

# *Committed Mothers and Well-adjusted Children: Privatisation, Early-Years Education and Motherhood in Calcutta*

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This article explores new definitions of good mothering among middle-class families in Calcutta and the way early years education, which has become popular over the last two decades has reshaped women's lives as daughters-in-law and mothers of successful future white-collar workers. Through a detailed ethnography of mothers attitudes to preschool education and the parenting practices associated with it the article explores their roles as consumers within a highly competitive local educational landscape, and argues that it is in through preschool education and the related practises that these women actively shape discourses of politics and modernity.

*'Once upon a time there was a simple bird. It would sing songs, but could not recite any of the sacred books. It would freely hop and fly about, but it knew nothing of rules or manners. 'Such a bird is useless,' declared the king. 'In fact by eating the fruits of the forest, it damages the royal fruit-market.' Calling his minister, the king commanded: 'Give this bird an education.'*

Rabindranath Tagore: *The Parrot's Training*

## **Introduction**

In Tagore's short story 'The Parrot's Training', from which these lines are taken, a hapless bird is incarcerated in a golden cage and educated using the latest methods, but dies in front of his proud teachers. Intended as a commentary on colonial education at the turn of the century, the writer's criticism rings equally true today: whether schooling is discussed in families, in the media or by politicians, the removal of the bird from the nest in order to teach it seems to satisfy only its teachers, and the latest methodologies are employed to instil rules and manners that agree with the demands of the market but provide little else.

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In this paper I discuss a subject this great educationist was particularly interested in, namely schooling and learning during the early years of childhood. But whereas Tagore commented on the institutions and formal learning I will focus on a less prominent aspect of schooling, namely the way parenting is implied in institutional practices and wider educational policies. While children and childhood have been analysed as part of schooling in relation to regional modernities and the emerging cultures of globalisation among the Asian middle-classes, contemporary parenting and in particular the role of mothers, who are implicated in educational practices, have rarely been discussed.

With reference to Bengal, the role of formal education in the establishment of specific ideals of motherhood among colonial elites has been highlighted as part of reformist and nationalist discourses (Bagchi 1990; Chatterjee 1993; Walsh 1995; Sangari 1999; Kumar n.d.). However, in post-independence India this link between schooling and parenting has been mainly explored through the analysis of to a very specific set of state practices, namely family planning. Through population policies aiming at poor mothers, the pedagogy of ideal, desirable and educated mothers as opposed to deviant, undesirable motherhood, gained prominence. This imagery is indirectly linked to schooling, since it is the responsible middle-class mother, who by practising birth control, proved herself to be educated, and by extension capable to bring up the right kind of young citizen. This relatively comfortable position of the middle-class mother, who learnt to value education and would be able to support the decreasing number of children throughout their educational careers, has become an icon of middle-class identity in urban Bengal. According to the modernist narrative, once middle-class women entered formal education during the nationalist era, any ambivalence in their relationship with formal schooling was resolved. In a paper on the history of education in South Asia Nita Kumar observes that the recent history of education is devoid of women as mothers, who became characterised as ahistorical and apolitical, one of the problems being the 'unattractiveness of certain spaces inhabited by women' which 'lies in the categories themselves: 'mother', 'home', 'childcare', versus 'intelligentsia', 'the nation', 'education' (Kumar, n.d.).

While this paper deals with one of the groups privileged in the writing of these histories, namely the Calcutta middle-classes, I situate the practices related to schooling in the ongoing processes of domestic change. These are related to the privatisation of services utilised by

the urban middle-classes and the increasing impact of consumption patterns associated with global lifestyles. The latter are by extension associated with the development of a global workforce, migration, and white-collar employment in particularly desirable industries. In this paper I will focus on preschool education, and the way early learning produces distinct discourses of domestic relationships, motherhood and modernity, within which a practice associated with the 'West' is appropriated.

### **Preschools and the Educational Environment**

While walking down the road in Central Calcutta, my three-year-old son remarked 'This place is full of school children' and pointed at groups of pupils at the gates of a Central Calcutta nursery school.<sup>1</sup> He was right: public places in the city are dominated by school children at certain times of the day. But equally conspicuous are their mothers, who are sitting next to the gates or stand in the shade under a tree, waiting for their sons and daughters to emerge. Mothers can be seen in the morning on the way to school, and afterwards, when those who travelled from further a field delivered preschoolers for morning sessions, and sit on the steps of a shop nearby, chatting. Groups of mothers reappear in front of secondary schools in the afternoon to collect children, hurrying home before they accompany them to tuition classes, music and computer lessons later in the evening. On special occasions they attend sports and drawing contests and during the various exams anxious mothers guard the entrances of the various venues for hours. If Calcutta is a city of school children, it is equally a city of their mothers, who relate to this 'educational environment' (Jeffery *et al.* 2005.) in multiple ways.

Among the most pertinent developments in Calcutta, and urban India more generally, is the rise of English medium education, which occurred over the last two decades. The accompanying privatisation of schooling among the middle classes is particularly obvious in the introduction of preschool/nursery education, but has gained little

<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork was conducted between October 1995—April 1997 and October 1999—August 2000, October 2002 to 2003, April 2003 and December 2003 to February 2004 and supported by the Economic and Research Council. I retain the name Calcutta because much of my data were collected before the process of renaming the city gained publicity and thereby follow the policy of the Centre for Studies in Social Science, Calcutta.

attention to date. Calcutta, which boasts many excellent and elite institutions of higher education, at the same time offers little at the medium and lower level. Since the left front government banned English at primary level in the 1980s, middle-class parents from a wide range of backgrounds have deserted the previously accepted vernacular schools, and although many children still attend Bengali and Hindi medium institutions, English is preferred by middle-class parents. Established English medium schools are mostly privately owned or run by trusts, although they are often subsidised, and many are attached to the Delhi board for examinations and curricula. However, even these schools are subject to local politics, for instance recent cuts in allowances for teachers. Preschool education, on the other hand, is provided entirely by the private sector in nurseries which are collectively known as Montessori schools. Sending a son or daughter to a preschool/nursery at an early age has become a precondition for admission to better English medium schools, and preschools represent a booming, unregulated market. In this respect the debates involving preschools are comparable to those surrounding the increasing privatisation of healthcare. Within this context education in general can hardly be called a Western concept, but nurseries are still widely regarded as a foreign import.

In Europe and America preschooling emerged as a solution for the childcare problems of working mothers, but quickly became a prominent site for states to educate children and their families, especially those from working class backgrounds. The same pattern can be found in many modernising countries, where preschools cater to the needs of working mothers and their families while educating young citizens at the same time (Stivens 1998; Anagnost n.d.). A comparable way of thinking is behind the West Bengal government's recent initiative which encourages NGOs to found preschools in some of the most deprived areas (Rana *et al.* 2002), but did only recently focus on the growth of private preschool education among the middle-classes. There are similarities here: In all cases the preschooler—who used to be a child in a domestic environment—is increasingly seen as in need of earlier institutional education; but there are also distinctively class-based differences.

### **Why Early Schooling ?**

In India, as in Euro-American contexts before model of early childhood as a 'developmental stage' provides the reasoning for the introduction of early-years education. Based on mostly Western educational theory,

this model of early childhood is gaining prominence as a folk model in support of preschools, whereby early childhood is presented as a phase during which children are particularly susceptible to acquire discipline and ‘manners’ through schooling. Furthermore, middle-class parents in Calcutta never fail to mention that children are to be developed, and their capabilities nurtured, so that they are enabled to succeed academically. In this convincing discourse, mothers, whether poor or middle-class, are held responsible for the lack of discipline displayed by school children, whether a little boy drops out of a village school or a city girl fails an exam. The introduction of formal schooling from an early age implies therefore educating mothers at the same time as their children. However, this is where the commonalities regarding the reasons for preschool education across social divisions end, since there exist stark differences as well: whereas the state government’s initiatives to draw more young children into village schools—whether motivated by political considerations or not—are marred by financial and organisational constraints, the expansion and elaboration of early years education among the middle-classes in a city like Calcutta and in the district towns is breathtaking. Where rural women as mothers are blamed for their children’s failure to attend schools at all, middle-class mothers seem to be keen on sending their children to the most competitive institutions, compliant with the demands and sacrifices they have to make in order to enhance their children’s chances for a good career.

### **The Pre-School Environment**

Schooling is a major concern for all middle-class parents, with entry into a ‘big’ school the moment when good parenting is established. Regardless of the household income and social environment, admission of a son or daughter to a school of their choice is a major step, and ‘good’ schools are scarce. In all the middle-class families concerned two-year old boys and girls were enrolled for preschool classes, some locally and others in well-known larger institutions. Enrolment across the different levels involved a standardised procedure whereby parents (sometimes only mothers) would purchase admission forms from the nursery or school, which would be returned, so that the name of the child could be entered either for enrolment or for an interview. Although only a few ‘reputed’ Montessori nurseries in Calcutta are oversubscribed, admission to non-selective, mostly local kindergartens, which should not present a problem, was represented by parents as a major effort.

Nurseries, or Montessori's as they are known, came up in all better neighbourhoods from the beginning of the 1990s onwards and are usually run by a founder/proprietor. Apart from promising personal development and basic academic skills, they offer preparation for tests and interviews in 'big' schools, which children 'sit' between the ages of three and five. Schools with a selective policy expect their new entrants to have attended a good 'Montessori' nursery, but even less competitive schools ask their prospective pupils to produce English phrases, alphabets, numbers and songs as part of the test. It is this functional aspect of nursery education that is most often highlighted by parents in conversations about preschoolers, but most other aspects of schooling like discipline, and 'development' feature as well.

Where a son or daughter was admitted for preschool education depended on three factors: the financial circumstances of the household, the place of residence, and the ethnic identity of the parents. Generally speaking, children from lower middle-class families do not usually attend the same nurseries as those from professional and business backgrounds, who are admitted to more selective, centrally located preschools with a lower intake. Fees in these institutions can vary between 700 and 1200 rupees per month, whereas many local 'Montessori' schools located in the garage of an apartment building or the spare rooms of a family home charge between 250 and 500 rupees. Both types may have different 'classes' for each grade, and the age of admission can be as low as eighteen months. In both settings, prospective students are carefully screened with a view to economic and ethnic homogeneity, however there is often no limit to class-sizes and teacher-pupil ratios may be as high as 1/30. Depending on the location, neighbourhood 'Montessori schools' can nevertheless be mixed, so that local shop keepers, doctors and the children of teachers may attend the same preschool for a while. Preschools are usually founded and owned by women, many of whom teachers, who manage the finances and supervise the employees, the teachers and helpers (*ayahs*), who look after the children.

These preschools are private, and emphasise an English character, which is perhaps better described as global Americanism. English is stated to be the medium of instruction in all nurseries, but the degree to which children are discouraged from using the vernacular languages and are taught in English, varies greatly. Unlike in primary schools, the teachers in nurseries are often not qualified as teachers but hold degrees in unrelated subjects, and many have not trained in English. The neighbourhood nurseries carry names like Little Angles, Morning

Glory, Blooming Rose or Playhouse Montessori, to indicate a child-friendly atmosphere and English medium surroundings. Furthermore, indicating 'fun' and 'playful learning', the buildings in which nurseries are located are often decorated with popular cartoon characters, and the walls inside are adorned with English alphabets and number charts. Another typical aspect of 'English' preschools is the display of foreign-made or fake toys, which are described by parents and teachers as educational, modelled after the popular Fisher-Price range. In short, Calcutta's nurseries emphasise their resemblance with such institutions elsewhere, schools in other Indian cities, and preschools in other Asian countries and abroad. Unlike schools, preschools in Calcutta do not display Indian national symbols like flags, portraits of nationalist leaders and even the 'indigenous' educationists Tagore and Vivekananda, whose pictures can be seen in many middle-class homes, are absent. Preschooling is clearly about tapping into what is represented as a 'global' culture, and no identifiable communal or Indian images and methodologies are promoted.

### **The Ideal of the Committed Mother**

Like Malaysian middle-class mothers, Bengali middle-class women's understanding of their own roles is related to notions of Western parenting practices, an opposition which dates back to the colonial period, when nationalist discourses and regional variations on the theme of motherhood produced a distinct modernist version of 'traditional motherhood' in Bengal:

'Bengali mothers proverbially stood for unstinting affection, manifested in an undying spirit of self sacrifice for the family... Motherhood emerged as the domain which the colonised could claim as their own.' (Bagchi 1990:65).

Middle-class mothers in contemporary Bengal compare their own way of childrearing with 'Western' practices', and institutional childcare is associated with negative cultural stereotypes. 'Childcare' and 'creche' have become familiar concepts in a context, where such institutions are non-existing, and more than once mothers with relatives abroad referred to these institutions as 'unsuitable for Indian families/children'. The same parents, however, sent their children to nurseries and schools to 'study', and although the majority of mothers I spoke to regretted that this was necessary at an early age, not a single family with children under fifteen had failed to admit a son or daughter to preschool.

With the admission to preschool, middle-class parents and in particular mothers feel that they are involved in the wider project of producing graduates, Indian white collar workers in a global economy. Much has been written about the way these new subjects are envisaged, represented and conditioned. The transformation of childhood and idea of children as potential migrants has been crucial in the way liberalisation affected families in China and India alike (Rofel 1994; Anagnost n.d.; Zhao and Murdock 1996; Fernandes 2000; Donner 2005). In the following section, I will analyse how the reproduction of the related values relies on preschool education, which subjects mothers and children to the related disciplining regimes.

When we were talking about admission procedures to her school, the headmistress of a well-known Montessori school explained:

‘In the interview I am looking for a well-rounded child—I show them this pencil holder here for example, and say ‘this is a key’ and wait how they react, and if they react—if they shake their head or if they say no, then that is a good sign. I ask them ‘what have you had for breakfast?’ and if they say chicken then that is a good sign. Or I show them my keys and make a sound with them and ask them ‘do you want this?’ and if they take it I will say ‘give it back’ and if the child then gives it back, that’s a good sign—I don’t want a child who is grabbing everything and who is demanding and shouts ‘I want this’ and ‘I want that’. Of course you cannot expect a two-year old to say much, what can you see in a two-year old—but I rarely make a mistake, I can tell. In general I am looking for a well-adjusted child, not for one clinging to his mummy...’

Many Montessori schools, have comparable procedures, whether they are truly ‘selective’ because places are in demand, or produce a competitive atmosphere to appear exclusive. Many more educated mothers consult self-help books before the interview, which prepare the child for admission tests more generally and claim to provide guidance for modern parenting. Under the heading ‘Foundation Stones’ one of the many preparation manuals for admission tests published in Kolkata is sold for just under a hundred rupees, and starts rather emphatically:

‘An ordinary child with average intelligence and initiative, when treated with respect and dignity as an individual, and is given proper guidance & motivation by you, will turn out to be a great citizen. Here comes the best gift you can give to your child: the most wanted qualities of the 21st century’ (Jain 2000:9).

The author then provides a list of fifty traits ranging from pride to sincerity, and from courtesy to love for nature, which the skilful

mother should nourish in her preschooler. The accompanying text emphasises that to *make* a child a success is a long term project, during which the parents 'can not expect overnight results' but will have to 'spend endless hours, months, years together with hard work, sleepless nights and total dedication' (Jain 2000:19). With regard to tests and interviews the author emphasises that these are in the interest of the school and the child, not because the capabilities of the child have to be established, but because the authorities 'have to assess in what type of environment the child is growing and how much committed you are towards your child'. After placing the responsibility for the success of an average child firmly in the mother's lap, she is informed that 'no matter how much committed, and sincere the teachers are, it is the parent's commitment and sincerity towards the child's education that plays the most effective role as the child spends most of the time with his/her parents' (Jain 2000:20). Finally, parents are asked to grade the intelligence of the child concerned and are reminded to be 'humble while answering that question. Be very frank and let them know exactly how much intelligent your child is. And please don't tell us, that you don't know, as that will clearly indicate that you haven't given proper time to your child.' (Jain 2000:20).

Far from being regarded as naïve, the book reflects popular wisdom about the role of parents in early childhood. Teachers and parents alike emphasised the importance of commitment in relation to children's schooling, which, if scrutinised more carefully, appeared to be a clearly gendered term. Although the home-environment of a child is checked in interviews with both parents, fathers attending the 'interview' for admission are assumed to engage with their children's 'education' as part of their leisure pursuits. Every self-respecting middle-class father can immediately answer questions like 'What do you do first when you come home from work?'; 'How do you spend time with your child?' which are practised in advance, the right answers being 'When I come home I spend time with my child reading a book or playing a game' and 'I like to take my child to the museum or to a park'.

Mothers, on the other hand, cannot get away that easily. Firstly, all applications are scrutinised carefully for signs of employment. The few working mothers I spoke to had all had negative experiences with teachers, who directly or through questions like 'When do you come home at night?'; 'Who cooks for your child and feeds her?' expressed their concern about the degree of commitment displayed. In the view of mothers and teachers alike part-time work from home may be acceptable, but mothers in full-time employment receive

little encouragement. Ironically, these mothers are often criticised by female teachers, who are working mothers themselves.

Apart from employment, the interviews at preschool level explore other social relationships indicating commitment, which are expected to have an impact on the child's schooling. In Bengali middle-class families, young children are usually brought up in a setting where parents and grandparents take part in everyday child-rearing activities. Many tasks are being shared between women belonging to different generations, who live in the same household, or at least the same house. In addition, middle-class families hire servants so that children are surrounded by a number of adults, who look after their needs.

Since siblings are rare in these families, teachers focus on the presence of grandparents and servants in the house as part of the domestic environment. Both sets of relationships may in the view of the mothers involve different moralities—grandparents are loving carers who have rights and are often seen as co-carers, whereas servants may be loving but represent a potentially bad influence. However, during the interviews and later on in their dealings with teachers these two sets of relationships are fused into 'other people at home' and the presence of grandparents at the gates or the servant picking up a child is often interpreted as an indicator of a lack of discipline in the mother concerned. More than once did a teacher tell me that some children, often those belonging to business communities, were neglected, because their mothers would not come to pick them up from nursery. The same negative image was commonly expressed where grandparents played a prominent role in school-related activities.

It is significant to mention that the role of grandparents in the upbringing of children has not always been denied either by the educational establishment or by the parents I spoke to. On many occasions parents with grown-up children recalled the crucial role played by a grandparent, who decided which school a child would attend and took care of the admission process, and in some families it was an uncle's job to take a child to school. Today, preschools emphasise the role of parents and in particular mothers as prime carers, and expect them to take responsibility for the more formal aspects of education as well as the daily routine. This ideological construction of a nuclear family is most obviously promoted where the 'work' children are doing is concerned. Asked whether preschoolers should do homework, one Montessori teacher argued 'Parents have to

work with the children at home—we expect them to do the homework themselves, but you can always help that with reading, writing and little number games—after all parents know what the child needs and wants.’ The discursive construction of a child’s needs is linked to intimate knowledge only the parents, and in particular the mother can have, even if homework is set by the school in the first place.

Being the mother of a young child appears in the context of preschooling as a modern middle-class occupation, for which one does not only have to be fairly educated, but for which extended families adopt the ideology of a nuclear unit.

While mothers are expected to utilise the readily available labour power of servants and grandmothers, their involvement has to be channelled towards the more ‘mundane’ tasks in the house’. In theory, only the mother and her child are involved in schooling and the mother devotes her day to school-related activities.

This maternal role in early schooling is based on the values of maternal care and intimacy between mother and child, which are borrowed from the economy of the nuclear family, but are employed in a setting where most children grow up in the house of their grandparents. Without acknowledging the role of other carers than parents in nursery education, the institution enforces the global image it tries to project, and frames mothers in relation to schooling in terms of the modern, nuclear family. Common complaints mothers make about children include their refusal to ‘work’ by themselves or with anyone else than the mother ‘She will not learn anything with her father, she doesn’t listen to what her grandmother says, and anyway, the old lady has no idea about Montessori education, the numbers games etc.—I am the only one, with whom she would study—and I am worried what will happen once she joins ‘big’ school and has to attend tuition classes’ as the mother of a four-year-old complained.

Whereas this ideology of intimate and exclusive bonds between a mother and her school-going-child is familiar in other contexts, the ‘culture of care’ (Hochschild 2003) emerging in urban Bengal is different from China, America, or even cities in Western India in that these mothers are housewives. Here, as in the case of some European countries, modern motherhood implies the withdrawal of women as mothers from paid work.<sup>2</sup> Although middle-class families

<sup>2</sup> The recent decline in urban women’s participation in the labour force has brought down the number of urban working women from 195 per 1000 to 185 per 1000. Among middle-class women voluntary retirement schemes in the wake

utilise domestic workers to perform tasks related to childcare in the home, mothers and often grandmothers are expected to work alongside these servants, who may be hired to look after small children. The management of servants, who may nevertheless explicitly been hired to look after young children, is a crucial task of mothers in these families and teachers regularly dispense advice on this. As a responsible mother, Sneha whose daughter was doing exceptionally well, recognised that the right environment for her daughter's progress in preschool included this aspect and explained with reference to her servant:

'As I go along I decide what she can do and what she can't do, and obviously with my daughter going to school now there is less for her to do—she can not read and playing with a four-year-old is more demanding than the earlier stages. It is fine as long as the children can not really speak, but after that you have to be careful, because they will pick up foul language from them, and I don't want that. This one I have kept for longer, but she has to go—I will have to let her go, I will soon have to kick her out'.

This brief passage reflects concerns raised by other mothers, and highlights implicit assumptions about childhood and developmental stages. Although the association of 'foul language' and maids is not new, the importance given to the right games for preschoolers in the house is of recent origin.

In more than one way the relationship between a middle-class mother and the school resembles a working contract, with clear obligations and hierarchies, and forms part of status production work undertaken by women (Papanek 1989:103). Their children's entry into preschool was not surprisingly seen by many mothers as entry into a professional relationship, and as a result teacher training has become a sought after qualification in brides: 'I was a teacher and all my sisters-in-law are teachers, you see, my in-laws were very keen that the women should be well-educated so that they can help their kids with the homework' emphasised Rimi's mother before she explained why it was impossible for her to work as a teacher while her only daughter was still in preschool.

of liberalisation attracted working mothers in particular as one journalist remarks : 'A tidy sum in the form of a golden handshake, time that one could finally call one's own, a more leisurely lifestyle and the option of working a few hours a day from the home were attractive propositions. At least the children would get better attention.' (Bose: 2003).

## Pedagogising the Domestic Environment

### 1.) *Languages*

As part of the new pedagogy mothers are reminded that preschoolers need encouragement to spend time on useful activities, and cautioned against the influence of family members, who may not be as committed to the child's education: 'It is you, who has to ensure that a two-year old is learning the English numbers, while the child herself may want to go upstairs and play hide-and-seek with the grandmothers' Tanuka's mother was reminded by a teacher when she picked up her child from nursery.

Regarding their involvement with the child at home, mothers mentioned that they themselves were aware of the need to employ new methodologies and many emphasised that they had to learn how to make use of educational resources, in particular English books, and TV serials. Though the amount of time dedicated to reading educational books may have been exaggerated, visiting children and their mothers at home I was regularly invited to witness even very young children performing simple English rhymes and the alphabets, numbers and commercial jingles.

By far the majority of middle-class children from Bengali families speak Bengali at home even in households where fathers and increasingly mothers are English-medium educated. With their admission to nursery English should ideally be part of conversations between mother and child, because once a son or a daughter is about to enter 'big' school, children are expected to be able to answer simple questions in English. From the point of view of the preschool, studying in English is not generally seen as a problem for those children whose mothers speak English and can teach them at home, but where a mother attended a Bengali-medium school teachers as well as mothers may feel some extra care is needed. From a domestic perspective English-medium tuition excludes most grandmothers from school-related activities, because women in the older generation were routinely sent to institutions teaching in the vernacular language, and are therefore less comfortable with English.

Talking to the mother of a young student I asked her whether or not her daughter had known English when she entered the nursery at age two: 'Yes of course she knew English, I taught her and she just picked it up from her father. She could count, she could say short things like 'Thank you' and she could tell her name. She never had

any problems and liked learning a different language.’ Significantly, this mother does not speak English herself, but had taught her daughter some phrases and the name of specific items using popular charts, before sending her to a local nursery, which amounted to her daughter knowing English. As Viruru points out, schools in urban India are multilingual environments, with more than one or two languages spoken by staff and students on an everyday basis (Viruru 2001:134–136). This was also the case with the nurseries attended by children in these families, in which few members of staff spoke English fluently.<sup>3</sup> In most cases staff reported that vernacular languages were used for ‘extra-curricular activities’ and English was reserved for ‘study’ purposes. At home the way English-medium preschooling was understood varied with the background and individual capability of mothers, most of whom expected their children to become confident in using English phrases and expressions by repeating them to them. But more importantly, very young children were encouraged to learn English by watching children’s programmes on TV, which was among all mothers seen as a valuable educational resource for preschoolers.

With reference to multilingual environments and nursery education, mothers were generally convinced that ‘Indian children’ are able to pick up languages without problems, simply by being exposed to them in their everyday life. But it was only non-Bengali mothers, who felt that growing up in a multi-lingual environment can be used strategically in the job market. Tania’s mother explained:

‘We have an advantage, because we ourselves have to speak in different languages all the time, because we are Gujarati, but we speak Hindi and English for business purposes and living in Calcutta you also come to know Bengali. I encourage her to speak Bengali as well, since she is young she can learn the language. I guess she can speak all these languages, I teach her Gujarati and she speaks with her grandmother, Hindi she learns from watching TV, she knows Bengali from the neighbours, and we are both teaching her English so that she succeeds at school’.

The emphasis on the advantages of multilingual education was less pronounced among the Bengali mothers I spoke to, who were often themselves not as confident in their use of other languages. The mother of a Bengali-speaking classmate of Tania expressed a common concern about her daughter’s exposure to Hindi, which she felt was

<sup>3</sup> Most young women who work in nurseries are educated in the vernacular language and have received very little training in English.

a drawback of education in schools attended by pupils from different language groups:

'If you want to send them to the better schools they will be exposed to a lot of Hindi there, she picks that up watching TV, and at school now. There are not too many Bengali-speaking children there, and the city as a whole is becoming more and more dominated by Hindi-speakers. Nowadays children are more likely to pick up Hindi and English than to learn Bengali properly, which is a shame, but there are so many children from Hindi-speaking backgrounds.'

However, even when a parent expressed reservations, no Bengali-speaking mother made an effort to teach her child how to read and write the vernacular language, and most presumed that they would acquire basic skills once they entered 'big school'. Thus, the nursery environment was clearly marked as a place where vernacular languages did not belong and should be disciplined, and where mothers had to be re-educated to overcome their natural urge to speak with their young children in the mother tongue. Although all mothers emphasised the importance of the vernacular language in the domestic context, in relation with schooling it had no practical value and was therefore not actively taught or encouraged. 'What's the use of Bengali for him, if he goes to college that will be in English, if he works in a company they will communicate in English, so the Bengali we speak at home is fine' was a common argument presented by young mothers.

Although mothers did not problematise learning English as such, the acquisition of English language was seen as a *skill* which alongside computer skills, numeracy and literacy, had to be actively pursued. The 'work' mothers should ideally do at home involves activities centred around a set of training materials, and while only a few of the households had a computer at home—still very much a luxury—children were given an endless supply of small books and games to enhance literacy and numeracy skills, practice colour charts and instil simple moral messages in English. Most of these teaching aids resemble textbooks in the way they were compiled and laid-out. Thus, exercises follow a simple question and answer scheme with adults taking the position of a teacher supervising the 'work' done by the child. While the fact that preschool children are generally not interested in these exercises is acknowledged, the author of one such book emphasises its clever didactic mix:

'The child is more interested in playing rather than in studying. Hence it is very difficult for the parents to prepare him or her for school admission.

Keeping this fact in mind this book includes study materials for your child which help in playing and learning at the same time.’ (Karn 2003:V).

In the more affluent households, where mothers were often English medium educated, they drew on tales and increasingly storybooks related to TV serials and movies to make learning English fun. If books in the vernacular were read at all, these were at this stage substituted by compilations of English nursery rhymes and European fairy tales, which introduce characters like Little Red Riding Hood and carry moral messages, often printed in bold letters at the bottom of the page. Increasingly, these are spin-offs of Disney productions, and typically, the mother of a three-year-old, who had only just begun to speak and read in English, proudly cited ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ as her daughter’s favourite story, followed by Peter Pan and Sleeping Beauty. Teaching the preschool child English at home does therefore include familiarity with a set of narratives and artefacts largely identified with ‘Western’ consumer culture, which mothers introduce as part of the preschool system.

## 2.) *Teaching Discipline: The Lunchbox*

The preparation of food to be taken to school is a second important arena for mothering practices related to preschoolers and the stuff of endless discussions among mothers in front of the gates, exchanges with teachers, and tales of love and betrayal between mothers and their children. Often when children were picked up from nursery school I overheard a mother asking her child: ‘Did you have your *tiffin*?’<sup>4</sup> On opening the container she would then turn around to a wider audience and continue ‘I don’t know what to do, he never finishes his lunch’. Here as elsewhere, conversations about children’s eating habits and their preferences, aversions and daily routines, are of utmost importance to most mothers. In Bengali households in particular, the preparation and consumption of full meals represents the hallmark of a distinctive Bengali domesticity, and ‘Bengali cooking’ features as the most distinctive feature of ethnicity among the middle-classes.

As Stivens suggests with reference to the domestication of middle-class mothers within a nationalist discourse in contemporary Malaysia, the development of a ‘cuisine’ is linked to the promotion of

<sup>4</sup> A ‘tiffin’ is a packed lunch for those working in offices or going to school.

class-specific child-rearing practices:

'The ever-growing cultural production of 'domesticity' suggests that women (as wives-mothers) are being groomed to take a crucial role in producing the everyday practices of modern Malays. The detailed instructions on household decor, advice bringing women up-to-date (sic) with 'modern' views about child rearing and interpersonal relationships, and the reinvention of cuisine all apparently accord women a key part in the 'domestic' construction of Malay middle-classness (Stivens 1998:62).

In Bengali middle-class families and in some cases in Hindi-speaking families as well, children's tastes in foods are taken very seriously, and are actively developed by mothers and grandmothers. Once a son or daughter enters school the preparation of a lunch box (*tiffin*) becomes a major signifier of 'good mothering'. Most preschoolers attend nurseries only for two to three hours in the morning, but all children bring a packed lunch, which is left with an *ayah* at the time of arrival. For nurseries these lunch boxes are matter of concern and are a prime area for the imposition of discipline—via discourses on practicality, hygiene, and cleanliness.

Since preschool children in these middle-class households do not normally eat by themselves, teachers have a vested interest in the types of food permitted, and many smaller places struggle to keep parental involvement in the actually taking of the packed lunch under control. Although I have not come across an instance where a mother insisted on sending hot food for a child at lunchtime as reported by Viruru, it is common for mothers to bribe staff in the hope to secure extra-care during lunchtime (Viruru 2001:103–105).

Even the small neighbourhood nurseries made it a point to send notes regarding suitable foods and packaging home with the students, and teachers emphasised that with respect to lunch boxes all mothers, regardless of economic standing or education, were irresponsible and unreasonable. In fact many mothers I spoke to displayed contempt for the nurseries policies regarding food, and subverted the attempts to impose order in the school environment by sending 'inappropriate amounts' and 'unsuitable food' on a daily basis into the preschool. I would like to suggest that far from being a mere boycott of the nursery's teachers this attitude can be read as a refusal to accept the school's messages about good and reasonable mothering and the need for preschool education outside the home.

Especially Bengali middle-class mothers take great pride in the developing of distinguished tastes in their young children, who are offered a wide range of regular foods and treats at home. When a son

or daughter entered school, these mothers felt that this loving and controlled 'education of the senses' was disrupted, because mother and child had to rearrange meals taken in the home around the lunch taken in the nursery. Anxieties about social status, urban environments, and the contaminating effects of modernity, which are translated into negative discourses about eating 'outside' more generally, were also implied in talk about lunch taken at school. Thus, while lunch boxes were prepared and packed in the home, what happened to the food at school was a much discussed issue in these families. The main concerns ranged from where, when and with whom lunch was taken at school. In a typical example the Bengali mother of a little boy complained that the helpers at his nursery, who assisted the children to take their lunch, were not fit to perform this task hygienically, since they all came from working-class backgrounds. She blamed the nursery's owner for neglecting the health of the children and claimed that her son had caught stomach bugs more than once because of the lunch time routine.

Another often criticised aspect of the school lunch was the sharing of food between children, which the children themselves identified as the most enjoyable aspect of going to preschool. Their mothers, on the other hand were disgusted by the mere idea of sharing in the class room, and most referred to hygiene as well as communal identities when I asked about it. A Marwari mother of a three-year-old daughter did not hesitate to pinpoint the problem for members of this strictly vegetarian community:

'You never know what they eat at school, I told her not to touch anything other children may offer, you don't know who prepared it and how—and if you have ever seen the kitchens of these Bengali families, you wouldn't want your child to eat any of the food that's been prepared there'.

In the view of teachers, on the other hand, mothers seemed to be obsessed with lunch, and had to be told what to send, how to prepare it and what amount of food to provide. Although teachers acknowledged that children needed a snack, depicting lunchtime as an important opportunity to teach children manners, the values of sharing by encouraging them to lay a table, take turns, and emphasise tidiness, they felt that a nursery could not channel the various meanings of food and the related maternal transgressions very well. Moreover, increasing consumerism tended to aggravate the problem of lunch boxes through the introduction of new and in the view of teachers highly competitive foods, which made the children greedy and seemed to contain messages appropriate in the domestic environment but not at school.

Mothers themselves acknowledged that new snacks marketed for children introduced an element of open competition, since most of these foods are relatively costly, but at the same time emphasised that preschoolers would not easily share such precious items with their friends. Consequently, even very young middle-class children demanded snacks seen on TV or in the shops for their lunch. boxes from early on, and commercially produced snacks have become inseparable from schooling in the nursery.

### Modern Times

Although all mothers sent their children to nursery, this was often done reluctantly and talking about entry into nurseries and schools mothers seized the opportunity to relate their domestic concerns with wider political issues. In many instances a mother felt that her son or daughter were not 'ready' to leave the home and spend time with teachers in a group of children, but few younger mothers dared to express their criticism of the new regime as directly as the mother of a twenty-five-year-old student, who had been the first in her family to be sent to a nursery 'When my daughter was three, she was not ready to go to kindergarten, she cried and cried, but we had to bring her there and gradually she settled in. The place was not very good, the aunties were not so educated and she did not like it at all. But that was the first generation to get admitted to the better schools like this.'

Earlier the assumption that children of well-educated mothers did not need to attend preschools was implicit in the way these mothers talked about early years education, namely as a means to make up for deficits in the home environment, as one older mother stated:

'Of course, if the mothers are not educated or not really disciplined, then children will have to go to the nursery or the Montessori school, like my sister-in-law's son and daughter, but with my daughter, I could have educated her at home, and so we sent her as late as possible.'

This clearly critical, if class-biased, approach has however been replaced by the general acceptance of preschool education among younger mothers from a wide range of backgrounds, who look at it in terms of chances, opportunities and future careers. Here preschooling provides social skills and a 'well-rounded personality' not produced by the home environment, simply because mothers and their children are not disciplined and 'smart' enough. If this new approach rests on the promotion of early learning institutions as 'just like home' to make early separation of mother and child more palatable, this implies not

so much that nurseries become more homely, but that homes become more structured environments. New mothers are teachers, who take full responsibility for the learning experiences of a single child.

The need for children from middle-class families to attend nursery schools is a recent trend, which emerged in the wake of globalisation and the integration of employment markets into worldwide discourses of skills and mobility. It is supported by the increasing privatisation of education in Calcutta, and the massive investment in related institutions by private parties and professional providers. Bigger schools and 'reputed' selective institutions have had kindergarden classes for three-year olds for some time, and are now busy to add preschool classes in an attempt to jump the 'early years' bandwagon. Earlier only a few pioneers interested in Montessori education or alternative models like the reformist approach promoted by Tagore in his project in Santiniketan included some early schooling, otherwise schooling resumed at the age of five or six.

From the middle of the 1990s onwards most neighbourhoods had their own small 'Montessori' schools. Indeed, the growth of this lucrative market in preschool education has recently been a matter of concern for the state government, which initiated steps to 'regulate' preschool learning. But unlike the discussions of state-schooling and the poor, which centre on the curriculum and the problem of attendance, the debate on preschooling for middle-class children emphasises the service character of schooling, and discusses the provision from a consumer point of view.

There are multiple discourses that brought preschool education about, but the rhetoric of consumer interests and market mechanisms is dominant in all of them. In the view of the state government the regulation of preschools is a necessity accompanying attempts to control other areas of urban growth, which should be supervised and subjected to trading standards, including the property market, health care and the leisure industry (restaurants, clubs, entertainment) (see Roy 2003). Alongside these, preschool education may be treated like other precious commodities, and parents can expect to be saved from unscrupulous entrepreneurs, but will themselves be able to invest in education. There is to date little concern with the quality of individual learning programmes other than with the infrastructure provided in specific schools—contrary to the debates that dominate higher secondary education in the state.

Among parents preschool education is widely regarded as a prerequisite to admission into a good school, and across all economic

differences, middle-class mothers think of the kind of knowledge required to pass an entrance exam at age three or four: alphabets, counting and general knowledge. Variations in their views on preschools related to the behavioural aspects of early years education, with the more educated mothers emphasising the preschool's importance in establishing behavioural patterns like independence and smartness, where lower middle-class mothers with a view on less 'reputed' schools highlighted discipline and the ability to literally sit a test as skills taught in the nursery.

Accordingly, mothers chose a mix of strategies to help their children, involving classic rote-learning at home and learning-is-fun educational toys instilling the same kind of knowledge. Indeed, since preschool education has become synonymous with Montessori, which some of the better educated mothers identified as 'child-centred' learning, a more labour-intensive type of home-schooling has emerged. Mothers educated to degree level and from upper-middle class families were mostly conversant with the educational tools and the 'method' employed at the preschool their child attended, which was constructed as the opposite of 'rote-learning' and discursively represented in terms of individual development. Here, to be a modern mother clearly implied a critique of the old regime, but was not translated into actual activities through which a son or daughter acquired skills and knowledge beyond a set of already popular skills. Enhanced through the common practice of recommending specific material, mothers could easily be convinced that in order to be a competent consumer they themselves had to 'learn' about such child-centred approaches education.

### **Conclusion**

By 'nationalising a foreign product', namely early years education (Fernandes 2000:615), middle-class mothers and the teachers are actually transcending the division between the home and the school and negotiate liberalisation through children's education. With reference to middle-class motherhood Chatterjee and Riley observe that: 'voluntary (responsible) parenthood' prescribed as essential for global, national, and individual progress, is the key issue. In this version of modernity, the triumph of reason is to be found in each citizen's claim to a greater share of national wealth and a higher standard of living. In promotional materials, the rewards of fertility control are always material, and the didactic stories about exemplary planned

families emphasize consumer power. While individuals happiness is linked to material and physical, rather than spiritual, well-being, the materialism promoted has a recognizable Indian, local and middle-class character' (Chatterjee and Riley:2001).

Within this context preschool education exemplifies the ways in which motherhood, childbearing, and childrearing became associated with wider consumption patterns and particular forms of domestic arrangements. Stivens cautions with reference to Malaysia that 'this may seem predictable to observers of consumerist capitalist culture in the West, where women are seen to occupy a similarly focal role as co-ordinaters of consumption and elaborate domesticity. But, as noted, the embeddedness of a range of Islamic practices in the material manifestations of becoming modern lends a highly specific set of meanings to women's place in producing domesticity.' (Stivens 1998:63). In India the emerging consumer culture of the 1990s has reshaped ideologies of motherhood, which are related to earlier formations, but are now transformed in globally recognisable ways:

'To be a modern mother is to be an active consumer under great pressure to acquire all the commodities necessary for the satisfactory performance of motherhood. The smaller number of children has coincided with an enormous expansion of expenditure on children' (Stivens 1998:63).

Distinctively, the post-independence state with its earlier emphasis on secularism and development and Hindu nationalism provide the background against which these new practices are formulated. But what form they take depends on regional histories and global movements. In a recent paper on middle-class motherhood and the nation in post-liberalisation China, Ann Anagnost observes that 'in the ideologies of motherhood, we see how aspirations for national transcendence over "an anxiety of belatedness" are being reworked in the private sphere in the production of the middle-class child as a new subject who can stride across national borders with confidence.' (Anagnost n.d.). With reference to Calcutta middle-class families, these same anxieties nurture the desire to recreate a 'global lifestyle' at home. The process whereby the new economic policies 'reorganise the family from within' (Anagnost n.d.) has been described in much detail for the United States, but we are just beginning to understand how these transformations work in India.

Liberalisation, the prospect of migration, and global competition are determining the way in which educational landscapes are perceived by middle-class children and their parents. Moreover, these are embedded in national and regional histories and ideologies including

nationalist and/or religious discourses. In India, these figurations have been described with reference to Hindu nationalist ideologies, which prescribe the production of new domesticities, gender relations and childrearing practices (see Banerjee 1995; Sarkar 1995). With reference to middle-class children in Bengali families in Calcutta, educational histories reflect other trajectories, most prominently the politicisation of education under the influence of the Left Front government. Although the state is expected to facilitate reforms in education, which in turn could serve to integrate the poor into the 'mainstream', middle-class parents yearn for privatised education—a space where reservations are not an issue, students are expected to realise their 'full potential', and gain their parents a place in respectable society. Thus, middle-class families with children living in Calcutta envisage their sons and daughters as citizens, but with a view to a global economy, and therefore emphasise marketable skills acquired in educational institutions which are 'private'. This view of a global market is reflected in the way in which preschool education is helping to reorganise the mothering practices in an environment where 'the idea of early childhood represents a 'latent potentiality' that must be seized' (Anagnost n.d.).

Mothers and teachers are not alone in making this child/citizen happen. Increasingly their efforts are supported by expertise and services, dispensed by companies, and a variety of specialists. Their suggestions, predictions and solutions address the anxieties, which accompany this kind of movement and are consumed in the homes of more and more middle-class children. Religion is not among the main issues raised by Bengali middle-class parents, whose ideological location implies new ideas about culture, regional tradition and education—and is markedly communalist in subtle ways. Where in the Malay context Islam and state-sponsored religiosity feature at school, regional and language-based identities are emphasised at home. As Anagnost suggests in the case of China, children as pupils have become the subjects of multiple practices resulting from liberalisation policies. But their mothers require training in the new methodologies, 'rules and manners', as well, and produce specific understandings of modernity through schooling.

### Note

Earlier versions of this article has been presented at the Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics, and at Queen Elizabeth

House at Oxford University, and I benefited from comments made by participants on that occasion. I am particularly indebted to Mukulika Banerjee, Chris Fuller, and Hendrik Wittkopf for their critical reading of the text.

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