities of the NOPS had failed to initiate working children into the extended physical restrictions and routines that schools required, the day-long Special School, in mimicking the formal classroom, hoped to succeed.

In the first instance, Special Schools were deliberately designed to follow the day-long routines and year-long cycles of formal schools: physically displacing children's bodies from the loom-space, as a means of unravelling the spatial and material modalities of the loom for the scholarly disciplines and academic routines of the classroom. As daytime rather than Moonlight Schools, they set up a mutually exclusive choice between productive loom-spaces and pedagogical school-spaces, enforced by ongoing child labor raids. The daily disciplines and routines that constituted childhood on the loom would thus be reconstituted in terms of a classroom timetable, to the exclusion of the loom. The modernist logics of the strict spatial and temporal separation of work from school were reflected in the efforts of Project-staff to keep Special Schools open over the summer – they were afraid that classroom disciplines, newly imprinted on the bodies of working children would lose ground to the work-patterns of summer-jobs. The SSA consultant, for instance, had argued for lengthening the school-day to preclude the distracting practices of part-time work.

The contiguity of Special School spaces and regular school spaces required and reflected increased coordination with the SSA Project for universal elementary education. To this end, a number of government orders (G.O.) were issued in Tamil Nadu that strengthened the “linkage” between Special Schools and state-run schools (State Child Labor Resource Cell 2008). Chief among these was G.O. no. 165 on school education that, in 2004, permitted the admittance of children – working children, in particular – at any time in the academic-year and without requiring certificates to prove their proficiency or schooling pedigree. A year and a half later, a further G.O. (no. 71) directed state-run hostels and residential educational facilities to accommodate rescued child workers at any time during the school-year. Gradually, the SSA also extended the distribution of free notebooks and text books, school bags and uniforms – an

incentive, at the time, targeting disadvantaged SC/ST populations – to children at the Special School. Instructors at Special Schools were also required to participate in the teacher training programs offered by the Education Department – on the much-vaunted ABL (Activity-Based Learning) methodology, for instance – just like regular government-school teachers. With the Special School thus modeled on the government school classroom, the rescued child worker, it was hoped, would soon be molded into the uniformed, textbook-carrying, notebook-maintaining ideal of the school-child who sat in one place with a book in hand.

In practice, however, and despite the best efforts of Special School instructors, the Special School classroom was a poor cousin: the Special School “library” was an aluminum box with about a dozen books. Operating out of a single room, where twenty to thirty students, from six to fourteen years, sat squished together, the Special School assembled in a community-owned space left over from a state scheme or project in the past, or in the empty classroom of the nearest municipal school, or was part of a private house taken on rent. Each of the fourteen Special Schools in Kanchipuram had two instructors, most of them female, without teaching degrees and on a meagre Project salary – a mere one thousand five hundred rupees in 2009 when I first met them. Indeed, the current PD preferred Transition Education Center (TEC) terminology over ‘Special School,’ and ‘instructor’ over ‘teacher’ to keep expectations in check. On the other hand, they were, perhaps, not all that different from the minimalist program of education in many state classrooms that, as Kumar (2010) laments, offers “little more than access to a building called the school” (p. 11).

Special Schools not only bounded education off from loom-spaces and bounded the working-day in school-timetables, they were the liminal spaces where new pedagogical performances and identities were practiced in order to fit working children for the formal

classroom as ‘school-children,’ *padikkara pasanga*. They wore school uniforms, for instance, had their own set of notebooks and school-bag, answered the roll-call, learned to organize their day into class-periods and organize their bodies into neat rows or circles for group-work and, in general, were inducted into the particular relations of teacher and students that constituted formal education. “Sitting in one place, with a book in hand” was an ongoing practice that could take even two years, instructors insisted, interrupted as it typically was by many visits to the toilet – in some cases, the municipal toilets or even behind a bush – and frequent absences. Daily attendance fluctuated wildly – indeed, it fluctuated within the day – with instructors taking turns to go on “rounds” in the neighborhood to coax or drag any recalcitrant students back to class. Yes, two years, Vishwa conceded; the “discipline activities” of the classroom were challenging – a *thalavali* (headache) for child apprentices – unlike loom disciplines that were familiar household disciplines. At any rate, he pointed out, where it was a daily occurrence in the classroom, he had not heard stories of children trying to escape from the loom.

The classroom performance that mattered was, in fact, the *performance of the classroom* to the exclusion of work. School uniforms, for example, materially manifested the new classroom identities of erstwhile working children; a constant reminder that their bodies were subject to a new classroom regime. Light-colored shirts and darker short-pants or trousers for the boys and shirts and calf-length skirts or *salwar-kameez* in similar color combinations for the girls, they signified a break from their work-clothes of vests, shorts, *lungis* (for the boys) and *paavada-chattai* or *davani* (for the girls). Working children in their school-uniforms had not only put on their new identities as school-children, they were marked in terms of their institutional belonging to school-spaces. During school-hours, therefore, a uniformed child (boy, usually) on the street was visibly out of place – a truant who was literally a ‘marked child.’ For instance, it

was Raj's school-uniform that had betrayed him at the construction-site he was working on, the well-intentioned property-owner having immediately sent him off to return to (the special) school. School-uniforms directed the public gaze at children out-of-school in the neighborhood, turning the streets, once the province of the *vaal pasanga* on the loom, into extended spaces of surveillance and frequent "rescues." For Sanjay and Praveen, wearing color-*thuni* (civilian/"normal" clothes) to the Special school was, therefore, as much a matter of cunning as convenience – they were less conspicuous on the streets when they were "cutting class."

Special School staff were particular about their students' uniforms, even chasing private donations for additional sets of uniforms to supplement state-supplies. They often spent their own money on bars of Rin (detergent soap) to encourage their students to wash their uniforms and wear them clean. Of course, the uniform was the gloss on a longer list of classroom-facing routines: students were coached to practice the daily hygiene required of the school-child, from brushed teeth and a morning bath, to washed, oiled and neatly-combed hair that, for girls, was plaited and tied up with a ribbon. These daily morning hygiene routines were a bodily marker of the school-child in Kanchipuram. Porkodi, for instance, who had attended Special School unlike her older sister, observed that it was habits of hygiene that differentiated her most clearly from her weaver-sister.

The clothes Lakshmi wears when she goes out may not always be the cleanest [she said]. Or she may not take a bath in the morning. I started to bathe every day before I left home to come to [special] school. And when I go out, I take care to see that I look a certain way, a proper way. I dress *olunga* (properly/orderly) and my hair is combed nicely. I'm 'decent' now. When I was working on the *thari*, I wasn't 'decent'; I never combed my hair or took a bath before I went to the looms in the morning. But today my hair is

combed and I am bathed and clean. That's because I went to school – that's a big reason to get educated, right? I may have never known how to be 'decent' otherwise.

When Valli, the field officer who oversaw Kanchipuram's Special Schools, went on her fortnightly rounds, she routinely inspected students' uniforms, hair and nails. "Padma *eppadi* decent-*a vand-irruka*," she might say, commending a student for her "decent" appearance and holding her up as a role-model. Occasionally, she would chide them gently: "neat-*a* uniform *potuvanga da* (do wear your uniforms neatly)," adding, with a nod in my direction, "Miss *enna nanaipanga* – decent-*a* ve *illa en than-a*?" What will Miss think of you – that you are not decent at all, right?

Special School instructors, therefore, pointed out missing buttons and hooks and implored the children to take better care of their uniforms; they exhorted the boys to wear clean underwear (*jatti*) or belts to keep oversize shorts in place; they doled out pieces of string (*nada*) to help girls keep their *chudis* up and lengths of ribbon for their hair; all the while reiterating the importance of looking "decent" and being *olunga* (proper). They had invested in what they held as some of the accoutrements of decent school-children: a comb, a bottle of coconut oil, needle and thread (for sewing buttons back on), safety-pins, a bar of face-soap, a tin of talcum powder, a few lengths of ribbon, a small mirror and a packet of red and black *pottu* for girls to wear on their foreheads. Often, the *ayah-ma*, the helper, was pressed into the morning duties of straightening out clothes, combing and plaiting hair, or applying "make-up" by patting on talcum powder on necks and faces.

Malli, in particular, one of the younger instructors, was a strict enforcer of classroom hygiene and uniform: *aal paadhi, adai paadhi* – clothes make (half) the man – as the Tamil adage held. Very particular about her own "get-up," as the vernacular put it, her sari, blouse, "in-

skirt,” *pottu* and *chappals* were perfectly “matching.” To her dismay, her students, Sanjay and Praveen, in particular, were habitual offenders who often showed up at the Special School in “un-uniform,” a colored shirt thrown over their school-shrts, or in uniforms bearing the marks of hours in the *thope* (orchard) shinnying up and down the tamarind trees or playing cricket on its dusty tracks. “*Parunga* Miss,” Malli would say to me in exaggerated exasperation, loud enough for all her students to hear, “*pakaradhukka* school-*pasanga* *madhri-ya* *irrukanga* (Look at them Miss, do they look like school-children to you)”? Indeed, many of the Special School students never quite achieved the spit and polish of the school-child that Malli aspired for. With their predilection for extending toilet breaks to run across the *thope* or make a quick excursion to the little stream that bordered it, or sprint down the road to the *petti-kadais* (roadside shacks) for a snack, they often looked worse for the wear, requiring frequent repairs to their uniforms and persons. A ragtag bunch in their tired uniforms, held together by safety-pins or mismatched with a “color” shirt or *chudi*. “*Andha* *pasanga-la?*” chuckled my neighbors: “those children? Of course we recognize them – they are those child labor scheme children, right?” If the uniform was intended as a badge of their new identities as school-children, then students’ uniforms also proclaimed how fragile those identities were: quite literally, fraying at the edges. Not quite ‘school-children,’ they were “child labor scheme children” or “INDUS-*pasanga*”; their not-quite-school-uniforms, materializing the not-quite-ness of their *padikkara* *pasanga* identities and a portent of their incomplete educational trajectories.

Paathale kandu-pidicharalam, averred my neighbors – of course they could tell, just by looking, they insisted, who was a *paddicha ponnu*, an educated/school-girl, and who wasn’t. ‘Decent-a’ and *olunga* (proper) were the words they used, referring to the school-mediated practices of bathing, dressing in a fresh set of clothes and looking presentable before setting out

in the morning – in implicit contrast to the loom-based ordering of the day. On the looms, children headed out to work in the cool of the morning, returning home mid-morning for their ablutions; and while girls usually bathed and changed their *pavadais* (skirts) when they broke for lunch, boys, rather more minimally dressed in singlets and rolled up *lungis* or shorts, preferred to wash in the evenings, at the end of the sweaty work-day. If children on the loom had integrated their cleaning routines into the working-day to best meet their needs, whether for cooling off or cleaning up, then school-children bathed in the morning, in customary preparation for the classroom. The different emphases on personal hygiene were, however, re-presented by Special School instructors – and by “rehabilitated” children like Porkodi – in terms of hygiene/decency and their lack. Loom-based routines were unhygienic and outmoded, therefore, inappropriate for the classroom and, by extension, in mainstream society and modern economy.

Tightly woven into ideas of a future-oriented practice of hygiene, were perceptions of urbanity: hygiene and dress not only signified schooling/education, they signaled the urban/modern. The *salwar kameez* or *chudidhar – chudi*, as the girls in my neighborhood called it – of the school-uniform was emblematic of the aspirational shift to urban/modern habits of dress from the traditional “half-sari” or *pavada-davani* of the looms. Pushpa, an erstwhile student at the Special School, put it best. Her siblings had not followed suit, preferring the loom over school; and Pushpa could not hide her disappointment. “We are workers,” she said sadly, “and that’s what we remain. Look at them,” she pointed to her siblings:

Tamizh is still wearing a *paavadai-chattai* (the traditional long skirt and blouse), and Chitra is wearing a sari. They are working people, but those who went to school, they look ‘decent.’ You can tell the difference between my sisters and people of their age who have gone to school. Those who went to school, they wear a *chudidhar*. It’s not that

everyone who wears *chudidhars* went to school, but in our area, that's how it is. If you walked down our street, you can tell the difference immediately, you would be able to say who went to school and who didn't. Just look at Tamizh. You can tell we are 'coolie (daily wage)⁷¹ people.'

While chatting with Raji and Selvaraj, siblings who had been mainstreamed three years ago, one of their friends expressed a desire to return to the loom to weave. Raji herself was considering dropping out at the end of elementary school – perhaps she too would head to the loom. Selvaraj, on the other hand, was incensed – “I am a *paddicha payyan*, an educated/school-boy,” he said vehemently; “how can I go back to the loom? Now that I have worn the ‘trouser’ [of the school uniform], how can I go back to wearing a *lungi*?” Going *back* to the loom was a regressive trajectory, as far as Selvaraj was concerned, symbolized by the *lungi*.

The uniform was, of course, just one cog in the institutional performance of the classroom. Other more or less ritualized practices that declared classroom belonging, setting it apart from the loom, included those most familiar of classroom routines: the sing-song student greeting of “good morning teacher” to start the day; or the quickly spat out “[may-I]-come-in-teacher?” while returning to the classroom after a toilet break; and waiting for the instructors’ “raise-your-hand” before responding to their questions. Special School instructors took special care in this regard: “Miss-*ikku* wish *pannunengala* (have you wished Miss),” or “Miss’*kku* ‘good morning’ *sonnenga-la* (did you say ‘good morning’ to Miss)?” they were insistent, no matter how many times I visited them during fieldwork. When my mother, a teacher herself, visited one of the Special Schools, Valli was thrilled when students stood up of their own accord to wish her

⁷¹ As opposed to salaried people in formal employment.

‘good morning,’ their arms respectfully folded, waiting to be told to sit down and then doing so with a “thank-you-teacher.” “If you behaved this well all the time,” Valli nodded appreciatively, “our work here is done.”

As mundane as these practices of greeting and courtesy appeared, Special School instructors were aware of their meaningfulness, in and out the classroom in Kanchipuram, as the norms of interaction that constituted the school-child. Indeed, manners of speech were the most frequently cited marker of school-children in the neighborhood – in contrast to the *vada, podi* (colloquial speech) and the banter of the loom. Porkodi agreed. After two years in Special School, followed by a year in regular school, she had taken up assembly-line work in an SEZ-company. Chatting about her colleagues, one morning – Porkodi was working a later shift that day – she expressed consternation that some of the other girls on her (assembly-) line were only “4th or 5th class pass.” Keen to establish the importance of education, and to underscore her own status, however tenuous, as a *paddicha ponnu* (educated girl), she said:

You can manage the numbers even if you have never had any schooling, and even learn A-B-C on the job, though that might be a little more difficult. And you have to be able to put them together to read the ‘part-number’ on the [assembly]-line. But what will you do when one of the engineers walks up to you and asks you for some information? Only if you are educated will you know how to answer him properly. Only if you are educated can you become a ‘[team] leader’ – leaders are like the rest of us on the line, but they have to talk to the supervisors, even to the ‘HR’ (human resources) people at times. And that is a ‘risky’ job. You have to be able to answer them correct-*a*. And for that, you need to know how to address them properly, as “sir” or “madam” – you need *paechu thiramai* (conversation skills), and that only comes with *paddippu* (schooling/education). Earlier,

when I was on the *thari*, I wouldn't have been able to talk to you, I didn't know how to talk with people like you from the outside. Now, I speak well – I can speak 'decent-a,' right? See how I call you "ma'am" or "miss" when I talk to you? Or how I 'wish' you [good morning]? That's because of school.

Veda shared a similar experience. Like Porkodi, after stints in Special School and regular school she had dropped out in class 10 to take up contract-work in an SEZ-company. One of her fellow-workers had been asked to leave for answering her supervisor back, Veda said – they sent her off saying "*nalla conduct illa* (it was misconduct)." Veda, however, had responded with "ok sir" when she had been told off by a supervisor. "I behaved correct-a," she added with a satisfied nod, just as she had learned in school. "They [company-staff] can tell, just by listening to how we talk and when we talk, who is educated and who is not."

The performance of the classroom – of classroom manners and conventions – of "how we talk and when we talk," as Veda had put it – and of "decency" in habit and hygiene: these were the "rehabilitative" practices that transformed – reformed – child workers into school girls (and boys), however incompletely, and represented their mainstreaming into society. Claims of "decency" in comportment and speech were central to self-identification as school-children, in distinction from unschooled family and friends; they were the embodied traces of the classroom that reassured Special School students of being *paddicha pasanga* even when they had dropped out of school. If the projected school-trajectories of formal employment and human capital returns – 'government jobs' as collectors and policemen or teachers – hadn't materialized, then their 'decency' sustained their claims and belongings to the classroom and the modern/urban futures it promised. Indeed, 'decency,' as Veda and Porkodi pointed out, were increasingly salient in the context of contract-work on SEZ assembly-lines; if not in remunerative terms

necessarily – team leaders on the line earned as much as other contract-workers – then for better relations with line-supervisors and managers. Classroom practices of ‘decency’ constituted a particular, embodied mode of identifying and acknowledging institutional authority and navigating the hierarchies and relations in a modern/urban workplace such as the SEZ factory-floor.

Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009

The ‘lead’ school identified by INDUS where Special School students were mainstreamed was the High School in the neighborhood – ‘Ice-School,’ as everyone around pronounced it. The only state-run school on this side of town offering higher secondary education, the school’s seven hundred students were drawn not only from the weavers’ neighborhood where I lived, but from the “colonies” and settlements to the south, including Keel and Mel Kadirpur. Reflecting the demographics of the area, the male and female students belonged to weaving households primarily, but increasingly, households in agricultural labor and construction-work as well, spread over Backward Caste (BC), Most Backward Caste (MBC) and Schedule Caste (SC) communities. While the proportion of SC and MBC students went up in secondary and higher secondary classrooms as students from primary schools in the Kadirpur area enrolled, elementary school children were predominantly from the BC and MBC households that made up the weavers’ neighborhood. And while there was a small number of Schedule Tribe (ST) students, there was no one from any of the Forward Castes (FC) in all its classrooms, from 1 to 12. The Ice-School was, in effect, a “vacated space,” as Dr. Vijaybhaskar, a researcher at the Madras Development Institute put it (Interview, February 2012); one of a growing number of state schools that socioeconomically advantaged FC groups had vacated for private, fee-paying

“English-medium” schools that promised high marks (“state ranks”) in public Board Examinations as a gateway to bright, English-mediated futures.

In 2009, the passage of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act guaranteed free (elementary) education to all children (ages 6 to 14) in the country. RTE not only directed schools to admit children at any time in the school-year, a long-time demand of (anti-)child labor activists, but instituted a ‘no-fail’ or a ‘no detention policy’ that mandated the compulsory promotion of students throughout their eight years of elementary schooling (Min. of HRD 2009). Special School instructors cheered the no-fail policy: once mainstreamed, their students could expect to have an easier time of it in regular school, if examination results did not count. Where students in earlier cohorts, Porkodi for example, had dropped out after failing in annual or half-yearly examinations in class 7 or 8, RTE guaranteed they would finish elementary school at the least. As Valli often encouraged students, *eppiyadu 9th poiru, athukkaparam pathikilam*: just make it to class 9, and we’ll see after that. Just as the higher castes and the better off were vacating state schools, children from marginalized groups and disadvantaged communities were being invited in.

Thus it was that Kanchipuram’s children, who had once learned while they earned as apprentices on the loom, were now moved into school – from “earning to learning” and from “exploitation to education,” as INDUS slogans proclaimed from the back of auto-rickshaws – to then be automatically moved up, by right, from one classroom to the next till the end of their elementary education. What did these children, now right(s)fully in school, learn in classrooms that, in contrast to the looms where they earned as well, were presented as learning (only) spaces?

The Notebook Economy

It was six weeks into the academic year, and I was witnessing what was something of a daily ritual in the 8th standard classroom of the Ice-School that I was observing. A teacher demanded loudly, “*Yaar da innum notebook vangala?* [Who hasn’t bought a notebook yet?] Stand up!”

As student after student slowly shuffled to his or her (bare) feet, teachers reacted with frustration, resignation or punishment. “*Kazhudhai* [donkey]!” was Mrs. P.’s typical response, “Why do you even bother coming to school?” Mrs. K. blamed the parents – “*Parents-ikku porrupe illai* [parents have no sense of responsibility]” – while Mr. S. was wont to blame the lackadaisical approach of primary school teachers. “*Yeppadi than salary vangaranga lo* [How did they take home their salaries in good conscience],” he lamented frequently. Even Lakshmi, one of the student ‘group-leaders,’ was often moved to ask: “You never forget to eat lunch, do you? How can you forget to get your notebooks?” Six weeks into the academic year – and by my reckoning, about half the class of 53 students was missing a notebook or more. So much angst over notebooks, I had mused then, half-bewildered and half-amused.

The state did provide some free notebooks – usually delayed and, more often, disdained by students and teachers for their thin paper and small size; they were largely reserved for ‘rough-work.’ It was the relatively expensive ‘big-note’ or ‘long-note,’ as classroom patois had it, that was the primary currency of the classroom: every student was expected to have a class-work and a home-work big-note for each subject and, occasionally, an additional ‘test note’ as well. Rekha, for instance, had 26 big-notes – 26! – befitting her position as group leader and indicating the relative affluence of her family. Indeed, students typically described their household finances in terms of their capacity to afford notebooks. “*Vasadhikku kashtam than,*” Darshini had said – it’s true our means are straitened – “but my parents will buy me notebooks if

I ask.” When Mani described the occupational profile of the neighborhood, independent weavers were distinguished from their coolie (daily-wage) compatriots in terms of notebooks: the latter could only afford to stagger the purchase of their children’s notebooks. For parents, in turn, buying notebooks was the material proof of their care and concern for their children’s well-being. “No matter what, whether by labor or with a loan,” Lakshmi’s mother had averred, she and her husband made sure their children did not lack for notebooks. Kala’s father was equally emphatic: if notebooks for his daughters required his wife to take up odd-jobs, then she did so. As Selvi, one of my neighbors, said, “I can’t read enough to help with her studies, but I have done what I can – I have worked extra to buy Bharathi (her daughter in class 8) her notebooks.” Others, like Prakash’s mother, had borrowed *thandal kaas* from the local moneylenders to carry out their “duty” (*kadamai*) of providing their children with the full quota of notebooks at the start of the school-year.

Often, students pitched in to supplement their parents’ notebook-provision. Ganesh, for example, a strapping lad at 14, had worked on the household loom over the summer, weaving *sada-regam* (plain) saris. “Six of them!” he added proudly. And while the bulk of his earnings were given to his parents, the rest, he assured me, had paid for his notebooks, and even a bit of ‘pocket-money.’ Ranjitha and Rosi, friends and neighbors, had worked in an ‘*appalam* (poppadum) factory,’ laying out the flat breads to dry in the sun for their notebooks, while Jaya had worked a few weekends as a *chiththal* (helper) on a construction-site alongside her mother. For Subbu, his work in the mango orchard a few kilometers south was more play than lucrative work – but it was “note-*kaas* (money for notebooks), Miss, he solemnly insisted. Work was not condoned in the classroom – and certainly not in a ‘lead’ school where child workers were

rehabilitated and songs were sung in the morning school assemblies about child labor being the shame of the looms.

On the other hand, the vast majority of the class of 53 students worked for money, often missing school in the process. Vijay, for instance, had missed an entire week of classes in late August, to work in the cobbler's shop his uncle ran; but when asked by Mrs. D., their Maths teacher, he mumbled apologetically about having visited his sick grandmother in the native village. The students who absented themselves during the many *thiruvizhas* and religious observances, in and around Kanchipuram were quick to claim piety rather than own up to lucrative opportunities they presented for boys to sell odds and ends – popcorn, water packets, handkerchiefs or beads – or play the ceremonial drums for some ready cash. As far as Mrs. P. was concerned, doing chores at home was alright, or even assisting parents on the loom. But to work for money? “*Evanikku intha vayasila cash ethukku* (what need can he have for cash at this age)?” She refused to countenance school-children doing it. But where teachers were suspicious when students had *kai-la kaas* (cash in hand), ‘note-kaas’ was above suspicion – indeed, a sign of students’ “interest” in studies. As Velu, a high school student, cheerily declared, “*padippikku sambathicha* [earning for learning] – okay!”

Much like Mauss’ gift, then, the significance of notebooks in the classroom was multivalent: they not only indicated the socioeconomic status of students, but drove an underlying moral economy that indexed responsible parents and interested students and justified working sins (Mauss 2002). But that was only the half of it, as I myself learned in the classroom: notebooks were, in fact, the very means of producing the classroom – and the appropriate ends as well.

Writing-work and the Classroom

Notebooks were the materials of the primary classroom modality: students, bent over theirs, in varying degree of effortful concentration, trying to keep up with their teachers and group leader peers writing out answers on the blackboard. Jostled along by a teacher's firm *mudichitengala da* (are you done yet) or a group-leader's exasperated *cheekrama* copy *pannunga* (copy quickly), students' primary role in the classroom was as copyists and scribes. Much of my time in the classroom, whether during study-hours, free periods, PT (Physical Training) periods, or even when teachers taught lessons, was spent recording students copiously copying into their notebooks. As a Night School teacher in the area wryly commented about my research, "The teacher writes at his desk, doing official work, the group leader writes on the 'board from the textbook, the students look at the 'board and write and write and write in their notebooks – and now you will sit at the back, watching them and writing as well?"

Late one afternoon, when the class was writing out a Tamil lesson under the supervision of group leaders, Bala had moaned loud enough for Mrs. P., checking notebooks at her desk, to hear: "Do we need to copy this also?" Mrs. P.'s response was swift and furious.

Whose loss is it if you don't copy? Mine? [Shaking her head] Should I copy this or not? What a needless question! You are wearing a watch – did you think of asking me if you should wear a watch? [Turning to me] Did you hear the question? A child is in school, and he asks a question like that! We are writing on the 'board for his sake, and he asks, "Do we need to copy?" There is an exam in a week and I have written out the main points – but do see him with his notebook in his hand? Does he have a notebook? When we were children, did you and I not sit and write and finish our lessons? But look at him, sitting here in class – and he asks, do we need to copy?!

For Mrs. P., writing was *the* essential work of the classroom. When Mrs. K., arriving late one morning, found her students already engaged in copying-work, she beamed at the class and called them good students. “Look,” she pointed out to me, “how well they are sitting and writing, in such an orderly fashion.” “An ideal classroom?” Mrs. M. had mused when I interviewed her. “Students should write well in class and finish their homework.” The classroom, in effect, was a written production, written into being every school-day by teachers and students; rather like the “document raj” of colonial bureaucracy produced by clerks and *babus* (Raman 2012).

Here then, is an account of the classroom, pieced together from my observations:

First period. English. Students – white sports uniform (but Kumar in brown-colored “ununiform” – new enrollment). Full classroom – six straight rows, neatly marked by lined up school-bags. Mrs. K. walks in. “Good morning, teacher” – extended sing-song today. Mrs. K. is popular. Students are full of enthusiasm. Anything is possible!

Straight into lesson [no attendance...]:⁷² “Have you studied ‘degrees of comparison’ before?” “*Illa, miss! No miss!*” Students still exuberant. Mrs. K. is happy: “Do you know my house? [Ponnu does, she is on his early morning milk route.] It is big.” Writes ‘big’ on the blackboard. “Big”, students repeat in unison. “But my neighbor, his house is bigger,” Mrs. K. laughs, writes on the ‘board. Students again, loudly, earnestly: “bigger.”

Mrs. K. divides the board into three columns; “let’s write down some ‘key phrases’”. Students – rummaging for pens and notebooks. “Superlative,” Mrs. K. points to 3rd column – “like

⁷² Much of the English class was conducted in Tamil, though key words and phrases used were in English. As for other subjects, as a state-school, the primary medium of instruction was Tamil, the familiar language in weaving neighborhoods (in addition to Telugu and Saurashtra).

superstar.” “Superstar” – students echo her excitedly. Superstar is what fans call Rajni (famous Tamil film actor)!

10 minutes. Students: still attentive. Mrs. K. calls out/writes out four more adjectives (small, tall etc.); students repeat after her, then copy... Class is going well. Mrs. K.’s cell-phone rings – it’s the “office.” “Please copy,” Mrs. K. hands her English Reader to Lakshmi (group-leader); takes the call in the corridor.

12 minutes. Lakshmi writes on the board, while students copy. Some chatter (“Rajni, Rajni” etc.). Also, movement: Kumar has shuffled back from 1st row to 3rd, his brown shirt standing out. 1st row has shrunk – Prakash and Jai in 2nd row, but Guru (a group-leader), in the front row now. More noise – discussion of Rajni films among boys in the back rows. Bala joins me along the back wall: “have you watched *Padayappa*, Miss?” Rosie, Nandu (girls’ last row) – tiff over missing “scale” (ruler); you need long-rulers to draw margins in big-notes. Lakshmi (shouting to be heard): *ellaru vaaya moodu*, shut your mouths, everyone.

20 minutes. – no sign of Mrs. K. Bodies migrate to favorite places – group leaders to the front, close to the board, concentrating on writing; the rest, talking – banter, angry words, etc. But hands still moving across their notebooks, dutifully; they are still copying from the board. Girls: two circles in the back; low chatter. Boys: louder. Mani gets up – looks out of the window, where is Mrs. K.?

22 minutes. Mrs. K. returns – the classroom still noisy. “Teacher *veliyila pona, rhomba jolly-a irriku-a?*” [It’s very “jolly” for you when the teacher leaves the classroom, eh?] Writes a couple of words on the board; confers with Lakshmi. Students are to copy new words from a ‘guide’ – if

they talk, Lakshmi will write down their names. Lakshmi rubs out old words – howl of despair from Mani; he's not done copying. “*Nalla* [good] acting,” Bala comments.

Mrs. K. leaves the classroom again – I'll come back to take attendance, she warns. More teachers in the corridor now, impromptu conference. Some new official circular?

30 minutes. Class had started well, with some teacher-student interaction... But learning possibilities have petered out now. Students are chatting or copying. In fact, chatting plus copying. The ten group-leaders at the front (boys – L; girls – R) nearest Lakshmi are a classroom in the classroom: copying fast, competing to finish first. The rest of the class: a hodgepodge of limbs, books and school-bags, no longer neat rows; a chattering mass that, nevertheless, was still bent over their notebooks, their pens scratching away.

The Notebook Hierarchy

The imperative for writing-work drove an elaborate notebook economy that students in the classroom participated in, not only by buying expensive big-notes, but by “maintaining” them, getting them “checked” by group-leaders for “up-to-date” status, before teachers signed off with the all-important “tick[mark]” that signified success.

Group-leaders were significant in this economy: their notebooks had the requisite ticks and signatures from the teachers, and it was their special province to get a ‘good’ in their notebooks for early submission or superior handwriting. It was their work that was showcased when an official personage or the occasional parent visited the classroom. When I arrived to observe the classroom, the class-teacher was eager to show off their notebooks; and when I left Kanchipuram, it was the poems they had copied out that I was gifted as keepsakes. Possession of the valued classroom capital, as signified by ‘goods’ and ‘ticks,’ not only bestowed group-

leaders with status, recognized by teachers and peers alike as *padikara pasanga* (good students), but conferred them with power: their notebooks served the authoritative versions for the rest of the class to copy [from]. And in controlling the circulation of their notebooks, they effectively controlled the participation of their peers in the notebook economy. Raji and Bommi, for instance, had nearly come to blows over a Maths notebook. Bommi had missed a day of class and expected that, as her group-leader, Raji would loan her hers to “maintain” her notebook up-to-date. Raji protested, however: the last time Bommi had borrowed her notebook, she had spilled tea on it! She could not be trusted with another!

Making up for missed classes by catching up on copying-work was always on the minds of students. Of course, some of the students, boys like Prakash or Vijay, responded by opting out of the notebook economy, strategically disappearing from the classroom when notebooks were checked or taking punishment over the effort required to maintain up-to-date notebooks. “Rogues,” Mrs. K. called them, the boys who – to the undisguised disgust of group-leaders and the grudging admiration of their other peers – resisted the notebook economy and its signifying power by “escaping” the classroom altogether. Numbering about a dozen, they slipped out of school to roam the neighborhood for an hour or two (the nine/ten boys) or absented themselves frequently (the two girls), often, earning some pocket-money in that time.

Unlike the rogues, the rest of the class – the “middle students”, as the Assistant Headmaster described them, neither “geniuses” nor “rogues” – responded to the notebook economy by trying to copy (from) their group-leaders, aspiring for high-status notebooks. Copying copiously throughout the school-day, the ‘middle,’ girls outnumbering boys by nearly two to one, pursued up-to-date notebooks with a remarkable constancy. Indeed, it was a point of honor that that they remained in the classroom during free periods, writing with their friends or

under the supervision of group leaders. While a ‘good’ from a teacher remained a distant prospect – their writing was not fast enough – they settled for up-to-date notebooks that won them a “right” from their group-leaders and were signed off by teachers. And if their lettering was adequate, at best, then their care for copying-work was still evident: each page in every notebook was sacralized with an ‘om’ (or a small Christian cross, in one case) at the very top.

Participation Modalities

The middle persisted with their copying work, even with the teacher at the blackboard, explaining a lesson: they kept their heads down, literally and otherwise, hunched over their notebooks and in a class of their own. Beyond determining what was copied and when notebooks were checked, teachers largely left them to their own (writing) devices and to their group-leaders’ oversight. Yes, Kala reflected, she and her friends hardly spoke up in class, though they did talk to each other a lot – as the constant low drone of chatter from the back of the classroom attested. No, they were not scared of their teachers, Kala insisted; their attitude was simply, “Let the group-leaders sit at the front and speak [to the teachers], and let the rest of us sit at the back and we can be our own family.”

In my early days in the classroom (and the academic year), when teachers occasionally directed their attention to include the middle, students’ bewilderment was palpable. Once, during a social studies lesson, Mrs. S. interrupted Lakshmi’s loud and enthusiastic answers to call on Ganga instead. “Look into the book for the answer, if you need,” she encouraged, ignoring Lakshmi’s harrumphed “*Yaarukum theriaadhu* [Nobody else knows].” As Ganga fumbled with the textbook, the seconds ticked by, and the class fell into an awkward silence. When the teacher finally turned to Raj, a group-leader, the relief in the classroom was palpable; with Raj’s answer, the classroom righted and returned to itself.

While teachers spoke animatedly – with varying degree of appreciation or exasperation – of group-leaders and rogues in interviews with me, middle-students were hardly mentioned. When I pointed it out, teachers responded half-apologetically that they were “dull students” – ‘dull,’ a description of their disengagement, contrasted with the eager participation of group-leaders, rather than a statement about their intelligence. As Mrs. S. elaborated, dull students participated in class, but differently, preferring to write instead of speaking up – and because writing was harder work, dull students also caught her attention, she assured me. Perhaps students’ “dullness” in class, their hesitation when called on, was best accommodated by the notebook economy? Mrs. M. certainly thought so: where students had misgivings about showing her their notebooks, they could be “bold” and talk to their group-leaders. Indeed, “If they do their [writing] work, then the leader will appreciate them and tell me, ‘Miss, that student in my group does her work well.’” Moreover, argued Mrs. M., calling on a student was a “waste of time” when she stood dully, unable to give an answer; it was in the interests of the entire classroom that she sought her group-leader’s help instead.

Teachers were agreed that a participation-oriented rather than a notebook-oriented classroom was simply not feasible. On the one hand, were the constraints the classroom operated under, immediate as well as institutional. With the pressures of “finishing the syllabus” and the “heavy load” of official work – from ‘exam-duty’ and teacher training courses to election-duty and record-keeping for various state schemes and – where were the hours in a school-day to coax the middle out of its dullness? Especially when no-testing regimes in primary schools had afforded students neither “basic knowledge” nor a “good foundation”? Moreover, as Mrs. K. observed, teachers were not all confident in their own competence; classroom pedagogy, as a result, was “read the lesson, write it down, and that’s all.”

On the other hand, were the pressures students faced. In the weavers' neighborhood the school served, where a class 8 student was likely the most educated person in the household, perhaps the very fact that (s)he was in the classroom and writing was sufficient progress? Teachers certainly thought so. "You have to be realistic about school," the Assistant Headmaster cautioned: the "genius" students would do well, of course, and the rogues were beyond help; but as for the rest, his school was "a holding space that kept kids off the street and the loom." That this middle was held (up) in the classroom with copying-work, argued Mrs. K., was, after all, a gentler means of educating first-generation students – if you "pressured" them too much, they would drop out. It also freed them from writing their lessons at home, especially when they might need to help on the loom after school-hours. Copying-work was, moreover, efficacious as exam-preparation in middle-school, added Mrs. M. Given "how much time students had to write in class, they had no excuse for not writing their exams well." To give Mrs. P. the last word on the middle, "They listen, they write, and for them, it is enough."

Classroom success

The students themselves agreed that it is was 'enough': their notebooks, line upon line of painstakingly created writing, checked over by group-leaders and signed off by teachers was long-sized, material proof of their successful participation in the classroom. No matter if they hesitated to speak in class or struggled to read their lessons – their notebooks reassured them of satisfactory outcomes. Indeed, even when they had performed poorly in the quarterly examinations introduced in upper primary classes, they persisted in the notebook economy.

"*Nalla paddipen* [I study well], Miss," Vani had declared, when I visited her at home one weekend; and her parents had readily agreed. "*Amma veetuku vandha odane ezhitha ukkandhuruvanga, nanga solla theva-ye illa* [the lady comes home from school and starts writing

straightway, you never had to tell her to study]," they said. "Rank *ellam varaathu, aana nalla paddipen* [I don't get a (class) rank, but I study well]," Vani had added; more accurately phrased perhaps as: I don't get a rank, but that's ok – I write well, and have notebooks to prove it. When I asked Deva about how his studies were going, he was offended. "Haven't you seen me in class doing my work?" he asked me back, adding, "*nalla than paddipen* [I do study well] – you can ask my group leader." He did not find it necessary to mention his quarterly exam performance (he had flunked English), content that his group leader would attest to his timely notebook submission. Examinations that sought to measure, however inadequately, students' learning, did not translate into the notebook economy; and, for students like Vani and Deva in the dull-middle, had been largely subsumed into the constant upkeep of notebooks.

When I recounted the student disconnect between their writing performances and their exam performance, teachers were not surprised. "There are so many students who didn't perform well at all on the last midterm examination, who we are still dragging them along," said Mrs. M. Only a quarter of the students could be considered "original pass," Mr. S. admitted; the rest had required the "boost" of "grace marks". A devaluation of education perhaps, he granted, but one that was justified: it was better a poorly-performing student who was promoted with grace marks than one who dropped out because of failing marks. "He scores 20 marks and we give him 40 extra and write 'promoted' in his report-card," Mrs. P. was more cynical. "He comes to us from primary school with no knowledge, and we pass him on to secondary school teachers to deal with," she shrugged.

With the majority of students unable or unwilling to actively participate in a class of fifty-three students and with teachers unable or unwilling to institute participatory pedagogy in such a classroom, the notebook economy was thus entrenched as a rights-based accommodation

for everyone. With learning reconstituted as participation in the notebook economy, the middle student could write now herself into being as a ‘good student’; at least till class 9, when the no-fail policy ceased and good students were defined by the examination scores.

Consumption and Conversation in the Classroom

If middle students preferred the notebook economy to more challenging participatory pedagogy or a harsher examination regime, then the notebook economy was also time-consuming and tiresome. The constant pressure of keeping notebooks up-to-date, the costs of buying them or borrowing them from picky group-leaders, the seemingly never-ending work of copying – I was dispirited by the daily rituals and disciplines of the notebook economy. If it kept the bulk of students in the classroom, it also excluded them from the easy relations group-leaders and teachers enjoyed, even as they learned to shun the lively disruptions and disappearances of the rogues. What gave these students the desire to persist with copying-work, even during the torrid, stuffy afternoons in a power-cut?

When middle students spoke about their time in the classroom, they – unlike their group leaders – made perfunctory mention about their teachers, textbooks or learning activities. They were proud of their notebooks, of course, but the classroom highlights they volunteered described primarily non-curricular activities. Sharing a toffee with a “best friend,” for instance, or making plans for playing cricket and *goli* (marbles), or the *kadha* (story/gossip) and *kindal* (teasing) that went on in the classroom, right under the nose of a teacher or a group-leader – they were all described, eyes sparkling, as “*rombha jolly-a irrukum*” (they were very “jolly” to do – they were fun). Unlike the notebooks they were eager for me see, I was not welcome to share these conversations or, indeed, their toffees; surreptitiousness was part of the jolliness, I suspected, but conspicuous consumption was also frowned upon in the classroom. Even tolerant

Mrs. K. drew the line at “wasting” money on snacks, like the high-school students were wont to: group-leaders were encouraged to report any unusual amounts of cash-in-hand to nip such “bad habits” in the bud.

Of course, the vast majority of students disagreed: snacks – and the pocket-money to afford them – were the materials of unalloyed jolliness. As Ponnu described, students were at the mercy of “*naaku rusi*” (taste buds): “If there’s something tasty, if there’s a box of *mittai* (sweets) on the counter as you walked past a shop or if you were going past a hotel and you smelled the *biryani* cooking, and you were in class 8, then that’s what you wanted to buy and eat.” For Anna, school was jolly whenever his father was in a good enough mood to give him pocket-money – there was nothing like sharing a ‘mango-ice’ with Vijaykanth at the end of a hot school-day. “Just looking forward to it during class was jolly enough,” he said, eyes sparkling. Arasi’s favorite memory from class was celebrating Sooli’s birthday. Inspired by her older sister, she too wanted to gift her best friend a “Five-star” chocolate, even if it meant working over a weekend; while Sooli, in turn, planned to cajole her mother for birthday money to buy “cone-ice” (ice-cream cone) for the two of them. When the day arrived, the girls whispered about the treats in store all morning, breathlessly waiting for the lunch-break, checking and rechecking Sooli’s money, carefully wrapped in a handkerchief. Afterwards, the chocolate wrapper was carefully saved between the pages of a notebook, to be brought out in class from time to time, a shiny, material memory of their shared jolliness.

If snacking and *naaku rusi* produced jolliness among students, it was also a means of marking significant relationships in class. It was with “close friends” and “best friends” that one indulged in the jolliness of snacking, of talking about and making plans for snacking and recalling it at length. When Rosi, whose parents occasionally allowed her to take a couple of

‘éclairs’ toffees for school from the small provision-store they ran in the neighborhood, she waited to share them with Ranjitha, the two of them then turning the shiny wrappers into friendship rings that they religiously wore in the classroom. It was as a trio that Bala, Guna and Sanath operated in the classroom, their small, thin bodies attached at the hip, whether bent over their notebooks or headed to the small bakery down the road and out of sight of the staff-room. Bonding over ‘butter-biscuits,’ they were bound to secrecy over their trips to the bakery, with any leftovers were brought back, carefully wrapped in newspaper, for a sneaky second snack when copying-work dragged on in the afternoons. When friendships were broken off, they too were marked by pointedly refusing to share ices or toffees and chocolates with the offending party, the offense in turn, demanding appeasement through favored snacks, before the circulation of snacks could begin again.

This too was “jolly”, Jaya insisted, the reproaches and rapprochements, a spicy addition to the conversation during copying-work. Indeed, the production of notebooks was only rivaled by the volume of talk in the classroom: the low, continuous drone from the back rows that, when the teacher was away, swelled up to the liveliness of a bazaar. Conversations among students were as constant and ongoing through the school-day as copying-work, muted though never entirely absent when teachers took lessons and louder and uninhibited when teachers were away, yet never so disruptive that it precluded copying. When they weren’t talking about or sharing food, students shared *kudumba kadhai*, family stories – “just day to day stuff,” Ruba explained, “things like what was cooked at home or if we fought with our siblings, or if we can meet on Saturday to visit a temple.” There was talk about film and television serials as well, but it was daily life in and out the classroom that was real grist to the gossip mill. Making fun of group-leaders (*kindal*), in particular, was a ready source of jolliness for students in the dull-middle.

Group-leaders, pointedly excluded from the consumption and conversation that occupied the dull-middle, did their best to stamp such practices out in the interests of copying-work. They monitored the classroom for any signs of pocket-money and, when teachers were away, meticulously maintained lists of those who talked loudly in the classroom. Lakshmi, the most outspoken of the group-leaders, emphatically blamed students' proclivities for conversation for their poor understanding. "If you are always talking about goings-on at home, how can you learn what the teacher is saying?" she frequently scolded her group. Of course, such accusations simply fueled more *kindal* targeted at group-leaders. When Raji, called her group mates thick-skinned *eruma madu* (buffaloes), having failed to herd them into finishing a writing assignment, they whispered even more, giggling, till she gave up. "Miss," Raji wailed, "they make fun of me that I pretend to be studious, when all they do is sit on the floor, pretending to write."

If Raji or Lakshmi were frustrated that classroom conversations disrupted the classroom and its notebook economy, teachers were more sanguine; beyond their frequent – and frequently empty – threat of "*vai moodu – naan varata* [will you shut up, or shall I come over]," they went their way. Mrs. S., who warned her students every day that she would call in their parents if they continued to talk in class, had never actually done so; she and her colleagues were agreed that a degree of leeway was necessary in the classroom. In Mrs. K.'s words, "we have to think about the students' background. If we keep saying 'discipline, discipline,' they will only hate the classroom and drop out of school." As long as students did their writing-work to produce up-to-date notebooks, chatter in the classroom was deemed excusable in the circumstances.

Indeed, snacking and talking in the classroom were integral to notebook production: it was the jolliness of shared conversation and consumption that, I gradually realized, oiled the wheels of the notebook economy. For the dull-middle, copying-work was rendered sensible in

terms of its affordances for jolliness: the snacks-related discussions, the exchange of family *kadhai* and the *kindal* of group-leaders that expressed friendships in the classroom. In effect, a parallel economy of jolliness production that, through the circulation of snacks and stories, sustained students through the long hours of copying-work in the classroom. Unlike the notebook economy, authorized by teachers and mediated by group-leaders, which relegated the dull-middle to secondary status in the classroom, the jolliness economy was a shadow economy, initiated and brokered by dull-middle students themselves, to mark peer relations in the classroom, including the exclusion of the group-leaders. If group-leaders raged against jolliness production as inimical to the production of notebooks, then jolliness was not, for the dull-middle, a means of resisting copying-work. On the other hand, jolliness production was the very palliative work that sustained the dull-middle in the classroom, taming any disaffection with copying-work; in the process, propping up and perpetuating the notebook economy. If the notebook economy wrote the classroom into being, then it was the shadow economy of jolliness that underwrote it.

(Not) Learning in the notebook economy

For the dull-middle, the notebook economy was preferable to the alternative of examination marks and teachers' questions – copying-work was tedious, but it did not show them up as *padikadha pasanga*, students who did not or could not learn, as tests might. Not written off as failures in the notebook economy, the dull-middle was not written in as *padikara pasanga* (good students) either. For all that they insisted they "studied well" (*nalla padippen*), they also acknowledged that they did not get a "rank" in class, a euphemism for having failed a subject or two, requiring 'grace-marks' to be promoted – ranks were reserved for those who had a passing grade in all the subjects. Even parents, unschooled for the most part, wondered whether

notebook-based assertions of *nalla padippen* did indeed translate into *padikara pasanga*. As one of my neighbors fretted about her daughter, “When I get home from the loom, Selvi is always writing in front of the TV; but if I ask her to read out the news ticker to me, I’m not sure she can.” Or, as a night-school instructor who worked with drop-outs in the neighborhood described bitterly, despite years in school, his students couldn’t in fact write – all they had learned in their classrooms was to draw the letters on the blackboard in their notebooks.

In writing all day, every day in the classroom, snacking and talking their way through it, the dull-middle produced themselves as in and of the classroom – and little else. The notebook economy interpellated the dull-middle as appropriate students, even when basic literacy was beyond them, even as 65 per cent of 8th class students in Tamil Nadu were at the 2nd standard reading level (Pratham 2012). If, as the school’s assistant head had suggested, the classroom was a ‘holding-space’ for the majority of students, then it was the notebook economy that produced an ongoing classroom out of holding-spaces, and aspiring students out of non-readers who could only draw the alphabet. In the process, entrenching hollowed-out educational outcomes for the majority of the classroom – the dull-middle numbered just under thirty in a class of 53 – as the daily, unremarkable and irreproachable classroom modality. The performance of copying-work was merely a likeness of student performance; the material output of notebooks, a mere reproduction – a simulation – of learning outcomes in the classroom. The notebook economy, however, in all its particular and involved routines and significations, reconstituted tedious copying-work, as *the* performance of value in the classroom, of students’ competency as well as teachers’ efficacy. In so doing, eroding educational outcomes for the majority of students in ways that were unproblematic and convenient, for both students and teachers.

But copying-work *was* tedious; tiring, time-consuming and tiresome in equal parts. In writing all day, every day, in the classroom, the dull-middle did distinguish themselves from the rogues who disdained such participation – but they were themselves differentiated from their group-leaders. Between copying and conversation, snacking and talking, there were few opportunities to make the shift to the front of the classroom where group-leaders sat, nearest the teacher. The notebook economy kept the dull-middle in their place, literally and otherwise: relegated to copyist status, and at the back of the classroom, distanced from their teachers. They did not expect to make any demands on their teachers – it was not their place in the classroom to. Teachers, in effect, were not responsible for the learning needs of the majority of the classroom. Instead, teachers' obligations of care for and oversight of students had been (partly) displaced onto group-leaders. All the same, group-leaders' tick[-mark]s did not have the same value as a teacher's 'good'; nor were group-leaders inclined to speak for the interests of the dull-middle – the hierarchy of the notebook economy was not conducive to such solidarity.

If they were relegated to the back of the classroom and largely ignored by teachers, the dull-middle did not mind. As drivers of the jolliness economy, they had reoriented the classroom for themselves: sitting with their best friends and being their own family, as Kala had described, to the pointed exclusion of group-leaders, made up for the disciplines and disappointments of the notebook economy. There was little need for the dull-middle to move up front when the back of the classroom was the hub for the exchange of *kadai*, *kindal*, snacks and snacking-plans when it might jeopardize their jolliness; or to seek teachers' attention when they were recognized as best friends by valued peers.

Between students and teachers, and between up-to-date notebooks and the jolliness of snacking and talking, no one was, in fact, held accountable for learning in the classroom. On the

other hand, given the rights-based mandate for ‘automatic promotion,’ such a non-learning classroom was, in fact, the efficient outcome for both teachers and students.

If rights-based policies presented the elementary school classroom as the appropriate space of learning-and-not-earning in Kanchipuram, then the elementary classroom was also produced in the everyday routines of copying-work, consumption and conversation as a non-learning space for the majority of students. In other words, the rightful, lawful place for Kanchipuram’s erstwhile working children was a classroom space of no earning – but also no learning.

Paradoxical perhaps, but presently convenient for students as well as teachers: between inadequately prepared students – understandable, given the socioeconomic profile of the neighborhood – and overextended/underequipped teachers – understandable, given large class-sizes and numerous “official work” responsibilities – the resulting copying-work modalities of the classroom suited both. If teachers overlooked students’ chatter in the classroom so they stayed in school, occupied by the notebook economy, then students forfeited their claim to teachers’ pedagogical duties to be left to pursue jolliness with their best friends. In effect, a classroom co-constructed by teachers and students that normalized hollowed out learning outcomes for the elaborate scribal rituals of maintaining notebooks. An unintended consequence of teachers’ and students’ responses to right to education policies, perhaps, but not an unanticipated or irrational outcome (de Zwart 2015). On the other hand, no-learning inhered in the very mundane everyday economies and exchanges – of notebooks, of gossip, of chocolates and ices – that constituted the rights-based classroom in Kanchipuram. The intertwined practices of copying and jolliness – the warp and weft, as it were, that interwove the classroom into being

– did not afford learning; the unravelling of the classroom as it was would have to precede any efforts towards learning outcomes.

In a classroom produced in copying-work, there was simply no room for Bala's question: do we need to copy this also? He might as well have asked: do we need to be in this classroom? If Mrs. P. found the question insensible, then she was, perhaps, merely reflecting educational policies that had interpreted children's right to education as the right to classroom-based schooling: they offered no room to reconsider the classroom-space or take seriously alternative spaces of learning for children. Did children need to be in classrooms where there was no tangible expectation of learning? Between rights-based laws for compulsory schooling and rights-based mandates for automatic promotion, it was inconvenient, indeed inconceivable, for students and teachers to entertain the question.

The release of ASER, Annual Status of Education Report, a citizen-led survey of children's learning outcomes in India since 2005 (Banerji, Bhattacharjea & Wadhwa 2013), has been accompanied by an almost ritualistic lament for the (lack of) quality of schooling across the country. A ritual that, once the media uproar over children's poor performance subsides – “Many of India's children can't add, can't read” – continues to fuel anxieties about the performance of teachers (“Over 50% MP teachers don't go to school”), government-run schools (“Poor state education in India threatens the futures of millions of children”), education policy (“School system fails students”) and the nation itself (“India: Learning a Hard Lesson”). Such mounting anxiety about education is not limited to India. Aaron Benavot, director of the Global Monitoring Report (GMR), summarized the “achievements and challenges” of the Education For All (EFA) movement as a “learning crisis” marked by “inadequate attention to education of good quality” (Benavot 2016, 5). While a ‘learning crisis’ may suggest a dramatic and unprecedented

occurrence; but for students and teachers in Kanchipuram, any learning crisis was simply the inexorably logical operation of the everyday classroom economy, set in motion in the sparsely resourced school-spaces that materialized global guarantees of educational rights. Just as student learning was always and already beside the point in the copying, conversation and consumption practices that produced the classroom, ‘quality’ was always and already not the point in the millennial global political economy of educational rights, underwritten more by rhetoric and less by material resources.

In guaranteeing children’s right to education, the classroom did not and was not required to offer them the opportunity to learn – the classroom as holding-space where students survived through elementary school would suffice. For advocates like Tomaševski (2001a), effecting the right to education is a “relay-race” that’s “long and uphill” (13): securing some schooling – “*any* schooling” (47; emphasis in the original) – for all the children in the world is the first necessity. To ensure the right all children to education requires first the availability of primary schools that allows states to make education compulsory, in turn, contingent on making education free (Tomaševski 2001b, 12-13). Making education of ‘good quality’ is thus second to – secondary to? – making education available, in the long and uphill path to the human right to education. The classroom that was written into being – and snacked and talked into being – in Kanchipuram was not, perhaps, the classroom form imagined or intended as a learning-space in rights-based educational efforts. On the other hand, that the available form was produced as no-learning space in snacking, talking and copying practices, was not only inevitable, but an acceptable and efficacious form of the classroom for the students and teachers who participated in it.

No-Learning Classroom Subjectivities

What did the majority of students in a no-learning classroom in a rights-based the no-fail regime, in fact, *learn* (to be and do)? The no detention policy (NDP) was an effort to reduce the stigma of failure, assuage examination fears, prevent dropping out and, thus, ensure the right of all children to elementary schooling. On the other hand, the no-fail policy has unfolded in a context that, as right to education activist Anil Sadogopal points out, is marked by insufficient teachers, a higher education system dominated by examinations and the growing popularity of private schooling (Bhuyan 2013; see also Sadogopal 2010). What did the majority of students in a no-learning, no-fail classroom *learn* (to be and do), and to what end?

In the first instance, students were conditioned to performing tedious copying-work, every day all day. The material addition of written pages daily was organized as discrete writing tasks executed repeatedly and persistently; the notebook economy did not sustain a longer horizon of accomplishment – students did not and were not required to consider their daily writing tasks as adding up to a larger curricular goal or learning outcome. Unlike on the loom, for instance, where line upon laid line of silk yarn added up to the six-yard *kanjivaram* sari, copying-work was line upon written line to achieve up-to-date status on the day. Such presentist orientation was itself constituted with respect to automatic promotion: year followed school-year, discrete and repetitive, rather than contributing towards cumulative educational attainment.

Secondly, dull-middle students, given their secondary status in the classroom, did not appeal or protest the tedium of the notebook economy. Instead, they resorted to the palliative exchanges of talking and snacking with significant peers that, in turn, required the remoteness of authority figures and justified teachers' abdication of responsibility. Between the notebook and jolliness economies therefore, distant relations with authority figures, mediated by group-leader peers, were sustained as the unexceptional, even preferred classroom relations for dull students.

In the official classroom economy, theirs not to make reply, theirs not to reason why (as the poet might have said) – but neither was theirs a fatalistic write-to-the-death response. While notebook production constituted the relative powerlessness of the dull-middle, it also afforded other exchanges: students learned to unprotestingly accommodate the uninteresting demands and inadequate/hollow returns of copying-work by initiating the jolly exchange of stories and snacks amongst themselves.

School certificates captured such classroom modalities best: valued not necessarily for any educational achievement they signified – there were as many SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certification) ‘fail’ as ‘pass’ certificates circulating in the neighborhood – but for their use in taking up work at the numerous Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in the vicinity of Kanchipuram. With state-issued ration-cards difficult to procure, school certificates were the preferred “age certificates” and “ID proofs” for SEZ labor-contractors. Chitra’s 8th class TC (transfer certificate) for instance, carefully stored in a tiffin-box with her gold bangles, was the document that paved her way onto the car-seat manufacturing assembly-lines of an SEZ-company: it proved her qualification to work by literally marking her time in the classroom. Mrs. K. approved – she credited the SEZs for the retention of her students, the girls in particular, till such school certificates became available. “From the *thari*, they came to school, and now, our children are going to work in SEZ companies,” she added, repeating, “*Thari* to school to SEZ-company – look, how neat-*a*, *oru* assembly-line *madri* they are progressing.” A neat assembly-line, indeed, moving students from the loom, to the school and then onto SEZ-companies. Between the right certificates and the right dispositions, the erstwhile child apprentice on the loom had been reconstructed as the complaisant-and-jolly contract-worker in SEZs.

The Rogues: Consuming Boyhoods and Own Businesses

In the spirit of this chapter, it is important that I mark its origins in a conversation with twelve-year old Kanniappa. “I want the ‘minister’ to know what I think – will you tell him what I said,” he had asked me urgently. It was several months into my fieldwork, and I was escorting Kanniappa back to his classroom. It was early afternoon, hours since Kanniappa had disappeared from the Special School, and I had finally run him to ground by the rubbish-dump that edged the neighborhood. He was scouring the area for “wire” he explained, referring to the increasingly lucrative trade in scrap metal – twenty-five grams of aluminum or ten grams of copper would fetch ten rupees at the two scrap-metal shops he frequented. Ten rupees that, he grinned, that would pay for the four eggs he planned to make a “grand egg-fry” with! I grinned back at his enthusiasm and promised not to tell his teachers.

K [loudly]: But I want you to tell the “[education] minister” about it; I want him to know that people are nagging me about school. They are giving me *tholla* (trouble), and I want them to stop… It’s a “waste”, a “time-waste”. In that time, I could be collecting wire instead.

M [teasing]: What if you don’t find any wire?

K: I’ll work in a *kari-kadai* (butchers-shop) instead. Do you know, they give you *kaas* (cash) and *kozhi* (chicken). I can make a sizzling *biryani* with it.

M: And what if they don’t hire you?

K: I'll work in a *biryani-kadai*⁷³ then.

M: But what...

K [interjecting]: And if they don't hire me, I'll work in the *mitai-kadai* (sweets-shop) then. And if they don't hire me, then the *pani-puri kadai* (*pani-puri* shop) near the main bus-stand. I have worked there before – last year – and they gave me fifty rupees for one day.

Kanniappa's impressive and intimate knowledge of the local economy had momentarily stumped me. "What about when you are older", I turned to ask him, "fifty rupees won't buy you and your family *biryani*-packets, will it?" But Kanniappa was not to be moved in the slightest:

Thooth [spitting on the ground], do you know where I'll be in two years' time? I'll be joining a road construction crew when I'm a little bigger – I don't need any more schooling for that! Do you know what the *naal coolie* (daily wage) is? Just the "starting [wage]" is more than two hundred rupees a day.

He would know – after all, his sixteen-year-old brother, a school drop-out himself, had been working for a few years now as part of a road-construction gang that included other relatives and family members. His *anna* (older brother) was making 450 rupees a day – he had recently bought a second-hand motor-bike, Kanniappa crowed triumphantly. "A bike!" He repeated, dancing a little celebratory jig. "You are taping all this, aren't you," he stopped to ask again. "I want the minister to hear what I think, I want him to know what *Kanniappa* thinks."

⁷³ In the expanding 'fast-food' markets of the post-liberalization era, *biryani-kadais* (*biryani*-shops) have mushroomed across Kanchipuram in the last few years – two new *biryani*-shops sprung up in Pillayarapalayam during my field-work, attracting a constant crowd of boys and young men each evening.

Hanging with the ‘*maatu-vandi* boys’: a field-note

Tamil Selvan folds his bony frame as he eases down to his haunches beside Tamarai, his mother, who is taking a break from the loom. It’s almost noon, and the March sun is unrelenting. The daily power-cuts are in effect, the children of the neighborhood are at school and the lingoes and looms lie silent as the weavers nap in the rising heat. Tamil Selvan and his *maatu-vandi* (bullock-cart) riding compatriots – the *maatu-vandi* boys, as I have come to call them – make a vibrant little tableau in the drowsy stillness of the day. Arasan, the oldest at sixteen and the default leader, leans against the tall step of the house next door, his beloved biceps burnished to a deep tan and shown off by rolled-up sleeves; Shankar monkeys about with my digital audio-recorder, pretending to sing into it, while Gopi and Dilli continue their mock wrestling on the street, oblivious the heat that sets the air shimmering above the recently laid cement road.

Tamil is a new student in class 7 at an aided-school⁷⁴ nearby that promises “excellent 10th Board results” on its posters. That is not however, what has prompted Tamil’s move. After a couple of attempts mainstreaming Tamil in class 6 at the Ice-School, Special School instructors hoped a change of scene would do the trick. But with the aided-school focused on the Board classes, Tamil was soon back to his merry ways, nominally on their rolls while spending most of his time on the *maatu-vandi*, as he has today. Tamarai, his mother, slaps her forehead and curses her fate – “*aiyyo*, he’s just like his brother; neither of them has taken to school.” Tamarai’s frustration is shared by so many others that I almost feel sorry for Tamil. It’s as if a posse has been relentlessly tracking him, from home to hideout, intent on steering him back into school.

⁷⁴‘Aided schools’ are run by a private management team and supported by the state through salary and non-salary grants. As a condition of state support, they offer free elementary schooling and maintain adequate enrollment of students warranting state funds.

“Ah, Tamilselvan *aa*,” his erstwhile teachers bristle, “*andha paiyannai thirutha mudiyadhu* (that boy can’t be straightened).” Even the Project staff that have followed him faithfully, from one classroom to another, have washed their hands off him – Esha calls him a “*pukka rogue*” while Malli threatens to set the police on him whenever she runs into him. Tamarai is willing – perhaps the police could scare the rascallions into going to school!

I ask Tamil why he doesn’t want to go to school. But Tamil looks away, half bewildered and half exasperated – “isn’t it enough that I don’t like school,” he mutters. “School *pidikilla miss*,” he sighs. “They don’t let you go out at all. *Oru minute kooda oor suththa mudiyathu*, (you can’t roam outside for even a minute).” When Tamil was at the Special School, he was always running off to join the *maatu-vandi*. Isn’t that hard work, I ask – wouldn’t it be easier if you just sat in a classroom and listened to the teacher? “Ah!” his mother sarcastically interjects – “but they don’t pay you to write in class do they?” Tamil looks up eagerly at this – “I can make fifty rupees every day on the *maatu-vandi* if I want – I made twenty-five rupees today.” “Really?” Tamarai asks. “Where does all that money go?” “Twenty rupees on buying ‘balance’ (on recharging his phone-card),” explains Tamils, and as for the rest, “Polo!” he grins. The boys share a cell-phone between them, much of their time – and money – is spent listening to paid “downloads” of the latest Tamil movie songs on it. As for Polo, the shop-owner at the *nadar-kadai* next-door avers that Polo is the number one best-selling snack among children in Kanchipuram. Puffed, wagon-wheel shaped chips, they were sold in tiny parrot-green pouches that, priced at just one rupee, were perfectly targeted at the child customer.

Of course, as Arasan points out, the cell-phone is a work phone. It’s how the boys stay in touch with the owner of the cart and the other *maatu-vandi* drivers or coordinate their delivery-time. Tamil adds: “If we see a new construction site, Miss, we call the owner and tell him where

it is – we ‘update’ him all the time.” Arasan, sixteen and strong, is the de facto head of the *maatu-vandi* boys, and has been driving it for (and with) the owner for over a year, plying sand daily from the Palar riverbed to local construction-sites. With construction and real estate booming across Tamil Nadu, sand-mining is a hugely lucrative operation in Kanchipuram, though in recent months, the government has attempted to rein sand-miners in on environmental grounds. Arasan and his employer, while at the small end of the market, run a profitable trade; demand is high enough that an additional hand or two is always welcome, and Gopi, Tamilselvan, Shankar, Siva, Mohan, Parthi, Dilli or Manikandan are invariably happy to oblige. Ostensibly in middle-school – most of the boys are enrolled in the nearby Ice-School, with Tamil and Mani in an aided school further away – more often than not, they are to be found in the *Pulianthope*, the huge tamarind grove that is their playground and workspace.

“If you are so interested in work, what about the carpentry class they teach at school,” Velu suggests. Velu, one of Tamarai’s neighbors, is a high-school student at the Ice-School who often works the night-shift in one of the SEZ-companies; and on days like today, when school is slow, he heads home to catch up on his sleep. “Do they give you fifty rupees in the class?” is Tamil’s cheeky rejoinder; “the *vandi*-owner gives us money when we work; what about your class?” “But your owner makes five hundred rupees,” Velu fires back, “and gives you only fifty, right?” “So what,” Tamil challenges, “he pays us for what we do – today we earn twenty rupees for every two hundred he makes.” If Velu has considered what percentage of the revenues of Hanil, the SEZ-company he works for as contract-labor, he is paid, he doesn’t say. “What can you do with twenty or fifty rupees?” he snorts. The boys fire back: you can purchase balance for the phone with fifty rupees; and download songs, Shankar adds; or play video games. And you

can spend it on snacks, they enthuse together. “Oh yeah,” Velu mocks, “you boys eat *biryani* every day, don’t you?”

“We will,” says Tamil confidently, “when we have our own truck. We’ll be making *pathayaram* – ten thousand rupees – at least!” Tamil was talking of his brother Daya. His older brother, and a byword among the Special School staff – the post-boy of the ‘rogues’ – Daya was an intense fifteen-year old who had led Project-staff a merry dance, resisting their efforts to get him into school. A driver like Arasan, he splits his time these days between the *maatu-vandi* and the delivery-van of a construction materials supplier. He was learning the ins and outs of the supply-business, he had told me, and planned to run his own logistics company one day. Whenever he was around, the leadership changed hands – Daya would rent his own *maatu-vandi*, organizing the raggedy crew of truant school-boys into an enthusiastic team of sand-loaders as they made local sand deliveries. The early mornings, when there was very little monitoring of the sand quarries, were the best time to ferry sand from the Palar river-basin to the *thope*: they could dispense with official quarrying charges and bills – costing about 50 rupees a trip – while steering clear of traffic and the excessive checks by local police. The *maatu-vandi* boys occasionally accompany Daya and Arasan on these early morning sorties – sleepyheads, Arasan scowls – though Parthi frequently tags along. Swimming in the river at dawn is *rhomba* (very) ‘jolly,’ Gopi tells me – “you should come.” Weren’t you scared? I ask him. “There’s hardly any water in the Palar,” Arasan laughs. “You should come,” Gopi repeats his invitation; “you can buy us *idlis* for breakfast!”

Parthi enjoys working on the *maatu-vandi*, loading and unloading sand in the *thope* or at a construction-site. In class 6 at the Ice-School till last year, given his erratic attendance, his teachers felt he would do better at the Special School. Parthi, on the other hand, feels that school

is a “waste.” Sitting next to him in class one day, I watched as he licked his pencil in concentration, his squiggly writing filling one page, and then the next, each letter carefully formed and disciplined inside the lines. The class had just read a geography lesson out aloud together and were currently occupied copying what the instructor had written on the blackboard: ‘sun’, ‘moon’, ‘star’, ‘planet.’ Each word was to be rewritten to fill a page of their four-lined ‘handwriting notebooks’ for English. “Do you want to try writing ‘moon’ without looking at the ‘board?” I asked Parthi. “English *varathu*, Miss,” he says tersely, I can’t do English (literally, English doesn’t come to me). I coax him to try – after all, I remind him, he has finished five years of primary school. Go on, start with the ‘m.’ When Parthi has finished, his m’s and n’s are mixed up. Shall we try the ABL (Activity-Based Learning) cards, I suggest. But Parthi’s done. “Five years,” he says bitterly, “what’s the point of me sitting here *chumma*, doing nothing useful?”

The next time I run into Parthi, he hard at work in the *thope*. The road that edges it also serves as a temporary sand-dump, and Parthi is loading sand on to the stationary *maatu-vandi*. He barely acknowledges me as he shovels sand into a *baand*, a wide aluminum pan, before transferring it to the cart – this one’s a 100-*baand* load, and he’s keeping track of the number of pans he fills. I sit down by the road to watch him work as he meticulously shovels sand into the *baand*, oblivious to the heat and the children playing a few feet away in the pleasant shade of the tamarind trees. Parthi has eyes only for his work, carrying the *baand* propped against his chest and occasionally on his head, working with care to prevent the least amount of sand spilling over, as he moves between the sand heap and the cart. He works steadily, shoveling round from the edge of the heap, making sure he doesn’t spread it out onto the road; “sand is valuable,” he remarks, looking up for a moment as he levels the *baand*, much like a cook measuring out flour.

“You can’t afford to waste a grain.” His green t-shirt, grey with many washes, and his maroon shorts are dark with sweat; sand coats his chest where the front of his t-shirt is open and flecks his cheeks and arms, but Parthi doesn’t seem bothered. “*Pothum da*, that’s enough,” says the *maatu-vandi* owner, walking over to hitch the bulls. He notices me and smiles, turning to Parthi to say, “*yenda Miss-a ippidi suththa vekkara?* Why are you running rings round Miss – why don’t you go to school with her instead?” Parthi ignores the comment, reaching into his shorts’ pocket for a carefully folded piece of pink paper. The official “bill” for the sand procured that morning at the Palar River, he hands it over to the owner in case the cart is stopped by the police. The owner nods his approval. It’s only when the cart wheels away that Parthi says disdainfully – “you don’t *do* anything at school; you don’t do *anything* at school,” he repeats, heading over to the hand-pump to wash.

When there are no loads to deliver, cattle and crew usually head to the *thope* for a late-morning break. The boys have claimed a couple of the tamarind trees for their own, the low branches, ideal for an old sari or two hung up as hammocks. The children of the neighborhood are in school, the bright sunlight is blocked off by the leafage overhead; and the *thope* is quiet. The boys take turns to play a film-song or a “game” on Arasan’s cell-phone – it’s too warm for a game of cricket – and the conversation is desultory. At times like these, I am a welcome distraction. My American experiences, for most part, leave them cold: I have never met Michael Jackson and I hadn’t even heard of The Rock or John Cena, the muscle-popping American “superstars” on their WWE cards. My phone, however, is a never-ending source of amusement. They know it’s the cheapest handset locally available – even Arasan’s cell costs more and Parthi is contemptuous. “Doesn’t download pictures, doesn’t have a camera,” Dilli lists its faults. Shankar looks at me suspiciously – “were you really in America?” The boys don’t have mobile-

phones – *yet*, they are quick to add, and with emphasis. A “touch phone” is their holy grail, and with many evenings at the ‘recharge’ *kadais* in the area, they have built up contacts with an inside line on the local second-hand phone market.

My bread-eating habits are another cause of hilarity. Bread?! They often exclaimed, shaking their heads in pity; but bread is what you eat when you are ill...! While there are no MacDonald’s or KFC eateries in Kanchipuram yet – the boys are nonplussed when I mention them – their knowledge of the many local and international brands of snack-food far outstrips mine. They pepper their conversations: from Nestle Bar-one to Five-star chocolates and Lacto toffees; from Wrigley’s to Big Babol or Center-fresh bubblegum; from Lays potato chips and popcorn to Cheetos, the new if more expensive entrant; and Pepsi and Thums-up and Sprite. Or any of a large number of local snacks and savories: *Murukkus*, *pori*-balls and *rasagullas*, roughly wrapped in old newspaper, or tiny plastic sachets of jams, pickles and jellies and chilled packets of “color” and rose- or *badam*-milk. To hear them talk one would think these were the things the boys lived for. Or, at any rate, one of the main reasons they missed school for. There was little to rival the “jolliness” of earning twenty rupees which then translated into hours of communal satisfaction, chewing bubblegum together. Or Polo – even the smallest of the neighborhood’s *petti-kadais* (corner-shops/shacks) was festooned with the shiny green packets. For all their shiny packaging, perfectly targeted price-points and ubiquitous TV advertising, not one of the packaged food items could, however, compete with the *biryani*. The *maatu-vandi* boys made ditties in its praise – or a lament when straitened circumstances forced them to settle for *kuska* instead, the cheaper version of *biryani* served without any meat. When Dilli lands work as a helper-cum-server at the tiny new *biryani-kadai* (shop) that opens two streets away, it’s the best day of his life. There is much rejoicing – and no little heart-burn – among the boys. The work

begins at 6 in the evenings, and Dilli is paid forty rupees – not counting tips, he adds. More importantly, he gets to take home some of the leftover *biryani* – even the (chicken) “fry” Miss, Shankar says with a groan.

For all their “jolly” exploits, the *maatu-vandi* boys are never work-shy; and for all the classes they cut, they have a keen sense of the monetary value of time. An hour’s worth of stacking bricks, for instance, earned twenty rupees. The festival seasons in particular, whether *Pongal* and *Diwali* that bring shoppers to Kanchipuram in their throngs, or the numerous *thiruvilas* held in *Chitthirai* (March-April) that draw hundreds of devotees to the procession of various gods pulled along in their grand chariots, turn the boys into shrewd entrepreneurs: from water-packets to handkerchiefs and small toys or bangles, the assembled crowds were a captive market. When the *maatu-vandi* boys dropped in to see my occasionally – to watch “cartoons” on my laptop or share a plate of biscuits (cookies) – they were always eager to account for their day. Once, Siva had said, rather virtuously, that he had been in school all day. Parthi is quick to challenge him: he has earned fifty rupees that day. Arasan has made his usual wages of 180 rupees a day. Mohan, wearing a rather grown-up *lungi*, has earned 150 rupees, working at a rice mill.⁷⁵ I point out that Siva’s day has been the easiest by far, out of the hot sun and with his books – surely, the others are envious? Mohan disagrees, trying to find the words to convince me otherwise. “Working isn’t really hard,” he says, with his gentle smile, “even when you are moving sand or digging a trench. It’s all quite easy to do, once you learn how – not like school,

⁷⁵ There were several rice-mills in Kanchipuram, and while most of the workers live on the premises – milling is labor-intensive – additional helpers are often employed during peak-season months, and boys like Mohan head to work in the company of their parents or relatives.

where it keeps getting harder all the time.” Arasan has the last word: “simply sitting in school won’t make your debts disappear.”

The boys are, for most part, practiced hands at brushing off questions about their schooling histories, with a shrug and a muttered *theriyathu* – don’t know. When I persist, there is usually a laugh, followed by some scurrying, and soon, a face triumphantly peers down at me from a higher branch, just out of reach. The only information they appear happy to volunteer about school is the ease with which they are able to “escape” their classrooms. Indeed, Gopi often greeted me with a sing-song *innum varaleye* – they still haven’t come (home) – referring to his teachers; not one of them has visited his home to check up on him yet, he says, wagging his thumb for emphasis. But Gopi is confident that he’s still on their rolls and all he needs to do is to show up for the half-yearly examinations in December. Aided-schools like his, where student enrollments are key to state-funding, often took a more relaxed view of student absences.

“These rogues need to be dealt with strongly,” Malli insists; “there’s nothing that a stint in a hostel won’t fix.” She and other Special School staff – some local⁷⁶ and national NGOs as well⁷⁷ – are firm believers that the best way to ensure that child workers get education is to move them into residential educational facilities. “Let’s see how they escape then,” she adds. Malli had

⁷⁶ For instance, Hand-in-Hand, India, which maintains a residential hostel for students in Panjipettai, about five kilometers from the neighborhood.

⁷⁷ At forefront of residential education for children, whether transition facilities like Residential Bridge Camps, or hosteling facilities loosely associated with state and state-aided schools, is the MV Foundation (MVF), established and led by erstwhile Chairperson of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (and winner of the Magsaysay Award for her anti-child labour contributions) Prof. Shantha Sinha. While office-bearers at the Foundation headquarters in Hyderabad did not have collated data on the trajectories of the 320,000 child workers (data submitted to the Special UN Session on ‘A World Fit for Children’ in 2002) who participated in MVF residential camps, management staff felt strongly that there was enough anecdotal evidence to justify moving children out of their families and into hostels and residential camps. Field staff did express some reservation, recalling specific instances of mixed success, but were in agreement with the overall emphasis on residential facilities that ensured the schooling of (working) children, particularly those from scheduled tribe and caste groups.

already suggested the idea to Siva and Shankar's parents. "The problem with the *maatu-vandi* boys," she sighs, "is not only that they are out-of-school themselves, but they are a magnet for other school-children as well." Indeed, each time I encounter them in the *thope*, there are invariably a few new faces in attendance, wearing school uniform, their school-bags leant against a tamarind tree. These are the bored and disaffected at school, unable to resist the siren call of a "jolly" time hanging about the *thope* listening to music, or the occasional prospect of earning ten or twenty rupees for assisting with the odd job. Some are biding time till their parents can afford to buy them a certain notebook or the chart-paper and assorted materials required for a school project; others are in hiding till their teachers forget to ask for signed report-cards or completed homework. For Vignesh in class 7, it is a class-work notebook for Tamil that's gone missing, and he would rather camp out with the *maatu-vandi* boys till he is done copying out a new one than face his strict Tamil Miss. Gopi (another one) has recently returned from his village, missing a week of classes in the process, and the thought of catching up was simply too much for him. Their concerns are specific – and small, they acknowledge; they know they will have to bite the bullet sooner or later – but it didn't need to be *this* very day.

There are other students however, whose concerns run deeper – deep enough that, like Parthi, they get a stormy look in their eyes when school is mentioned, even threatening self-harm when parents or teachers persist. Kumaresan, for instance, usually a quiet and retiring thirteen-year old, reacts with sudden vehemence when Valli suggests he accompany us to a Special School. It's the second time that a raid team has picked him up at a mechanic-shop and the local councilor has asked Valli to personally look into it. Mechanic-shops are a popular workplace for boys in Kanchipuram, their allure only increasing with a recent 'superhit' Tamil movie where the hero drops out in high-school to work as a two-wheeler auto mechanic. Consequently, they are

also frequently visited by Project staff and raided by Enforcement Squads.⁷⁸ As Valli and I accompany Kumaresan home, he insists he will not return to school. “I’ll go away if you keep telling me [to go to school], he says.” “Force *pannathenga* teacher,” his mother says quietly, don’t force him; “what if he runs away?” Valli is thoughtful. A few days ago, she and I had been talking about the spate of suicides among children, particularly in relation to school: in 2012 alone, the National Crime Records Bureau reported 331 cases of suicide among children below 14 years of age in Tamil Nadu, the second-highest number in the country.⁷⁹ She is worried that the idea of suicide is catching on with children – the children she encounters in her role as Field Officer are far more likely to threaten running away or suicide when being sent back to school than two or three years ago. At any rate, Kumaresan is back to working at a mechanic-shop: his mother tells me that this one isn’t on the main road and hopes there won’t be any child labor raids till he turns 14 in a few months. Her son seems happy at work she says, adding, he doesn’t appear to be slow at learning.

School and/or work: four “flexitarian” trajectories

Whether Kanniappa or the *maatu-vandi* boys and others of his ilk, the “rogues,” as Project staff and school-teachers called them, occupied a liminal space on the fringes of the classroom while they engaged in work-based pursuit of their diverse aspirations. Of course, many school-children in my neighborhood worked in the summer; and such economic activity

⁷⁸ Enforcement Squads, or to give their official name, ‘District Task Forces’, were instituted in 2007 with a mandate to focus on informal workplaces such as household-based ones in particular. The Task Force is drawn from across departments, with representatives of the district administration (including the police), NCLP, SSA and local NGOs, under the leadership of the Labor Department. The Squads work in addition to Labor Inspector teams who are charged with raiding formal sector work establishments such as factories.

⁷⁹ While the National Crime Records Bureau has not released state-specific analyses for minor-suicides in 2012, at the national level, the main causes of suicidal deaths among children below 18 years of age are, in decreasing order of importance: ‘family problems,’ ‘failure in examination’, ‘illness,’ and ‘love affairs.’

was, by and large, not perceived as very problematic: it was not in direct competition with school, in the first instance, and was often justified as “note *kaas*” (see chapter 5) and the means to buy new school supplies. Special School instructors were less pleased, however, fearful that hard-won classroom disciplines and routines would be undone over the summer and their students would be lost to work once again: as they pointed out, summer-jobs increasingly also translated into regular work through the year, and were often the precursor to dropping out of school or Special School for work. A far larger and also growing number of children, boys in particular, also cut class or snuck off during free-periods for an hour or so of work; hours that could easily turn into days during the various “seasons” in Kanchipuram when extra hands were needed in shops, rice-mills or temples. Yet newer modes of school/work combinations were being experimented with as well: Tamilselvan, for instance, had shifted to aided schools where well-intentioned, less-strict attendance policies meant that they could write their examinations despite having missed entire months of school for work. Still others, a significant number including Daya, had dropped out of school entirely for work, finding it quicker and more profitable to return to education when older, via night-schools or “corres-classes” (correspondence courses).

The “flexitarian”⁸⁰ ways in which boys and girls (to a far lesser degree) sought and carried out a variety of paid work, negotiating no-work-more-school policies, was remarkable; even if teachers and Project-staff certainly did not think so. “*Intha kaalathu pasanga* (children these days),” they chided, torn between resignation and outrage when they found children “simply roaming” outside the school with “cash in hand” to spend. When parents had made

⁸⁰ The striking description offered by a child rights lawyer and activist I interviewed in India, who shared similar examples of children in ‘difficult circumstances’ dealing remarkably and ably with them, in unexpected ways.

sacrifices, even borrowing money to keep their children in school, how could children be so “careless” (irresponsible) as to cut classes for *ur suththaradhu* (roaming around), they lamented. Project staff chased after them calling out threats of “hostel,” the residential education facilities that were increasingly seen as the “solution” for the *rogue-pasanga* (rogue kids) constantly “escaping” from their classrooms. “We can’t “control” these *rogue-pasanga* anymore,” complained a school-teacher; “once they experience cash-in-hand, there is little we can do.”

If the adults in their lives dismissed their activities as rogue or careless, children pursued their “flexitarian” negotiation of school and work spaces, not only with facility, but a focus on the future. In the following sections, I describe four different flexitarian trajectories I encountered in my neighborhood, each organized by a particular trade-off between school and work, and justified, not only in terms of immediate remuneration, but also longer-term work-trajectories and economic aspirations: summer-work, with little direct trade-off between school-hours and work-time, to explore work-based fall-back options to school; short-term SEZ-work after dropping out of school to pursue and prepare for good marriages (often with the expectation of returning to some form of education); “own business” work-trajectories, that rejected schooling entirely for long-term self-employment; and opportunistic-work, pursued intermittently during school-time, in the expectation of unskilled, casual work futures

Summer-work and Fallback Options: Where casual work opportunities for some “cash-in-hand” were available year-round and taken on without much planning, summer-jobs were regular, full-time employment, assiduously planned by children, often with the support of their households. With children’s time freed up over the summer, they and their parents hoped to recuperate some of the direct and opportunity costs of schooling. In the long row-house I lived in and shared with four other families (as was characteristic of weavers’ neighborhoods), the talk

among the children as early as March, even before final examinations had been completed, was about their summer-plans. As one of them put it, “I don’t want to waste one second of summer,” and he had already engaged his social networks to find suitable opportunities. Thus, Bharathi had arranged with her mother’s master-weaver to assist on his looms while Chandra would keep accounts for the small cooperative enterprise where a distant aunt was employed. The boys, Mano and Yogi, less constrained by gendered notions of distance and safety, were headed to work in the bazaar-area: Yogi, to the hotel kitchen that had previously employed his father, and Mano to a ‘silk-house’ that retailed the saris produced by his uncle and other weavers in the neighborhood.

While their earnings primarily paid for rising school-related expenses, additional tuition-classes in particular, or helped out with household *kashtams* (hardships) such as outstanding debt, summer was also the time for exploring fallback options to academic trajectories. As Yogi explained, for all that he wanted to study for an engineering degree, his plans were contingent on the marks he scored in school. “When Class 8 or 9 examinations are so difficult,” he grimaced, adding, “learning to cook in a hotel is a handy skill if I don’t do well in school.” With a growing local economy in retailing, hotels, low-end services, transportation and construction, in particular, informal sector alternatives to higher-education mediated formal employment were increasingly available and increasingly lucrative. Fifteen-year old Mani, for instance, had spent his first summer working at a “mechanic-shop” in Class 6. The main push for work had been the difficult *soolnalai* (circumstances) the household faced at the time, as his father had been unable to work. But Mani had found working with (motor) bikes so appealing that he had resolved to make it his future line of work. Since then, he had worked every summer and weekend at the mechanic-shop; in all that time, he added proudly, not only had he never troubled his parents for

a single rupee, he had progressed enough on the job to consider opening his own repair-*kadai* (shop) in the near future. He had been saving up his wages for some time now, and given the rising motorbike sales in Kanchipuram, expected his investment would pay off handsomely.

With the growth of such relatively long-term informal sector opportunities, summer-work was also increasingly a precursor to dropping out, as in Mani's case. As a Project field-worker said in frustration, "only if children are caught and held during the annual school vacation was her work [the elimination of child labor] possible". For children like Mani or Yogi, however, summer-work was the means to identify, explore and build relationships and skills towards alternative work-based trajectories in the local economy, in case formal school education proved too difficult to complete or was irrelevant to their aspirations.

SEZ-work and Planning for 'Good Matches': Shantha, barely fourteen, was the youngest SEZ-worker I met in the neighborhood, employed at one of the SEZs an hour-long, company-van ride away. Having dropped out a few weeks into class 8, she had joined as contract-labor at a "shoe company" thanks to one of the *akkas*⁸¹ in her neighborhood who was already working there. Determinedly pragmatic and forthright, marriage, she told me, was on the cards in a few years: "we are not like you Miss, and we don't want to grow old before we marry." Given her life goals therefore, schooling had not made sense to her; despite the effort it cost her, she had not made much headway in learning to read and write. "Why stay in school then, when SEZ-work was available and it paid?" she had reasoned, and dropped out to work. Getting around age restrictions on factory-floors by wearing "make-up" and a *salwar*-suit to look older, Shantha had found the work easy – "cutting" leather florets and "pasting" onto shoes – and

⁸¹ Literally, elder sisters, used to refer respectfully to older females.

learned quickly. “It was better than school,” she insisted defiantly, describing the “jolly” atmosphere with the *akkas* gossiping and teasing during lunch and tea-breaks. Crucially, she was saving her salary. She knew the work was not permanent, but it aligned well with her own planning horizons as she expected to work for no more than five years five years, enough to put together the dowry and wedding trousseau that would contract the “good match” – a good marriage – she sought. She might regret her decision, she acknowledged; she wouldn’t be able to help her children with their school homework, but she could always send them for “tuition [classes],” she reasoned breezily.

Shantha, at fourteen, had grasped the logics that drove thousands of young women onto SEZ factory-floors: SEZ-work was the means to improve their marriage prospects when educational qualifications beyond elementary/secondary school proved challenging, time-consuming or expensive. A “good match” in marriage depended on the number of “[gold] sovereigns”⁸² you brought in dowry, as my neighbor often reminded her two daughters anxiously. Rather than depend on financially-insecure parents, girls like Shantha secured their own futures by heading out for SEZ-work. While the shift-work modalities of SEZs precluded formal education, many girls, keen to be the kind of good mothers who could “coach” their children for school, planned to pursue their education. They would join correspondence courses or complete secondary and higher-secondary school certifications as “private candidates” who were not required to enroll in regular school. In the meantime, however, working towards good marriages offered the best returns in terms of long-term economic security.

⁸² A sovereign is a standard measure/weight of gold, named for the British gold coin, that has entered the local vernacular to refer to pure gold.

Work-based Trajectories to “Own Business”: For Daya, work modalities were more congenial and in line with his ambitions than school. An astute reader of the local economy if not of text-books, he had spent the better part of the last three years evading school and Project-staff, working instead on the sand-moving *maatuvandis* (bullock-carts) that supplied local construction-sites. Starting out as a loader, he had moved up to *maatuvandi*-driver, before renting a cart to run his own sand-moving operation with a motley group of school boys eager to cut classes. When Daya set up as a sand-supplier nearly two years ago, the price of sand had been 300 rupees for a full-load, he explained; and after they had paid the 200 rupee hire-charge for cart and cattle and the fifty rupee *challan* (receipt) cost to the police, there was enough profit when the boys were delivering two to three loads a day. “These days, a load of sand cost 500 to 600 rupees, depending on the weather; do the math,” he urged. Daya’s sights were set on bigger things however: an “own business” in the logistics and transportation sector that he and his great friend Vijay, another fifteen-year old drop-out, hoped to start. Not only were they both working in the construction industry supply-chain, learning the lay of the land, they were also saving up to buy a *chinna yanai* (a type of mini-truck) on installment to get their transport-company going.

While Daya steadfastly refused to talk about schooling, I was offered an insight into his logics one afternoon as we walked across the *thope* (tamarind orchard) in Pillayarapalayam. We had just been hailed by a student at the nearby municipal school. “What are you doing with this *porriki-payyan*,⁸³ Miss,” he called out, hooting with laughter as he cycled back to class after lunch. Offended on Daya’s behalf, I asked him if he was concerned about being belittled for not finishing school. Time will be the judge, he shrugged.

⁸³ Literally a rag-picker or those who once scavenged for a living; the term was typically used as an insult for young men who were wastrels, though young people often also used it in friendly name-calling.

In another five years' time, I will have my "own business" and I'll be the one they call "boss." But he will be working in an SEZ, saying 'yes sir,' 'no sir' to his supervisor. I need to be able to read and write, yes? That I can manage; and if I need a "certificate", I can always join the night-school⁸⁴ for a couple of months and pass the exam. In five years' time, we'll see who the *porriki* is.

If Daya was comprehensive in his rejection of mainstream schooling, finding it largely irrelevant to his ambitions, then he was also conscious of institutional demands for educational-certifications and acknowledged the benefits of literacy. Drawing on his knowledge of local opportunity structures however, he reasoned that the SEZ-based returns to education did not justify the opportunity costs of schooling, when those opportunity costs included the material, relational and informational resources that work-based trajectories offered towards an "own business" or becoming a "boss". Thus, Daya went about his sand-deliveries, biding his time till his "own business" was a reality, paying little heed to the naysayers or to haranguing Project-staff in the meantime. While he himself was no longer on their list of "rogues", having recently turned fifteen, his ragged crew of three or four middle-school boys continued to be a target of their ire and rehabilitation efforts. Recently therefore, two of them had enrolled in an 'aided school' nearby as a compromise, taking advantage of the school's relatively relaxed attendance policies.

Opportunistic-work in the Informal Sector and Pocket-money: The most irksome of children's flexitarian behavior, as far as school-teachers and Project-staff were concerned, was

⁸⁴ Night-schools, known as the *Nila Oli Palli* or Moonlight School in Kanchipuram, were popular thanks to strong support from the district administration in the late 1990s as part of The Literacy Mission efforts; however, their numbers have dwindled to two since INDUS.

the seemingly consumption-driven and unplanned casual work that students, more boys than girls, engaged in from time to time. Subbu, for instance, in Class 8 at the local municipal school, was (in)famous among his peers for slipping in and out of school unnoticed. Running into him one afternoon outside the school-gates, he admitted he had spent much of the afternoon, and many others, assisting his electrician brother-in-law on a job. “He gives me twenty rupees at least each time, Miss,” Subbu added proudly. Parthi earned as much, each time the sand-cart made a delivery. Having disappeared from his TEC classroom one morning, I had finally run him to ground in the *thope*, loading *bands* (baskets) of sand onto the waiting cart. He enjoyed it, he insisted, and he was good at it, with the cart-owner trusting him to get the number of *bands* in a load right – unlike reading, he added bitterly. Shankari was more sanguine about her lack of academic skills and if teachers often upbraided her for taking an extra day off at the weekend from time to time, that was water off her back. Her weekends were usually spent weeding the paddy-fields where she lived, or cleaning out her neighbors’ cattle-sheds – even half a day’s work paid as much as fifty rupees. A school day now and again to compensate, she felt, was justified.

Such opportunistic work that brought in some “cash-in-hand” was available through the year in the fringe economy of haberdashers and scrap-collectors, at food-stalls and marriage-halls, as domestic-help or helpers for house-painters, drivers, electricians, masons and bike-mechanics. At “season” time, it proliferated when crowds of shoppers or Hindu-devotees descended in Kanchipuram, presenting a captive market for groups of youthful sellers of water-packets, cheap toys, handkerchiefs or small eats. Parents and teachers, however, bemoaned their carelessness and irresponsibility in choosing cash over school, while Project staff roundly denounced them as “rogues.” As one of the Class 8 teachers would say, “the children are

carelessly throwing their futures away for a bit of “cash-in-hand” – it was bound to mire them in “bad habits,” she feared.

Such “cash-in-hand” moral panics among adults obscured children’s view of their labor and consumption practices. “How can I ask my parents for pocket-money, Miss?” Subbu frowned. He knew the *kashtam* (hardships) at home and it was shameful to ask them for money when he could easily take care of his own needs. Undoubtedly, a spicy *biryani*-packet or a cold-drink or, as in Shankari’s case, a pair of earrings, fueled children’s interest in paid work; but there was also honor in earning pocket-money instead of burdening parents with their demands. Moreover, while opportunistic work was relatively unplanned and contingent, children were not “careless” or deviant in their behavior. On the other hand, they were canny workers and consumers, with their ear close to the ground in the local economy. Their remarkable knowledge of wage-rates and “commissions” in a variety of sectors, or the best deals on second-hand mobile-phones or cheap *biryani*, or a host of casual work opportunities, was acquired through the various kinds of work they participated in, even moving a veteran TEC instructor to reluctant admiration. “The children are very well-informed in these matters,” she acknowledged; and already experienced in finding ways to make money in the growing, low-skilled services sector.

While opportunistic-work was an undeniable “escape” from the particular pedagogic modes of classrooms, children were also making considered judgments about their academic abilities and interests in the light of a variety of work modalities and relationships they participated in. As Shankari candidly admitted, she was not academically-inclined nor was she interested in SEZ-work. With little incentive for school-work, she was primarily waiting out the years of ‘automatic promotion’ through eighth grade, enshrined in recent education policy, till she could legitimately drop out and tend to home and (vegetable) garden. In the meantime, she

felt her time was better spent on the weekends at remunerative work that was, she felt, better suited to her interests.

‘Carelessness’ or Situated Logics, Aspirations and Agency?

Among the constellation of actors and activities that make up the child labor policy community in India, those I interviewed persistently read children’s logics for work as misapprehension or careless/ rogue behavior. The very choice of work over or alongside school, they held, was a demonstration of children’s incapacity for rational and long-term returns calculations, prone as they were, to the present and perverse pleasures of ‘cash-in-hand.’ As Burra (2003), an influential child labor researcher in India, observed,

Are children capable of being aware of [the] long-term consequences for their adult lives? I rather doubt it. Even if they were able to comprehend the impact of their perspectives, it is arguable as to whether their representations of their best interests should be taken literally” (p. 82).

These actors, in effect, echoed the global orthodoxy on child labor, constructing childhood as a period of dependency and discipline that precluded the exercise of economic agency by children in choosing to work. On the other hand, what the child labor policy community in India dismissed as “misapprehension”, I suggest, is better framed as children’s situated logics, responsive to the social and material conditions of their daily lives; and what they labeled as rogue behavior, “careless” about future outcomes, is better framed as children’s aspirations for informal sector futures rather than the waged, formal sector employment that rates of return calculations are typically premised on.

Work of varying duration, type and regularity was a mundane part of daily life for many children in Kanchipuram, whether in addition to or instead of school. Drawing, perhaps, on local histories of childhood as integral to the social and economic life of weaving communities, children persistently identified and performed as economic actors in their own right. Not passively resigned to their relative poverty, nor to classroom modalities they experienced as irrelevant or uncongenial, children made strategic calculations about work and school drawing on their knowledge and experience of the local economy and based on their abilities and aspirations – and acted on them.

Children's decisions for work, whether more or less opportunistic or purposive in kind, were framed and strategized in terms of a longer planning horizon. If summer-work met school-costs and household needs, then it also offered the means of exploring alternative, informal sector careers; and SEZ-work, if short-term by nature, offered longer-term utility in contracting 'good marriages' towards economic security. Other work decisions were explicitly rationalized as work-based trajectories, such as moving up from the *maatuvandi* to owning a transport-company, and primarily about achieving longer-term aspirations. In the case of opportunistic work as well, children often reasoned and justified their decisions with respect to their life-goals, shaped as they were by their own assessments of their academic circumstances. While the immediate satisfaction of buying a pair of earrings or eating biriyani was not a trivial consideration, present consumption in itself was rarely the end-game for children. Instead, children framed their participation in work as a strategic use of their time, and a more efficient and enjoyable use of their time, in comparison with participating in classroom modalities that did not support the interests and aspirations of children.

Children's decisions, therefore, were not only longer-term oriented, but also calculated in relation to alternative trajectories. Underlying their logics for work were probabilistic comparisons of school- and work-based outcomes, factoring for their interests and abilities and framed within larger structural/material constraints. That is, children's work and/or school logics were an implicit comparison between the school-based trajectory to formal employment assumed in child labor policy efforts, the school-mediated trajectory to contract-based SEZ-work as effected in Kanchipuram, and the opportunities available in the local informal economy via more or less organized work and apprenticing trajectories. School-based trajectories to formal employment presumed academic and economic abilities for post-elementary schooling and assumed the existence of capacious and local formal labor markets; in effect, precluded many children in Kanchipuram. In response, children sneaked out or dropped out of school, or shrewdly exploited automatic progression policies in elementary school, to take up various combinations of work in pursuit of their life-goals and aspirations.

In sum, children's decisions for work were formulated in terms of life-trajectories sensible to them in their everyday lifeworlds in Kanchipuram; trajectories that were, in their calculations, "real" and realize-able, given their sociocultural contexts and their material constraints. These situated logics, in effect, embedded the opportunity costs of work and school in local economic contexts, rather than relying on abstract, national-level and distant rates-of-return-on-education calculations. Moreover, in aspiring for informal sector work trajectories over school-mediated formal employment, children were not being rogue or careless, but responding to the returns on investment they had experienced or calculated in the local economy. Thus, children not only exercised economic agency in making decisions for work and/or school and acted on them, their logics demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of the local economy and

reflected long-term calculations purposed to achieve informal sector aspirations. Efforts to ‘combat child labor with education’ then, by framing work and school as oppositional in the name of children’s rights, denied children’s demonstrable economic agency and foreclosed their own determinations of their future trajectories.

Children’s decisions for work and/or school offer a situated critique of the two-pronged human rights/human capital discourses underlying child labor policy orthodoxy. Universalist rights-talk, abstracted from the specificities of lived experience and context, precludes the need to engage with ‘real’ children and their situated logics for work. Consequently, law and policy in India have continued to veer towards the prohibition of child labor (Ramanathan, 2009), despite the tripling of ‘marginal’ child workers in the country since the 1990s, that suggests a growing incidence of flexitarian behavior (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, n.d.). Additionally, the human capital calculations underpinning international education discourses rely on waged employment, typically in the formal sector (Bennell 1996; 1996a). In the process, overlooking the informal sector-driven growth in employment in India since (neo)liberalization reforms and mainly concentrated in the self-employment category (Sarkar & Mehta 2010; Mazumdar & Sarkar 2008; Bosworth & Collins 2007).

“If returns [to schooling] haven’t been seen there [in Kanchipuram] yet, it has to come, it has to come,” insisted a child labor specialist with a multinational agency. Such faith in formal educational returns not only dismisses children’s logics, but is arguably misplaced given the post-reform occupational structure in India. It also undermines the need for alternative modes/models of education that better accommodate, even support, children’s aspirations and agency. In this context, it is worth reiterating the Kundapur Declaration at the first international meeting of working children: “We want respect and security for ourselves and the work that we

do. We want an education system whose methodology and content are adapted to our reality” (Miljeteig 2000, p. 20).

Consuming boyhoods and disciplinary projects

If children’s logics for work and/or school in Kanchipuram were shrewd and situated calculations of opportunity costs and future returns in a post-(neo)liberalization Indian economy marked by shrinking formal employment and rising demand for low-skilled service workers and tradespeople in the informal economy, then, consumption of tasty snacks, as Ponnu had evocatively described (chapter 5), was also a powerful desire among students his age:

It’s all about *naaku rusi* (the taste-buds), Miss. If there’s something tasty, if there is a box of *mittai* (sweets) on the counter as you walked past a shop, or if you were going past a hotel and you smelled the *biryani* cooking there, and you are in Class 8, then that is what you wanted to buy and eat. Just making plans with your friends in class about eating *biryani* together made your heart very jolly.

Such youthful *asai*—appetite—for particular foods was hardly a new phenomenon. Children in Kanchipuram’s weaving neighborhoods had for generations indulged in their *asai* for the favored snacks and treats of the time thanks to longstanding institution of *inam kaas* (cash reward) on the looms. In the 1950s when he was a child apprentice, it was *sundal* (steamed chickpeas) and peanuts that were the snacks *de jour*, Govind recalled: “for ½ *ana*, we ate like kings.” By the seventies, there was a greater variety to choose from, as Ravi described (see chapter 2):

We went out as a group—all the boys I knew in the neighborhood—heading for the shops to buy the snacks that we liked. Usually sweets—we loved *rasagulla* and *urundai*, or the

*gaj-uruga*⁸⁵ that we wrapped around their wrists and nibbled through slowly. Or a packet of *kaaram* (savory snacks). There were no special food-shops like there are today—it was all small *petti-kadais* (roadside shacks) then.

It was no different at the turn of the century. As Saravana, a child apprentice rescued in 2001 recalled,

But for all us, the allure of the loom was *Amavasya* and *Karthikai*—when you got the *inam kaas*! [Laughter] I got ten rupees the first time! That was enough for us! That was enough to buy snacks to eat—there was no *biryani* or anything like that in our time, but we got biscuits and ices (popsicles) and little things like that.

If such consumption practices were integral to childhood in Kanchipuram, then they were essential to *boyhood*, in particular, part and parcel of the free-ranging *ur suththuradu* that boys performed to signal their emerging masculinity. Called “loafers,” *vaal-pasanga* (boys-with-tails) or *porikkis* (roadside scavengers, a more derogatory term) with more or less indulgence or exasperation by parents, neighbors, teachers and child labor project staff, boys reveled in being *theru-mannans* (kings of the street). They lounged around at street-corners, tea-stalls and *biryani*-shops, gossiping together and making *galatta*. While *ur suththuradu* was woven into boys’ daily work-routines on the loom and in the errands they ran for the weavers, often stretching out into loitering and snacking with their friends, schooling modalities were less boy-friendly: they offered no *inam kaas*, even as *ur suththuradu* was curtailed by the locks and

⁸⁵ Locally made sweets, wrapped in newspaper and sold.

security guards at the school-gate. Yes, the students of Class 8 at the Ice-School were unanimous, boys were *paavam*, to be pitied; the classroom was harder on boys.

Why? [explained Ponnu astutely] Because if you are a girl, they tell you should be *adakkam* (restrained) and stay inside; but if you are a boy, they say you have to be a man and they send you out to the shops. But now, both of them are sent to school—and boys still have to go out, that is their habit.

So go out they did: during the much anticipated lunch-recess or right after the final school-bell, when the school-gates stood open and boys thronged the *pettikadais*, cool-drinks shops, bakeries and roadside hawkers in the vicinity; but also by “cutting class” and sneaking off to find opportunistic work. Two or three hours of casual work a couple of times in the average school-week not only enacted the free-ranging masculinity they aspired to, but produced the cash that sustained it.

Where Ravi or Saravana and their peers on the loom had roamed around town with the *potlams* and biscuits popular in their day, children in present-day Kanchipuram had entire categories and lines of packaged food products catering to their tastes and vying for their attention. Indeed, debating the merits of competing products (Coke versus Pepsi, Kit Kat versus Perk, Lays versus Polo and so on) or the value-for-money offered by locally-made snacks over multinational brands (color drinks/sherbets versus Coke, or *rasagulla* over chocolates) were hot topics among the boys, as they milled about the shops or set off *ur suththuradhu-ku*. In a post [neoliberal] reforms context of open markets, with the “consumer revolution” offering access to “a wide range of products, locally manufactured and imported, to satiate the cravings of even the most avid, consumer junkies” (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2008, p. 41), cash-in-hand was all the

more central to satisfying the *asai* for snacks and to experiencing jolly boyhoods in Kanchipuram.

Here is Kanniappa, again, this time, giving a speech on the *biryani*, in yet another plea to the “minister.” “A plea from class 7 student in Kanchipuram,” he began gravely, hopping onto a large stone for effect—it was his ambition to be a politician someday, and no doubt this was practice. “A plea to be left alone to pursue my *asai* (love or desire) for *biryani*. Since it is never served at any school [referring to the state sponsored midday meal program], I, Kanniappa, would prefer to spend [some] class-hours, making money to buy *biryani*.” After singing the praises of *biryani* and listing his other favorite foods—*kozhi* (chicken) fry and egg fry—he concluded with another request: “Please tell my teachers and everyone who gives me *thollai* (trouble) about attending school to stop.”

I recalled Kanniappa’s passionate speech a few months later at a “civil society consultation” on child labor laws in India. Held in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad in March 2012, in response to the government decision to reconsider India’s apex child labor law—the Child Labor Prohibition and Regulation Act (CLPRA) of 1986—at the table were representatives from a number of NGOs: from Save the Children, India, under whose auspices the consultation was held, to a large national NGO like the MVF and smaller, more local NGOs and research entities, they all carried out child labor projects in India, occasionally in partnership with each other and typically as part of internationally funded collaborations. As the consultation kicked off, the agenda became apparent: to strategize for a blanket abolition on child labor in the country—and to be “uncompromising” about it, as participants repeatedly announced. When it was my turn to speak, with Kanniappa and his compatriots on my mind, I described their escapes from school for work—their calculative logics and “flexitarian” movements between work and

school, but also the boyish desires for snacks and *biryani*. Before my fellow-participants mobilized for a blanket-ban, had they, in fact, I wondered, asked the children?⁸⁶ My question was met with surprise, anger, derision, pity and a doubling down on their position. In the context of NGO efforts to combat child labor through education, such consuming boyhoods were anathema: not only irreconcilable with the child victim they represented, but increasingly, perceived to be such a corruption so as to be no childhood at all. The consumption practices of Kanniappa and his ilk were seen as the troubling precursors of ominously-phrased “bad habits” (addictions) that portended tragic consequences for children and their communities. To quote the then-Director of the MVF:

We have seen kids like that, roaming on the street... it's their fashion, they're glorifying their own desires, getting out of school and indulging in all this... Definitely there is a lot of consumerism, inside the school also; but a lot of kids we have seen are doing that out on the street. That is dangerous, such glorification—you have to tell them that, you have to teach them out of it, or they will leave school completely. We simply cannot justify it—it is dangerous. They will get into contraband sooner or later. School is even more important for them—only school can help such kids.

If, in Kanchipuram, children’s consumption practices were sensible as a means of signaling masculinity or of coping with the classroom, child labor NGOs predominantly perceived it as unhealthy “exposure” to the market that rendered children vulnerable to moral corruption. “[D]esires awakened through marketing destroy[ed] the child’s innate simplicity and even

⁸⁶ This was a question that, as I realized later, had been asked—and answered comprehensively: see the Concerned for Working Children (CWC) position paper, “Have we asked the Children?” (Reddy 1997). CWC, an NGO based in the neighboring state of Karnataka, is associated with the *Bhima Sangha*, a working children’s union.

interfere[d] with the growing child's ability to become a creative, rational adult able to defer gratification" (Cross 2010, p. 20), they might have said. In their view, Kanniappa's desire for *biryani* was a gateway to dangerous behavior, unspecified though it was, and a portent of worse addictions to come. The right(s)ful NGO response, therefore, was to double down on prohibiting child labor as *the* antidote for such market exposure, the classroom offering the possibility of restoring children to an appropriate innocence by protecting them from the market and the streets.⁸⁷ Indeed, two NGO respondents singled out an extended school-day to preclude children's participation in work after school hours as a strategy to nip children's precocious consumption in the bud.

In effect, Kanchipuram's children, once imaged as victims on the loom in slave-like conditions, were reimagined as enslaved by a commodity/consumer culture: the "victims of consumerism," to borrow from Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase (2008). Indeed, they were doubly victims, on account of their un-childlike, consuming desires, but also reflecting the inability of their families to provide pocket-money. In reimaging the child worker as a desiring victim of commodity culture, forced to work, child labor NGOs in India were, perhaps, rehearsing the moral panics associated more broadly with market society: if children were socialized into the market by inculcating the "urge to buy," then a market society was also preoccupied with imagining and eulogizing the child as innocent in contrast to the mundane, market-mediated corruption of adult life (Bauman 2006, p. 9). Where they had rescued children from the workplace and into the classroom, NGOs were now also concerned about rescuing children from the marketplace into school. Only school could protect them, as the MVF leadership insisted:

⁸⁷ See for moral panics around street-children, another iconic child victim in Poretti et al.'s (2014) list.

between locked school-gates and extended school-days, the child victims of consumerism would be safe from corruption.

In such moralized accounts of consumption, any pleasurable affect associated with consumption is suspect. As Buckingham (2007) observes, moral panics about commodified childhoods are discourses generated “*on behalf of* children,” meaning that they rarely include the voices of children who are best protected by “keep[ing] them locked away from corrupting commercial influences” (p. 16, emphasis in the original). NGO representatives had few questions to ask about Kanniappa or his peers, for instance, beyond making lists of the snacks they craved to generate a trauma portfolio of consumption. NGO staff did not—could not—recognize the jolliness of a shared plate of *biryani* or a bottle of Coke that was so often the highlight of the school-day for the rogues in Kanchipuram’s weaving neighborhoods. To eat chocolates was to spoil one’s teeth: any pleasure children derived was only short-term gratification, effecting wasteful behavior, a sign of what Huberman (2005) describes (in the context of Benares’ child tour guides), as the culturally paradigmatic useless figures of the *awaaraa* (loafer) and the *nasheybaaz* (addict).

Fears for the un-childlike child consumer of Kanchipuram’s weaving neighborhoods reflected fears about the moral decline of Indian society and culture at large. It was *biryani* today, it would be cell-phones next, and then, who knew? Anarchy! The Dionysian child, inclined to bad habits, bad company and bad morals was not only self-destructive but potentially catastrophic for the larger collectivity (Jenks 1996). In the Indian context, where the broadly neoliberal reforms of the 1990’s consumption practices of youth have emerged as a politically-contested site in debates about ‘Indian culture’ and globalization, loafers and rogues and addicts are lodestones for moral panics. Popular culture is “rife with worry about the consumerism of

youth,” as Lukose (2009) observes in *Liberalization’s Children*, contrasted with the austere “Gandhian values” of an older, more socialist generation of India’s ‘midnight’s children’ (p. 20).

In reframing the consumption practices of liberalization’s children in Kanchipuram as a market capture of their innocence, the consultation workshop reflected broader fears about the unsettling and seemingly uncontrollable social and cultural transformations unleashed by (neo)liberalization policies. Market forces had rapidly transformed a longstanding ‘savings culture’ into a ‘spending culture’ of conspicuous consumption⁸⁸: a descent into *apa sanskriti* (bad culture) that troubled large sections of Indian society (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2001 and 2008). As Jenny Huberman describes of the child guides who work in Banaras’s tourism industry, anxious narratives in the neighborhood about boys’ consumption habits, about their waywardness in eating and drinking in the *bazaar*, were a response to the uncertainty of the present: an attempt to restore order by resorting to memories of a better time in a better city with better children who embodied a better Indian culture (Huberman 2005). To rescue Kanchipuram’s rogues and loafers—victims of snacks-based consumerism—and restore them to an appropriately uncorrupt childhood was also a means to defend society from an “un-Indian” culture wrought by globalization and western consumerism in post-reform India.

Not all consumption is equal, nor are all consumers equal. As sociocultural and critical theorists from Veblen (1970[1925]) forward have reminded us, it is always other—especially socially inferior—people’s consumption that is problematic: the uncultured are plagued by uncontrollable materialism, the working-classes are vulgar and ostentatious, women’s fashion is frivolous and children are prone to goods of doubtful legitimacy (Seiter 1993). While all children

⁸⁸ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/analysis/indias-savings-culture-is-its-saving-grace/articleshow/6609789.cms>

are “commercially encultured,” some practices of consumption, such as those that derive from minority or working-class cultures, are perceived to be more threatening (Cook 2010; Cross 2010). The “proper child consumer,” as Korsvold (2010) describes, is a non-acting consumer who is the recipient of “proper toys” from expert adults who claim to know what is proper for children. A middle-class project, the notion of “properness”, she adds, not only sustains adult hegemony, but sustains relationships of power between social classes and groups; the proper child consumer is framed in stark contrast to the consuming-laboring child that seeks the social recognition and identity associated with material consumption (Cook 2013; Lukose 2009; Nieuwenhuys 2005). Thus, in the cross-hairs of public anxieties about youth consumption in India are non-metropolitan, lower-caste youth, in particular—Kanchipuram’s “loafers” and “rogues” for example—whose consumerism is disparaged by “middle-class oriented civic groups” such as child labor NGOs (Lukose 2009). To them, the consumption practices of Kanniappa and his ilk were improper and inappropriate—because they were children, but also because as lower-class and ‘backward caste’ loafers, they embodied the unproductive, consumerist citizen-in-the-making that spelled doom for a threatened Indian culture and polity.

Anxieties about commodified child labor not only reconstructed Kanchipuram’s consuming boyhoods as a narrative of victimhood in the marketplace, but in representing them as victims, child labor NGOs effectively disciplined their desires and daily lives: in the vein of Project-staff chasing after the rogues who had escaped their classrooms, calling out threats of hostels. Ramu and Subbu, for instance, a pair of irrepressible cousins in the Kanchipuram neighborhood where I lived, had been rescued from work into school, before their frequent escapes (by their own admission) had resulted in their enrollment in a boys’ hostel by Hand-in-Hand (NGO in Kanchipuram) fieldworkers “for their own good.” These welfarist efforts of

protecting children by segregating them into educational/reform institutions also uncannily recall Victorian efforts to save the factory- and street-child. If Mary Carpenter's reform-schools sought to restore such youth to childhood, no longer "independent, self-reliant," but "brought to a sense of dependence" and the "trust so characteristic of childhood" (Hendricks 2003, p. 42), then such schools were also an attempt to wean children away from the 'dangerous classes' and school them into the disciplines and obedience to authority that characterized a stable social order (Johnson 1970; Davin 1982; Sandin 2009). Reform schools and hostels, in this view, are an ideological exercise, efforts to assuage social anxieties by disciplining working children.

Some Conclusions: The jolly-and-complaisant SEZ worker

It's time for the three-stranded weave of this narrative – this intertwined story of the rights-based policy project of 'global childhood' as enforced by the 'no work more school' mantra in Kanchipuram's weaving neighborhoods; the ethnographic project of children's ways of being and becoming in Kanchipuram as they move into and across spaces of school and work; and the critical project of the reconstruction of childhood in Kanchipuram in the context of neoliberal labor regimes marked by flexibility and precarity – to be knotted up and brought to a close. Or 'cut' from the loom, as the *kanjeevaram* sari is, and folded precisely before it is sent out into the world.

I began this narrative, some two hundred pages ago, with an account of numbers: the remarkable reduction in the numbers of child labor on Kanchipuram's looms, estimated by the Human Rights Watch Report in the range of forty to fifty thousand in 1996, which fell dramatically to 124 in 2009 when I arrived in Kanchipuram. In the first instance, these counts, as I have previously suggested, reflect the affective politics of large numbers in the cultural project of 'global childhood': of sensationalism as a mode of knowledge production among child rights activists, well-intentioned to spur humanitarian action (see Thangaraj forthcoming), even as it produces contempt for 'other' childhoods (Nieuwenhuys 1998) and reproduces unequal geopolitical relations (Pupavac); indeed, raising the (neo)colonial specter of white people saving brown children from brown adults, as Spivak might provocatively say. In this context, contributing to "southern theory" on childhood is a political imperative; one that my

ethnographic project seeks to engage, especially given the paucity of cultural-historical accounts of childhood(s) in South Asia.⁸⁹

Going back to the startlingly different scale of child labor numbers in Kanchipuram, however. The magic of large numbers also points to the problematic definitions and terminologies of ‘child’ and ‘labor’ (and, indeed, ‘education’) in global policy frameworks, as Bourdillon (2006) has pointed out in his literature review of development policy. Binary systems, he added, such as child versus adult or ‘harmful’ versus benign work, while attractive to policy and law makers in their absolute simplicity, are, impractical or even untenable in practice; especially in majority global south contexts where age as well as work activity represent socially embedded relations and practices rather than singular legal determinations. When applied in Kanchipuram, for instance, binary terminologies served to produce knowledge about children that was always-and-already framed in terms of a cultural/normative discourse of ‘abolishing child labor,’ creating a distorted and exaggerated narrative that, in turn, was overlooked or justified by local Project staff as in service of the “good works” of education (see chapter 4).

A less noticed if equally problematic policy binary is the opposition of education and work, as implied by ‘no work, more school’; or in the reclassification of all out-of-school children in India as ‘child labor’ – an approach briefly adopted by the state at the turn of the millennium at the urging of child rights activists (Lieten). Such dichotomies between school and work, on the other hand, are hardly meaningful for children in Kanchipuram’s weaving neighborhoods, as I have demonstrated. For them, as indeed for children in other parts of India (Census 2000;

⁸⁹ Scholarly interest in childhood as an analytic in Indian contexts is relatively recent (see Balagopalan 2011) – and growing; as exemplified by a recently published edited collection on *Childhoods in India: Traditions, Trends and Transformation*, published in 2017.

INDUS-ILO 2006) or across the global south (see Shafiq), school in combination with a variety of work – including waged work – is a mundane everyday reality. Surveys and reports of child labor, however, in their binary classifications, fail to represent – even recognize – the experiences of such children, even when they constitute a significant part of the classroom. Inadequate or unrepresentative data, in turn, generate inadequate or even counterproductive policy responses: as, for instance, state efforts in light of the RTE Act to enforce eight years of compulsory elementary education that, in disallowing those with fewer years of schooling from taking matriculation examinations as private candidates, only created disaffection for educational qualifications among boys like Daya. Given such category-busting value, the “ethnographic warrant” writes itself in the context of policy projects (see Kendall & Thangaraj 2009) – in the face of the ascendancy of “data-driven policy” and “scientific” educational research that base their claims in objective knowledge and big data (Popkewitz; Samoff &).

As a subscript to the ethnographic mapping of the spaces and trajectories enforced and enabled among Kanchipuram’s children by no-work-more-school policy dogma, are the following trends that may be read as a portent for Kanchipuram’s centuries-old weaving neighborhoods.

In 2012, as a means of estimating the prevalence of the various trajectories that connected classroom-spaces and workspaces, I attempted, with data collection support from Project staff, to develop brief sketches of the 212 children and young people who had been rescued from the looms in the vicinity of my home in Kanchipuram, c. 2000-2009. Of this small though not insignificant data-set, representing 7 per cent of the child labor population in Kanchipuram as estimated by the INDUS survey in 2004-05, a full quarter were untraceable; typically, as a result

of their families out-migrating to the nearby metropolis of Chennai or back to the native village in search of work.⁹⁰ As for the rest, a little over 170 in number, their traceability reflects their social embeddedness – they were more likely to be from the longer-standing weavers' households in the neighborhood. A map of their trajectories from loom to school and beyond then, is not only a picture of their movements and mobility in a changing field of economic opportunities, but – and in a nod to Bourdieu-ian social/class analysis – a snapshot of the fragmenting of a historically prestigious occupational group and the artisanal and intergenerational social relations that constituted it. A not-so-slow death of the practices and dispositions – the cultural habitus, Bourdieu (1979) might have said – that produced weaving not only as a livelihood but a “way of life” on Kanchipuram’s neighborhoods.

In considering those children and young people we traced, given their overlap as they shifted between trajectories – as for instance, when young weavers had taken up SEZ-work briefly before returning to the loom, or when SEZ workers had briefly taken up weaving or other kinds of work in the local economy during the “service breaks” enforced in their contracts – precisely estimating numbers for each kind of trajectory was difficult. What was beyond doubt, however, was the popularity of the trajectory from school classroom to SEZ factory-floor: over a third had dropped out of school, to eventually take up short-term company-work in SEZs. Girls outnumbered boys in this group, having preceded them into SEZ-spaces; though boys were following them onto assembly-lines in growing numbers, in particular, as car manufacturers like Renault-Nissan had recently set up SEZ units they were hiring for. In following this majority female group off the loom and out of school, lies the story of (how and) why weaving girls got

⁹⁰ An important trajectory in itself that calls for more research

SEZ jobs (in a faint paraphrase of Paul Willis): a story, rather than of the cultural reproduction of class, of the reproduction – the respatialization – of gender, as girls' trajectories and aspirations, no longer wedded to the loom (and I use the expression advisedly) are channeled via the compulsory education spaces of classrooms and refracted onto/into the neoliberal spaces of SEZs.

The next most numerous group, predominantly male, had taken up tradeswork in masonry, catering, auto-repair, land and labor brokering/contracting or other forms of self-employment in the ‘traditional’⁹¹ services sectors of food, retail and delivery/logistics. Barring a few girls who worked in retail sales or managed Xerox-*kadai* (copy shops), the rest were boys and young men seeking to follow their aspirations for “own business” in the rapidly growing unorganized/informal sector. Some of these opportunities were more or less directly linked to the expansion of SEZs – in labor (sub) contracting, for instance, and maintenance and logistics services for the mega-fleets of SEZ company-buses, or even the traffic in fake certificates as SEZ “ID proofs”; while others were more loosely coupled spaces of opportunity, as in booming construction and roadworks in the vicinity. Yet others reflected the broader restructuring of the economy across the country by the neoliberal reforms of the 1990’s – the ubiquitous growth in consumer markets in food and retail, as seen in the proliferation of *biryani-kadais* across Kanchipuram, or the emergence of questionable enterprises, sand-mining, for instance, that accompanied the rapid deregulation of the economy. These self-employment trajectories trailed promises of spectacular success – and I use the word in a nod to the “frontier capitalist” modalities of neoliberalism (Tsing) and its conjuring up of cash [see Comaroff & Comaroff];

⁹¹ Rather than in the more ‘modern’ IT and telecom sectors that have been often hyped as the engine of India’s growth at the turn of the millennium.

marked by a degree of lawlessness and luck, their precarious nature appealed to and advantaged the “rogues,” practiced in surreptitious and ‘flexitarian’ escapes from classrooms. At the very least, they allowed for the autonomous work modalities so on the loom – and in stark contrast to SEZ-work – and, in the process, sustained the wide-ranging masculine practices of *ur suththaradhu*.

Among the rest, and apart from a plethora of trajectories to casual work typically undertaken as supplementary or seasonal activities by “housewife” girls and young women who had dropped out in secondary school – making *appalam*s and preparing mango pickles, for example, or packing sweets, “taking tuitions,” joining multi-level marketing companies, weaving plastic baskets and toys, or doing agricultural work at planting and harvesting times – the single most identifiable trajectory was back into the loom-space. Less than half the size of the SEZ group, this group, largely made up of older INDUS cohorts and with boys marginally outnumbering girls, had quit classroom-spaces rather quickly to return to weaving on the loom. Between a sense of obligation to return master-weaver advances, as loom-based ethics demanded, and feeling too shy (*koocham*) or having too much self-regard/pride (*mariyadai*) to sit in the classroom (as girls and boys had respectively explained), the pain of reorienting one’s body and senses had been too much for them to endure. These were the self-identified ‘last generation of Kanchipuram weavers,’ who not only vowed to weave as long as they were able but, from their vantage-point on the loom, launched some of the strongest criticisms of the strict labor regime of SEZs.

Finally, it is also important to note those trajectories that Project staff highlighted as “success stories”: of the 212 children rescued from the looms in the neighborhood, four had gone on to post-secondary education: Aisha had finished her Bachelor’s and was currently working as

an instructor in the very Special School that she had attended; Saravana had recently started a professionally-oriented master's degree in computers; while Deemu and Kutti, still finishing up their Bachelor's degrees, hoped to obtain a master's in commerce and a teaching degree, respectively. Held up as "role models" by Project staff in newspaper releases and feted at Child Labor Day programs, their trajectory from loom to school to further education that held out the possibility of formal white-collar employment epitomized the occupational mobility that formal classrooms promised. They were yet to realize returns on their hard-won investment in education – funds solicited from religious and community-based organizations and philanthropic individuals that had seen them through high school, or by enrolling in evening college in order to work days and save up their fees – but their Special School instructors were always quick to assure them it was only a matter of time.

Aihwa Ong (1991), in an early piece on gender and labor in free trade zones, brings together a number of scholarly accounts from south, east and southeast Asia as well as North and Central America, to suggest the emergence of a "cultural struggle" in the face of neoliberal imperatives for "docile [female worker] bodies." Worker consciousness and subjectivities, she argues, while expressed in a cultural (rather than a class) idiom and configured in terms of proximate relations, hierarchies and norms as daughters and young women in their communities (rather than in labor-capital terms), were no less of a political challenge to SEZ work regimes. Thus, even if neophyte workers – "whose sensibilities were shaped by peasant and/or preindustrial cultures" – did not oppose 'capital,' they "challenge[d] the work process for its dehumanizing effects," engaging in "daily struggles against corporate policies over body discipline, pressures for high productivity, and surveillance..." (p. 291).

What daily struggles challenging dehumanizing SEZ practices did Kanchipuram's young women engage in on assembly-lines, especially given the reshaping of their worker sensibilities and subjectivities in a rights-driven move into classroom-space? Before attempting an answer, it's worth going over female factory-workers' cultural struggles in response to SEZ work, as Ong reviews them:

In Taiwan, female workers spoke of being shut up all day and wasting the "spring" of their youth, a bitter contrast to pre-factory days when the period before marriage seemed carefree. This sense of imprisonment is also felt by factory women in Malaysia who... felt "shackled" in the factory. ...The theme of entrapment extends to their experience of work discipline. Malay women rejected corporate expressions of welfare concern, claiming that the management treated them as things, not human beings. Many found the relentless drive for higher productivity and disregard for worker fatigue intolerable. They also complained of bodily deprivations (aches and burns, insufficient sleep, skipped menstruation) that registered the grip of industrial discipline. More assertive workers tried to enforce traditional morality, demanding human empathy (*timbang rasa*) and justice from their foremen. They sold their labor but not their right to human consideration.

Workers in Taiwan also contested categories and practices that treat them as extensions of machines.... they denounced workplace conditions in moral terms. ... Foremen were described as "mean," "overly strict," "slippery," and "putting on airs". Workers were therefore suspicious of perceived attempts to manipulate their emotion... The refusal of such gestures echoes a Hong Kong worker who scornfully denounced implicit expectations that to get a slight pay raise one should "pat the horse's rump" (i.e. curry favor)...

In mainland China... although women workers subscribed to the sexual division of labor, they also used such gender images to subvert new pressures for higher productivity. They routinely cited family and female reasons for taking time off work... (pp. 299-300).

As Ong concludes, young female assembly-line workers, if using different cultural idioms, nevertheless “expressed a view of industrial work as an assault on the body as well as on the moral value of human beings,” disrupting, resisting and subverting the meanings imposed on them as docile worker-subjects (p. 300).

In 2009, when I first arrived in Kanchipuram, I remember trying to break the ice on my school-visits by asking students about their aspirations: what would they like to be when they grew up? The middle-schoolers, without exception, wanted to be police inspectors (boys, in particular), doctors, engineers and teachers (girls, in particular). Three months later, when we had grown more familiar with each other, I asked them a slightly different question, largely in a bid to help them chart their paths to the policemen, doctors, engineers and teachers they hoped to be: what would they do after class 8? After class 10?

The answer for the majority of class 8 students? “Company-*velai*, Miss,” or “Nokia-*velai*,” as company-work in SEZs was often called in the neighborhood. Even Lakshmi, firebrand group-leader and staunch advocate of formal education, granted that

We can’t always get to do anything much after we finish our studies. Girls usually go to work at places like the Nokia-company, and even some boys also work there. Girls mostly finish their [secondary school] studies and then they work for Nokia.

Professional pathways were certainly the “right” answer to give school visitors; the more pragmatic answer, on the other hand, within reach and without the pressures of high marks and fat fees, was SEZ-work. Indeed, their teachers were unanimous that the SEZs were a “good opportunity – for our girls, in particular.” Their class-teacher had noted with great satisfaction that students from the school were headed towards the SEZs, *kootam-kootam-a* (in a great crowd); while the headmaster had gone one better: the SEZs were a “blessing” for his students, he insisted, offering jobs when the future of the loom looked shaky. “It’s our [good] luck that SEZ companies had come at the right time – where would our students go otherwise?” he had said. It had not taken INDUS field-workers long, either, to package rates of returns to education (ROREs) in SEZ terms: child workers would enter school, leave with an education – and the all-important ‘school certificate’ – that opened up the gated spaces of SEZs, and in turn proved the promise of schooling. In effect, SEZ-spaces were sensible to students and teachers as contiguous with schooling-spaces, with narratives of rescue and rehabilitation, largely meaningful as a progressive trajectory whose arc extended beyond schools and into SEZs.

Indeed, for several years, daylong job fairs were a specific Project intervention in Kanchipuram, with SEZ companies welcomed to the dusty brown grounds of the Collectorate as generous patrons who preferentially hired erstwhile child workers – “to give them an opportunity,” as a Project staff put it. Such recruiting nexus between SEZs and state/quasi-state agencies – local panchayat administration, state schools, government schemes, district employment officers, etc., as Dutta (2016) describes – were widespread across Tamil Nadu, justified, even celebrated – by one of Kanchipuram’s Collectors, for instance – as the governmental good work of ‘employment generation.’ A loom to school to SEZ assembly-line, indeed, as Mrs. K., the 8th Standard class-teacher, may have delightedly crowed (see chapter 5);

running seamlessly from weavers' neighborhoods to the deregulated factory-floors of SEZs, carrying young and largely female bodies, newly inscribed as rights-bearing classroom subjects.

On the other hand, managers at SEZ-companies were rather blasé, even dismissive – in more ways than one – about their recruitment pool of young matriculates and drop-outs. As a manager at the Hyundai SEZ-factory told me, the company “just like that, pulled in people, all 8th and 10th standard [students], without any decent criteria or training.” Dutta (2016) not only corroborates his account, but quotes labor contractors and brokers to suggest that SEZ companies, in fact, specifically targeted low-performing state school students in poor neighborhoods: not only scouting them rather than private school students – “We prefer government schools, they mostly have BPL (Below Poverty Line) students” – but favoring those with lower marks – “If they get high marks, we don’t prefer to hire them, since attrition is high [as they may aspire for higher education or better jobs]” (p. 47). And why not, as the Hyundai manager had queried, when all the young workers did was assembling a mold? “They will do that for one year and they will go,” he shrugged, “and that’s it – that’s the company plan.”

SEZ-work thus, was deliberately uncertain; as the makeITfair campaign report, aptly titled ‘Phony Equality,’ makes clear (Ferus-Comelo & Pöyhöne 2011). Labor officers don’t know and companies don’t tell when asked about the extent of contract labor employed on SEZ factory-floors, and the involvement of labor contractors and subcontractors only muddies the waters. Nokia, for instance, did not have a policy on how long workers remained on contract, nor, in the maze of contractors and subcontractors, report on how long the average contract lasted. Moreover, to preempt any presumption of a longer-term employer relationship, SEZ-companies also resorted to enforced “service-breaks” that required workers to stay home for a month or two – or move on to another company – before they could be rehired. Where assembly-

line workers were on the direct payroll of companies, they were typically – and rather cynically – employed as “trainees” for between one and two years, even when any ‘training’ per se of assembly-line workers – at Nokia, for instance – lasted a month at best. Traineeships, while presented by labor contractors, not unreasonably, as precursors to permanent jobs, did not, in practice, imply any such claim – as Mani’s experience testified. In fact, the very suggestion made him laugh. He had held on for 16 months at an SEZ company, clutching a ‘trainee appointment letter,’ to no avail. Working as contract labor at a different company now, he let me photograph his letter, adding bitterly, “take it if you want, it’s not worth the paper it’s printed on.” The Hyundai manager agreed: assembling a mold hardly required any training – “they are not gaining any knowledge or skills out of it,” he added, reiterating for emphasis, “they are not gaining any knowledge out of it.”

SEZ-work itself, as other ethnographic accounts have attested (Cross; Hewamanne; Ong), was tedious and repetitive, and tiring besides. As Dutt (2016) describes of Nokia-*velai*, a young and predominantly female workforce about four thousand in each of the three daily shifts, was assigned to ‘teams’ and organized in ‘lines’ on the cavernous factory-floor, on their feet for the entirety of eight-hour long shifts, heads bent over work-stations, while hands assembled components to meet hourly targets – as high as 600 phones an hour – before passing them on further along the line, to be quality checked. Monitored by peer ‘team leaders’ and “motivated” by recognition as ‘Smart Operator,’ supervised by typically male “Sirs,” in turn, surveilled by the ever-present ‘electronic eye,’ these young women were primarily constituted on the factory-floor as “working bodies.”

Moreover, the average SEZ labor contract, as far as I could determine from the salary-slips my research participants showed me – typically, a thin strip of paper torn off a longer excel-

sheet print-out by the labor contractor that detailed the number of days worked in that month and any deductions for bus-services and provident funds and, it seemed to me, was careful not to mention any company or contractor information – offered between 2,800 and 3,600 rupees a month. At the lower end were the relatively low-tech garment and footwear SEZ companies that paid 100 to 120 rupees for each working day; while larger companies, Nokia for instance, were at the higher end, offering 180 to 220 rupees a day. While SEZ wage data is notoriously difficult to obtain from the companies themselves, Ferus-Comelo & Pöyhöne (2011) determined, in their report for the makeITfair campaign, that contract-workers at Nokia earned Rs. 4,400 a month, while those at Salcomp, a Nokia subsidiary, paid them Rs. 4,130. Of course, working overtime increased monthly earnings, just as wages were held back, not only for any days of work missed, but when production was cut back in response to global demand. In sum, when the average silk weaver in Kanchipuram, according to the District Statistical Hand Book for 2010-2011, published by the state Department of Economics and Statistics, was earning 4100 rupees a month in 2008, the average SEZ worker took home about 3600 rupees at the end of her month on the assembly-line.

If SEZ-work was a “good opportunity,” especially in the context of a longstanding, skilled occupation group or a divine “blessing” in the temple city of Kanchipuram, then I was hard-pressed to see it. How had the young and majority female contract workforce in Kanchipuram responded to the low-paying, low-skilled, highly uncertain and highly surveilled flexible labor regimes of SEZs?

Much to my bewilderment, the girls and young women in my neighborhood appeared rather sanguine about their conditions and routines of work on factory-floors, even enthusing

about company-*velai* and justifying its labor practices. When I first arrived in Kanchipuram in 2009, Nokia-*velai* was *the* “hot top ic” among youngsters in weavers’ neighborhoods: the promise of a “modern” job in sprawling industrial complexes, accessed by “ID proofs,” key-cards and a fleet of air-conditioned buses, and with the accoutrements of smart uniforms, shop-floor shoes, pay-slips and salary accounts seemed to outweigh any critical considerations of the dehumanizing lack of worker protections and possibilities for skilling and advancement. If the policy paradox – of rights based schooling that protected children from work by moving them into classroom-spaces, only to then line the majority up for SEZ-spaces stripped of worker protections and rights – was troubling, then I was even more puzzled by the excitement about company-*velai* shared a generation of young loom-to-school-ers.

In the first instance, the glass-fronted and metal-sheeted modernism of SEZ-factories, their grand – indeed, global – scale of operations, the precisely fixed shifts and elaborate assembly-line work routines, the formal hierarchical organization of work, all presented a rather attractive and stark contrast with the spaces and relations that constituted the loom-space: the relatively “primitive” technology of the loom, the loose organization of weavers in shifting and multiple production attachments, the intergenerational and intra–neighborhood interdependencies and, above all perhaps, the barefoot, lungi and *pavadai* (traditional long-skirt)-clad modalities. If Selvaraj had been outraged at the thought of going back to wearing a lungi after having worn the modern ‘trouser’ of his school uniform, or Pushpa had been saddened by her unschooled sister’s preference for the *paavadai* over the *chudi* (see chapter 5), then SEZs, with their mandatory factory uniforms and shoes, certainly appealed to their sensibilities as school-children. Moreover, modern SEZ habits (literally and otherwise) dovetailed with a middle-class ‘habitus’ in Kanchipuram’s neighborhoods: that of going *out* to work – contra staying *in* the household-based

loom-space, a handbag or backpack casually slung over a shoulder, much as any white-collar office-worker might. Such modern/middle-class symbolism was powerful enough that when one of my neighbors was invited to attend her friend's son's marriage, his wedding-card proudly proclaimed his connection to Nokia – he was a sub-contracted company-bus driver – much as the middle-classes listed their educational qualifications on their invitations.

Early one morning, as my neighbor Gamini and I were picking up our milk-packets at the corner *nadar-kadai*, we watched as a gaggle of handbag carrying young women, carefully coiffed and wearing bright *chudis*, hurried on their way to the end of the street where the company-bus would pick them up. "Look at them going out to work," Gamini sniffed, torn between envy at how smart-*a* they were dressed and disapproval that they were the cynosure of all eyes on the street. Street-spaces, as previously described, remained the litmus-test constituting gender in Kanchipuram, navigated swiftly and carefully by girls even as boys were entirely at home on the street. Company-buses had, however, dramatically re-drawn girlish boundaries of "safety," as a Special School teacher put it:

The company-bus now comes to [girls'] homes – it comes to their locality to pick them up and drop them off. So they don't need to get on or off anywhere enroute, and there is no reason for any harm to occur. They can go 'safe' and come back 'safe.' A lot has changed thanks to the company-bus, yes... When it comes to girls, parents' first thought is always: is she 'safe'? That's it. They stop with that. Even the question of how much she earns comes only later.

Thus, where gendered sociospatial expectations would have once deemed it unsafe for girls and young women to travel unchaperoned beyond the neighborhood, company-buses, often gender-segregated, had carved out a safe corridor to SEZ-spaces, shielded from the prying eyes of

strangers on the street. In the process, SEZ-work had also widened girls' spatial trajectories – a means of stepping outside their relatively cloistered lives in classrooms or on the household loom – and loosened some of the constraints that socially mandatory performances of *addakam* (restraint) placed on them. The company-bus, in particular, was a liminal space, unwatched by censorious neighbors or by efficiency-minded SEZ supervisors; a space where girls sang along to the latest Tamil movie hit-song, applied lipstick and make-up or did each other's hair, shared biscuits and compared fashions, endlessly gossiped about work, romance and family, and exchanged "beauty tips" and birthday gifts.

Indeed, in my interviews with the young, female SEZ workers who had been rescued in my neighborhood, it was these "jolly" experiences that took pride of place: high jinks on the company-bus and shared snacks in the company-canteen, surreptitious conversations under the noses of team-leaders and supervisors or smuggling cell-phones – strictly disallowed on the assembly-line – onto the shop-floor. The acme of jolliness, of course, was the trendy Chinese food and North Indian cuisine, the vacuum-packed biscuit packets and cups of tea that young girls and boys enjoyed at SEZ-canteens with "access cards" that directly debited their daily-rated wages. It was reports of such "jolly" happenings that had drawn 18 year old Veda to one of Hyundai's SEZ-based suppliers a year ago. "My friends called me," she explained,

they had studied with me before, and when they started working [for an SEZ-company], they called me. They said we are all going together, so why don't you join us – it's jolly here. [Laughter] I like everything at the company – it is jolly... When the supervisors are gone for lunch, we fight to sit in their chairs – there are ten chairs, all in a circle. When they are off for lunch, we pretend we are the sirs – what the sirs do, we do. We are always talking (*kadhai adippom*), always fighting and being jolly, so we don't feel tired.

When sir isn't there, that's when we tease each other loudly (*kindal*) – the moment we see him heading off, we begin [smiling]. Even when he is there, we sneak and talk to each other, of course. So even if he is around, we are not tired because we are talking... We talk about whatever friends talk about – there's always something to talk about. Yesterday was Sunday and so it was a holiday. So today, we discussed what we ate on Sunday, whether we had slept. The girls were saying that if I was going to sleep off at the company, they would beat me to a fine pulp [laughs]. On Saturdays – because Sunday is a holiday – everyone dances in the bus on the way home. My friends dance, everyone dances! It's jolly on the bus, with all the youngsters playing music or listening to it or fighting loudly! Before getting on the bus, that's when we buy snacks – I buy chocolates or biscuits to share with my friends. And they also buy snacks and we share them on the bus or during break-time... Sometimes, when one of us takes a day off, we all take the day off! Even if one person isn't at work, it becomes hard for the rest of us, so we all take leave together! If anyone asks us, we tell them, yes sir, we are all friends, sir. So it's all quite jolly.

If I was concerned that Veda and her fellow-workers were on their feet for most of the working-day, then Veda sought to reassure me, repeating that "we are not tired because we are talking, even on the line, we are talking." Porkodi, at 19, was also working in an automotive SEZ unit – she had worked previously in a "phone company" – and she agreed. "It's jolly, Miss," she insisted; "yes, the hours are long, but no, they are not difficult at all. It's jolly," she reiterated, "because of all the other youngsters working there. There are a lot of us, both boys and girls, who work there – I think about 1800 girls in all, across the shifts, and maybe 500 boys. So it's

jolly for us – the times passes easily!” Her favorite part of the work-day? Porkodi’s rather solemn face breaks into a big smile – “Tea time of course!”

That’s when we talk the most – we talk about anything and everything! About work, or what happened at home (*veetu kadhai*). Yes, we talk about movies also sometimes, or music. Not about the beauty parlor – well, maybe once in a while. All sorts of things. On the bus, the girls sit in the front of the bus and the boys at the back – I sit right in the front – but the girls sitting behind me, they talk and laugh with the boys. They all have a jolly time, they are up to all sorts of things, chatting and laughing. I also talk, but only to those who are sitting with me. We gossip, we play [on the cellphone], we even take a nap. We talk for a little while, and then we fall asleep.

17-year old Kanaga described her work at a garment export company in similar terms: “It is jolly,” she said.

There are youngsters on this side and youngsters on the other side – they are all around you. And everyone talks and gossips while working. Sometimes, we even turn around while working and pass comments and be jolly. At lunch, we talk and joke a lot – we talk about the company, we discuss what we are eating, *veetu kadhai* (family stories). Sometimes we talk about the popular ‘serials’ on TV, we talk about their story-lines and it’s very jolly. Even if I am feeling under the weather, I go to work – because of the other youngsters there! It is all very jolly.

Especially jolly, of course, was watching Dhana’s burgeoning relationship with one of the *Annas* (lit. older brothers; generic term of address) at the company. Friends from their time together at the INDUS Special School, Kanaga insisted that it wasn’t a “love affair” – at 16, Dhana was too

young for such things – but all the flirting certainly added some spice and a lot of gossip to the long work-day, she grinned.

If the chatting and talking and gossiping on the factory-floor was a “coping mechanism to stand and work for eight hours,” as Dutta (2016) attests (p. 49), it was also the scapegoat for the injuries workers sustained at work. Veda herself had suffered minor burns on her hands several times – it was her own fault, she assured me. “When you are working and everyone is chatting and being playful, sometimes you get hurt,” she said, adding, “If I am careful, nothing will happen to me.” Wasn’t the company liable though? I wondered. “What can they do?” Veda was quick to absolve them. “Such accidents only occur once in a while – maybe once a week, someone gets hurt, a needle pricks your nail, something like that.” And when it occurred, the company rushed them to the hospital – “they even use a car for it,” she added. You could then take the rest of the day off without your salary being cut. As far as she was concerned, the lesson to learn was: “You have to keep in mind that you should do only work during work-time and you can play when it’s time for play; you can’t do both.” On the other hand, it was playful banter that kept the line going – kept the line standing, at any rate – for the entire shift.

For all the talking on the factory-floor, there was little talking back to supervisors and permanent staff – the best relations were conducted at a distance or in respectful silence, as far as the girls were concerned. Veda, for instance, was relieved she wasn’t a team-leader with the “risky” job of speaking to the HR manager or reporting targets to the “sirs” – you had to know how to speak with them “correct-a.” It was best to be quiet, as Arpa had done when her supervisor scolded her – “in front of everyone,” she was embarrassed. “I didn’t say anything,” she added – after all, she had been talking, and if there was a “fault” in your work, then it was only right that you were scolded. No, she clarified, no one scolded you for talking – “it was only

because I okayed the wrong part”; all the same, she had been careful to keep a low profile – to keep mum – for the rest of the day. Indeed, “faults” could even be punished by being briefly exiled from the line and its chatty modalities, banished to silence. “Yesterday,” recalled Porkodi,

I was in the Quality area – that’s the riskiest area to work in, if anything goes wrong, you’re in trouble. So yesterday, oh my, how they scolded me! If you hold up a part wrongly, then of course you will be scolded. They will ask you to go stand outside – you have to go out and stand by yourself for some time. So I stood there quietly for a bit. Then if you say you are sorry, you can return to your station.

It was difficult, at this point, not to think about the classroom-ification of the SEZ factory-floor – or was it the other way round?

Unlike Mani, the girls I met did not appear as bitter about the uncertainty of their work contracts either, or the tantalizingly out of reach “permanent job.” Trainee letters were valued, of course, and stored away carefully with school certificates and small pieces of jewelry; not least because a traineeship was seen as a promotion from contract-work, translating into higher wages. On the one hand, as Porkodi had observed, there was little difference between trainees and contract-workers – both wore the same uniforms and were paid the same wages, though contract-workers had a small part of their wages, fifty rupees or so, held back by the labor contractor as a brokerage fee.⁹² On the other hand, a trainee letter suggested recognition by the management, auguring well for the future: while the letter did not guarantee, in so many words, employment beyond the training period, it nevertheless implied that such an expectation wasn’t unreasonable. Jayanthi, Anitha and Arulselvi, for instance, near neighbors and friends from their INDUS days,

⁹² In some companies, trainees did earn substantially more than contract-staff.

were all trainees at their SEZ companies, manufacturing car-seats for Nissan and Ford, cellphone parts for Nokia and brake-wires for Hyundai, respectively. For them, the trainee letter was the certificate that proved they were worthy in the eyes of the company to be “permanent staff.” Jayanthi believed that it was her excellent attendance record that had swung things in her favor. “Not more than 2 days off a month,” she said, adding, “only then will you be given a good report. They will say, she is good enough to be made permanent.” As a permanent staff, not only would she earn more, but who knew, she might even be made team-leader. Jayanthi was excited about the opportunity.

When I met Jayanthi almost a year later, I was eager to learn about her employment prospects – had she been made permanent yet? Jayanthi laughed – she had forgotten all that, she said. In fact, she had been working at another SEZ company for several months now. Soon after our previous conversation, the company-bus had broken down for a couple of weeks; and when Jayanthi had returned to work, the break in service had pushed her down the list of those eligible to be hired as permanent staff. If I was disappointed, Jayanthi was sanguine: after all, her labor contractor had found her work almost immediately, and soon she would be earning as much as she had previously. “Very convenient for the company,” her father paused his weaving to say. “Bus breakdown,” he snorted. Jayanthi took a more conciliatory tone, however. “Perhaps there were others who were made permanent,” she mused; “may be if I had stayed....” Her voice trailed off. As it was, she had a new contract now and that would do.

“It’s just like school,” Anitha had explained, when I found her home one day – she was on a “service-break” at the time. If the trainee letter had proved a hollow promise, then Anitha was unperturbed: it was just like school, she said, giggling; like the annual vacation after months in the classroom working under frowning group-leaders. Yes, agreed Veda, “it was the company

giving everyone one month off to rest.” In any case, if uncertain and short-term work contracts marked flexible neoliberal labor regimes, then they also aligned with girls’ own planning horizons: unlike on the loom, SEZ-work would cease before the wedding – “neoliberal exceptions” may have allowed girls to work the night-shift in SEZs unlike other sectors of Indian industry, but marriage and night-shifts could not coexist for girls. Where skills on the loom had once facilitated girls’ trajectories to relative socioeconomic security – “safety” – in the form of marrying into a weaving household, SEZ-work offered the means to pull together an adequate wedding trousseau and the “gold sovereigns” that translated into a “good match.” If SEZs were, in effect, a mere a stop along the way before the real business of married life began, then surely, any uncertainty was readily compensated for by “jolliness.”

Thus, far from the cultural struggles that Ong (1991, 1998) and others have documented in free trade zones and export zones in other regions, the young female contract workers in my neighborhood exemplified cultural accommodation in the face of the dehumanizing bodily disciplines and demands of SEZ-spaces. If the routines and practices of the assembly-line required “working bodies,” then Kanchipuram’s female contract workforce were certainly not “docile,” as much as they were, in their own words, “jolly.” SEZ-work was tedious and tediously repetitive, each work-process, broken into discrete steps that were performed over and over. For the young women and girls on the assembly-line, however, such tiresome, repetitious work routines were primarily sensible and meaningful in terms of “jolliness” – of sharing stories and jokes on the line, despite supervision, and of sharing snacks on the bus and indulging in SEZ canteens. If there were injuries and disappointments, they shrugged them off: not only were the girls seemingly inured to hollowed out achievements and outcomes, given the demand for cheap

contract labor, moving on to another contract and another SEZ-company was as automatic as their promotion at the end of an elementary school year.

In the face of service-breaks and scars, of relative powerlessness and poor prospects, biscuits and best friends on the bus might appear irrelevant, even farcical. What was such jolliness when compared to the hollowed out, deskilled and insecure work modalities represented by SEZ assembly-lines? Viewed through the prism of the classroom however, SEZ-work was not only sensible, but entirely unexceptional and mundane. It was, indeed, “just like school.” The copying, chatting and consuming modalities that produced the classroom in Kanchipuram, also presented the modalities of SEZ contract-work as unproblematic and palatable (literally and otherwise). By normalizing students’ experiences and expectations of tedious work and hollow achievement and initiating them into routines and relations that resonated closely with assembly-line work – peer supervisors and best friends that let the authorities, whether teachers or employers, off the hook – classrooms produced SEZ factory-floors as familiar, contiguous spaces of work, sustained by the apparently counter-productive but in fact integral practices of conversation and consumption. The classroom subjectivities of dull-middle students prefigured a particular kind of complaisant worker-subject: one who was not required to demonstrate literacy beyond reading parts-numbers or proficiency beyond repetitive handiwork on assembly-lines; and one, who was, moreover, inured to tedious work and secondary-status and did not make claims on authorities despite a lack of achievement or progress on the job.

This then was the work that the school classroom had done for the SEZ assembly-line: it had framed the tedious performance of repetitive tasks, undemanding relations with authority figures and hollowed out expectations – not as exploitative work, but – as unremarkable and unproblematic. If rights-based rescues from loom into school were, in practice, also trajectories

into SEZs – and for girls in particular – then the neoliberal labor regimes of SEZs were sensible and intelligible to girls only in light of classroom performances and modalities. The neoliberal worker-subject in Kanchipuram was not the docile female worker of SEZs; neither was the rescued child worker, the empowered subject of rights discourses. Rather, classroom routines and practices had constituted dull-and-jolly subjects who prefigured jolly-and-complaisant workers, talking and snacking through the daily disciplines of SEZ factory-floors as they once had in the classroom.

Chatting with Kanaga about her SEZ-work one Sunday, we were joined by her older sister Maheshwari – old enough to have been spared child labor raids and rescues, unlike her younger sister – who wove on the household loom.

M: Listening to you talk, I don't think I will like company-*velai*. No, I will never join a company. My work is my work – I shouldn't have to fold my arms and have to answer to someone else. If I work, then I should only have to be accountable to myself.

K: I don't feel like that. Anyway, if I worked on the loom, wouldn't I have to answer to the owner?

M: If you do your work on the loom correct-*a*, then you don't have to answer to anyone. I have never felt I like was answerable to anyone.

K: That is exactly how it is at the company. As long as you don't make a mistake, they won't scold you. If I have made a mistake, then I accept it quietly. So company-work is also best.

M: [shaking her head] But on the loom, if you are able to set up your own loom and weave independently, then there is no problem at all.

Where the loom had, for centuries, sustained aspirations and trajectories of ownership – of being *rajah* and *mantri* on the *thari* – the rights-based shift from loom into school, despite its liberal and liberatory promise, paradoxically served to normalize the relatively unfree and disempowered work modalities of neoliberal labor regimes. If young weavers in present-day Kanchipuram offered an unequivocal critique of the disciplines and relations of assembly-line labor from their perch on the loom, failing to understand the draw of company-*velai* for their schooled cohorts, then the latter, initiated into the classroom and its elaborate and incessant writing-work rituals, didn't “*feel like that*” about SEZ-work. In this context, it is worth quoting Alfred Chatterton again (see chapter 1). The British Superintendent of Industrial Education in the Madras Presidency in the 1860's, faced with weavers' desire for autonomy, had conceded defeat in his efforts to introduce factory disciplines: “It is perhaps difficult for most of you to realize the great change which bringing the weaver into a factory system involves... he is accustomed to work at his own time and in his own home...” What colonial experiments had failed to accomplish, a hundred and fifty years later, liberatory projects of childhood and education had succeeded in doing: girls – and an increasing number of their male cohorts – from weaving households were increasingly enclosed in the very factory disciplines that previous generations had disdained for so long in the pursuit of their artisanal way of life.

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