

Book Review
The Life at School: An Ethnographic Study
By
Meenakshi Thapan, 2006

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Alternative education is an education process which is delivered outside the traditional school settings. Alternative Education is designed to meet the needs of at-risk students who are not succeeding or who have dropped out from the traditional setting. Alternative Education continues to thrive as social problems including school violence and dysfunctional families create new challenges for communities and states. Its aim is to provide students who do not thrive and succeed in the traditional school setting with other opportunities to receive an education. Till date various research studies and books have been authored by world renowned educationists and social reformers at national as well as at international level. Deschooling society, school is dead, Life at School: An Ethnographic Study, Alternative Schooling in India and How Children Fail etc. are some of the books which threw the light on alternative education. Among them 'The Life at School: An Ethnographic Study' published by Oxford Press is one the important study of Meenakshi Thapan in which the author has sketch the picture of an alternative school 'Rishi Valley School' (RVS) by using ethnographic approach.

The manuscript is all about the subjective interpretation of Rishi Valley School(RVS) life as it is perceived by their students and teachers during the life which they spent at school. This book argues that the individual (pupil and teacher) is important to the schooling process. The book explores the differences, contradictions and dilemmas in the everyday life of the school and cities in the form of transcendental and local orders. It also considers the noteworthy relations between Krishnamurti's ideas and the institutions that seek to implement them. RVS is with adynamic character which is reflected in its ability to engage in a continuous process of transformation.

The book is an ethnographic study of the Rishi Valley School, a co-educational, residential public school situated in Andhra Pradesh, which is run by the Krishnamurti Foundation. Rishi Valley is founded by the renowned philosopher Krishnamurti, is a private unaided school since it is managed by a private trust and is not supported by any government. This book examines the interaction between ideas and institutions, the 'culture' of the school in terms of certain rituals and ceremonies that characterize the daily and yearly round of activities, teacher-pupil interaction, and ideology in relation to the educational process.

An ideology applies moral and value prescriptions to social institutions and processes, and its relationship with these is always one of interaction leading to possible change. One such social process is education, which is permeated with ideology, both explicitly and implicitly. Krishnamurti's philosophy as contained in his writings, lectures and conversations is discussed.

Author explores the link between ideology and education, focusing on some essential elements of Krishnamurti's world-view. In particular, it examines Krishnamurti's views on self-discovery, the individual and society, social order, social transformation, awareness, sorrow and suffering, freedom and the religious mind, education, the role of parents as well as teachers and pupils in education, and co-operation and living together in the school. It also discusses the intention of the Krishnamurti Foundation.

Author describes the organization of the RVS as being characterized by a fundamental dichotomy in school processes between the 'transcendental' and the 'local' orders. While the transcendental order is governed by Krishnamurti's alternate world-view, the local order constitutes the actual schooling process. The transcendental order is concerned essentially with values and the production of a new kind of human being through the process of self-knowledge and transformation, whereas the local order is mainly concerned with the gathering and reproduction of knowledge through the transmission of educational knowledge. Author also discusses the key functionaries of RVS which plays a vital role in school's decision-making and authority, as well as the academic system, with emphasis on differentiation through specialization.

School culture is based on values and norms which, in the RVS, are derived from organizational practice and discursive practice. Both organizational and discursive practices are common to most schools but in Rishi Valley, there is a third value which is enshrined in Krishnamurti's philosophy. Value is realized through organizational features and practice as well as through rituals of challenge and effervescence. Hence, all three elements operate together resulting in different activities including the performance of certain kinds of rituals and ceremonies. Author examines the routinized rituals and ceremonies in Rishi Valley as part of the school's culture. One of these is the evening ritual of *Asthachal* in which all students are required to be outside and watch the sun set over the hills. The other is the preparations of Krishnamurthy's annual visit which bring 'a mystical quality' to the school.

Teachers and pupils make significant contributions to the social reality of the RVS and have views and identities of their own in relation to their environment. In Rishi Valley, the world of the teacher, or teacher culture, is made up of several strands: the teacher's role as perceived by the school and their recruitment to this role, as well as their orientations and commitments to this role and the forms these take in terms of their perceived identities. Author discusses the demands of the local order and then analyses the recruitment of teachers in the school. It also considers teachers' commitment and their perception of their role in the school. Author also presents two case studies, one for the professional teacher (Ranjan) and another for the 'ideologue' teacher (Jai).

Teachers - pupil Interaction occurs in both formal and informal settings. It describes the social processes through and in which the teachers live as members of the Rishi Valley community, and examines the configuration of teacher culture. Teacher-teacher interaction is influenced by a wide range of factors, including the organization of the school (divided into transcendental and local orders) and the teacher's structural position. Another major determining factor in such interactions is the school's ideology. In Rishi Valley, teachers interact formally during faculty meetings, special staff meetings, and twenty-minute morning tea-breaks.

The social background, attitudes, and general experiences of pupils contribute towards establishing the pupil culture in the school. In addition to interaction with people, pupil culture is the result of the pupils' relationship with, and attitude towards, school work and the events that constitute pupil activity in the school. Pupil values influence pupil culture as they encompass and are reflected in pupils' views on different aspects of school life, including ideology and school work. This chapter examines the life of the pupil in terms of school-generated experiences and activities in order to understand what it means to be a pupil in the RVS. It discusses pupil' school entry, pupil perspectives on school work, co-curricular and leisure-time activities, sport as an important aspect of the pupils' lives in school. Author also reveals the Krishnamurthy's transcendental ideology with RVS pupil.

The interaction between teachers and pupils has a definable form, and some of its constituent relations stay relatively stable over time. Thus, it is possible to predict certain modes of behavior among teachers and pupils in particular contexts. What makes the RVS different from other public schools is its special character which is attributed to the fact that the school is located in a particular institutional and ideological setting. Teacher-pupil interaction formally occurs in formal settings as well as informal settings, like staffroom, auditorium and dining hall, outdoor respectively. The use of different strategies, particularly those of negotiation and fraternization, increases the flexibility of teacher-pupil interaction. Author also explores teacher-pupil interaction in Rishi Valley, focusing on two classroom studies as well as culture lessons and discussion meetings.

After reading the book painstakingly, reader find out few points on which author could focus more so that authour can interpret more beautifully and elaborately. Most of the times author puts overdue emphasizes on the transcendental orders rather than the local orders which compels me to feel that the author himself is more interested in transcendental orders than the local orders. Author did not describe the curriculum, pedagogy, methods of teachings and co-curricular activities of RVS in detail which plays vital role in overall function of any institution. Last but not the least author has used ethnographic approach which demands more and more participant observations and interviews so that the ethnographer can interpret and express the site more vividly.

Overall, the book has explored the relationship between ideology, school and society through an analysis of the different aspects of school life in the RVS. The educational processes in Rishi Valley are based on a well-articulated ideology which challenges conventional methods of education but, paradoxically, employs a formal system. This chapter summarizes how the book has looked at the school's social and cultural settings and their implications for teachers and pupils. It has examined Krishnamurti's alternate world-view and educational thought as a form of ideological discourse. It has also explicated the school's cultural setting by analyzing the rituals and ceremonies associated with the daily round of activities and dramatizations of the same. Furthermore, the book has also discussed teacher culture, pupil culture, teacher-teacher interaction, and teacher-pupil interaction. One important conclusion that can be drawn from this ethnographic study of Rishi Valley is the clash of ideologies in school processes: competitive and result-oriented impulses amongst pupils and teachers often go against the other-worldly ideology of Krishnamurthy, the school's founder.



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