

# Schooling and the Meo Girl Children: Some Insights from the Field



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## Abstract

The present paper is a part of an empirical research conducted during Ph.D. study. The study had been conceived on wide canvas of Meo girl children in three subdivisions of Mewat district of Haryana-Taoru, Nuh and Punhana. The basic purpose of the research was to understand the experiences of Meo girls in contexts of their historical, socio-political and economic development across generations and in negotiating everyday challenges in the process of their growing up and education. It was also to understand as to how everyday lived experiences of the Meo girls shape their life aspirations, world-view and meaning-making about the self and the others and consequently influence their perception. The present paper addresses three dimension viz. a viz. their educational concern, despair and hope out of the total dimensions taken under the study. The findings of the research suggest that in spite of their challenges and despair, the Meo girls reflect strong positive hope and resisting their previous prevailing circumstances. As compared to their earlier situation, many among these girls have become capable in challenging male dominated negative attitude towards education of girls. The data also suggests that several Meo girls have crossed their traditional boundaries of constraints to receive education. They hope to get quality education that could lead them to improve their future life prospects, with strong determination and positive worldview towards their life.

**Keywords:** Mewat, Meo, Girl Child, Concern, Despair and Hope.

## Introduction

Schooling as a processes plays a significant role in the life of a student, not only because of the explicitly stated activities, but, also because, it works differently in the life of children as the students coming to school belong to different socio-cultural, historico-political and economical background. Parsons, (1959); Frere (1985); Kumar (2005); Apple (2000); and Giroux (2005) works are particularly significant to build understanding upon schooling and its functions.

There are two major theories that relate to schooling- the *functionalist theorists* and the *conflict theorists*. The *functionalist* thinkers, believes that 'modern' schools is the most important social institution for the development of children as it teaches common culture shared by the society. Talcott Parsons (1959) belonging to this group believes, that, school empowers its students to cross the narrow boundaries of the self and the family, and, to move towards a greater universal thinking and behaving. Thus, schooling as socializing agency empowers its students to work with different individual even without growing with them together. Suggesting prescriptive role-performance for the students Parsons (1959; p.51) says,

*'Capacities can be broken down into two components, the first being competence or the skill to perform the task involved in the individual's roles, and the second being the role-responsibility or the capacity to live up to other people's expectations of the interpersonal behaviour appropriate to these roles.'*

However, this understanding of schooling restricts to understand principles of education only in instrumental terms which remain located in an individual. The functionalists group of thinkers thus, overlooks the relations among power, knowledge and ideology that work simultaneously in school. They ignore the social order working within schools. They also ignore association of schools with cultural and political life of the students which represent a place of contestation and struggle among different cultural and economic groups.

Differing from the functionalists, the *conflict theorists* see the processes of schooling, in terms of power relations. Therefore, they challenge the functionalists' paradigm and believe that, conventional schools teach students just to remain submissive and fail to equip them with skills to enter into workforce and challenge the inequality and injustice meted out to them. Frere (1985), Kumar (1987), Apple (2000), Pathak (2002) believe that the conventional schools prepare its pupils, to dutifully and obediently accept mindless instructions from the powerful and do not equip them to challenge it. Thus, such schools and its processes '*reproduces the domination of the powerful*' (Gol, 2014), who controls the processes of schooling through curriculum, contents, language, examination and so on. Thus, the conflict theorists base their arguments upon the deepest divisions in complex Indian society. This is why they feels the need of '*special universal cultures*' (Gol, 2014), to be incorporated in the curriculum so as to emancipate students.

Frere (1985) visualizes education, as a '*banking system*' where students remain involved as depositories. They patiently receive, memorize and repeat the task provided by the dominant- the depositor. The depositor often works as oppressor to the depositories. Thus, in this sense knowledge becomes a gift provided by the oppressor who considers themselves as the knowledgeable. Kumar (2009) using the analogy of 'gift', says, that, '*when we give a gift, we often, choose it, by considering the receiver's personality, likes and needs*'. If we see this analogy in contexts of the entire schooling processes of a child, then the difficulty arises that education is not limited to one child and their likes and desires, but, for millions of children. This is why Frere (1985) contends that such schooling system tries to change '*the consciousness of the oppressed and not the situation which oppress them*' and hence, '*the more the oppressed adapt to such situation, the more easily they can be dominated*'. Frere (1985) therefore, suggests the transformation of the structure of schooling that will liberate the 'students' 'otherwise' it will continue, the oppression of students. However, the school curriculum does not provide space from social life of the students. Kumar, (2005) in this regard says that:

*'The school curriculum has no reference to children's life outside the school and the hiatus between the curriculum. The learner's social milieu is part of colonial and pre-colonial legacies of our education system which overlooked the question of equity and equality'*.

Thus, the processes of schooling are more or less remain disassociated with the child's immediate socio-cultural and physical milieu which becomes one of the major reasons of their estrangement from schooling (Ahmad, 2016). In fact, the civilized dynamics of education exclude the concerns of oppressed groups to find place in the schooling processes. This is one of the major reasons of existence of exclusive schools for the elites other

than that of the common mass. In this context, Kumar (2009; p.44) says, that, '*the co-existence of parallel schools ensures that children of the better-off are separated early, from the children of the poor*'. Similarly, Giroux, (2005) says,

*'If public education is a crucial sphere for creating citizens equipped to exercise their freedoms and competent to question the basic assumptions that govern democratic political life, teachers in both public schools and higher education will have to assume their responsibility as citizen-scholars by taking critical positions; relating their work to larger social issues; offering students' knowledge, debate and dialogue about pressing social problems; and providing conditions for students to have hope and believe that civic life matters and that they can make a difference in shaping it so as to expand its democratic possibilities for all groups.'*

Thus, it is essential for educators to highlight the ideas and researches that critically challenge the official knowledge in the process of empowering students as an individual and as a social change agent. For this, it is essential to structure and re-structure the workplace according to everyday routines and practices which shape the social relations within classroom. However, contrary to this we often find that resources are selected, organized and distributed in schools which suggest the maintenance of the power relations by the traditionalists who do not give importance to praxis, subjectivity, class-struggle, emancipation and so on. Michael Apple (1993) sees education in the political dimensions and says that the policy and practices of schooling are politically directed by the dominant groups of the society in order to control the knowledge which Althusser has called an '*ideological state apparatus*'. Apple, (1993:10) says, that, this is because the dominant groups want '*to make their knowledge legitimate and increase their power in the larger arena*' (p.10). Thus, our educational institutions, '*fill the needs of the social division of labour in the society and produce the knowledge and culture required by an unequal society*' (Apple, 1995; p.83). He says that unless it is understood how schooling situate in contexts, it is difficult to analyse the realities of schooling as '*there is another end to the rope which binds schools to outside agencies*' (Apple, 1995. p. 65).

The discussion above suggests that the processes of schooling assert identity formation among the pupil and are not limited to the developmental aspects only. Longer duration of time spent in school shape the identities of the child and empowers them to respond to various challenges arising out of the processes of schooling. In fact, the manner in which their relationships are conceptualized and ordered in school often shows

whether it will meet the social needs or reproduces domination. The work of Mead (1934), Eric Erikson (1950, 1968), Marcia (1980), Kakkar (1981) and Pathak (2006) are particularly relevant to conceptualize identity. Mead (1934, p. 135-226) emphasizes that the processes of social experience and activity plays greater role in identity formation of a child. He further says that the social processes influence the behaviour of an individual and makes their identity- a socially constructed reality, where, everyday cultural practices and the process of socialization shape the identity of an individual.

Erickson (1950, 1968) tries to understand the development of self through eight stages of life ranging from infancy to old age. He utilized 'ego conflict' as the central concept that develops self. The ego conflict which may be resolved either positively or negatively, flows from the developmental tasks and remain in conflict at each of the eight stages of life. Therefore, the formation of identity involves the meaning of existence as to who one is, what value one owns and what one wants to achieve and pursue in life.

Marcia (1980) says that since the shaping of identity often keeps changing during adolescence, therefore, the identity remain quite volatile during the period of adolescence as it also keeps changing. Such change is often attributed to interaction with different entity of the environment and meaning making. Therefore, identity of a person works as a driving force to addresses various commitments in life. In this sense, identity is psycho-social phenomena of an individual. This is why a person holds multiple identities and acts in contexts of complex social structure.

Pathak (2006) understood identity in context of socio-personal variables such as gender, religion, nationality and also in contexts of to the 'others' which belongs to the groups with which a person identifies or differentiates self. This is why, the worldview of an individual determines such identity of an individual, 'that often emanates from caste, ethnicity, language, religion, gender and nationality as a consequence of our memories of the historical past, local traditions and cultural specificities'. Pathak (2006) says that it is due to multiple identities an individual develops conflict with regard to religious identity, racism, casteism and so on. Therefore, it is multiple identities that restrict an individual to think in a broader context because an individual consciousness and approach often remain situated in social relationships. However, Kakkar (1981) says that as a consequence of multiple identities an individual possesses personal inner world based on one's experience and visible external world which s/he is socialized to lead. He further says that the influence of multiple identities makes persons' behaviour and appearance more dynamic. In contexts of girls he says that, due to the nature of Indian society being collectivist and patriarchal in nature, girls develop a relational sense of identity. Therefore, a girl projects her identity, in relation to others, and often not as an individual existential identity.

### **The Meos: Historical Past and Identity**

The Meos' have remained a community who has always shown resistance to imperial rule living in the vicinity of Delhi. They often remained in conflict with the monarchs of the imperial capital as they often enter Delhi for looting and plunder due to regular drought and famine in their habitus- Mewat. This often provoked the Delhi Sultans and also the British rulers in pre-independent India. They constituted the poorest community depending upon farming and animal husbandry. Even in present day scenario, Meos are extremely poor and depend upon rain fed agriculture and animal husbandry. The precarious condition of the Meos can be analysed from the fact that they live largely from hand to mouth, often remain indebted to the money lenders even in average years due to arid land with less produce and frequent drought. Most of them are illiterate especially among women. Thus, the identity of Meos especially the girls, in contexts of the present research, raised the issues of their struggle in contexts of schooling which have been made a part of exploration of this research so as to understand Meo girls' experiences of resistance, schooling and change on the one hand, and, on the other, their shaping of experiences, worldview and life aspiration in tandem with respect to the global events and movements.

The statistics pertaining to Meo girls shows that they are most disadvantaged and backward as compared to others (Hayat & Sharma, 2018). However, in several ways positive changes in the perception of the Meos community towards education of girl children also reflects in the preceding decades. As a result, the literacy rate among Meos girls in Mewat has increased from 23.90% in 2001 to 36.60% in 2011. The increased number of girls coming to schools crossing several hurdles also suggests that they are determined to escape marginalization. Actually, Meo girls comprise the poorest and most disadvantaged group, because, they are the victim of their circumstances which further marginalizes them from education. In this regard Apple (1995, p.98) says, that,

*'Girls seem more marginal because they are often pushed by male dominance to the periphery of social activity. Their free time is controlled by parents more closely. They assume apprenticeship for domestic labour which begins at home'.*

In these contexts, the research was taken up within different dynamics that impacts the lives of the Meo girls in multiple ways.

### **Methodological Approach**

Being a qualitative research, the study undertook descriptive form. It was conducted in three schools located in three blocks (Taoru, Nuh and Punhana) of Mewat-Haryana. An intense engagement with the Meo girl children, teachers, parents and community members were done to collect the data from the field. Out of all the sample schools and geographical areas, 60 students, 18 teachers, 48 parents and 15 community members were interacted

continuously for almost sixteen months from April 2016 to August 2017. The perceptions of all the samples were recorded on several issues pertaining to the education of the Meo girl children. Focus group discussions (FGD) with parents, teachers, and other key persons of the community have been done from various angles to understand the entire issues comprehensively. Participant and non-participant observation helped in gathering data. Diaries, letter writings, drawing, and notes of the Meo girls were explored to understand issues comprehensively.

### Contexts of the Present Paper

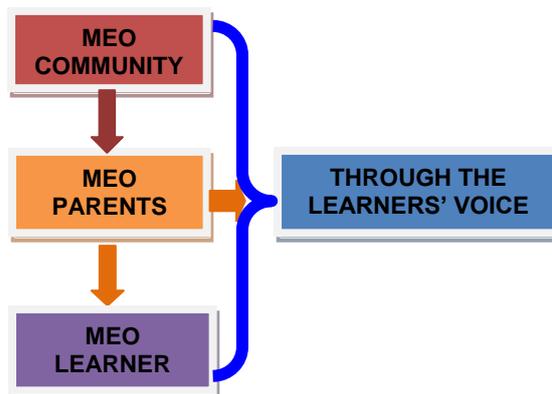
The idea of the present paper has been derived from the projective workshop conducted with the Meo children during data gathering processes and the conversation made to record their worldviews relating to education, understand their concern, despair and hope in contexts of their experiences of resistance, struggle, breaking of cultural boundaries, schooling, escaping marginality and bringing change in their lives and so on. Three small hour workshops in a theatrical mode were conducted with the samples in the entire sample areas with 30 samples. Before analyzing the responses, a thorough master-sheet was prepared with similar and dissimilar responses which helped in deriving sub-areas of concerns.

### The Reflective Trends

#### The Meo Girl: As An Individual and A Member of A Family

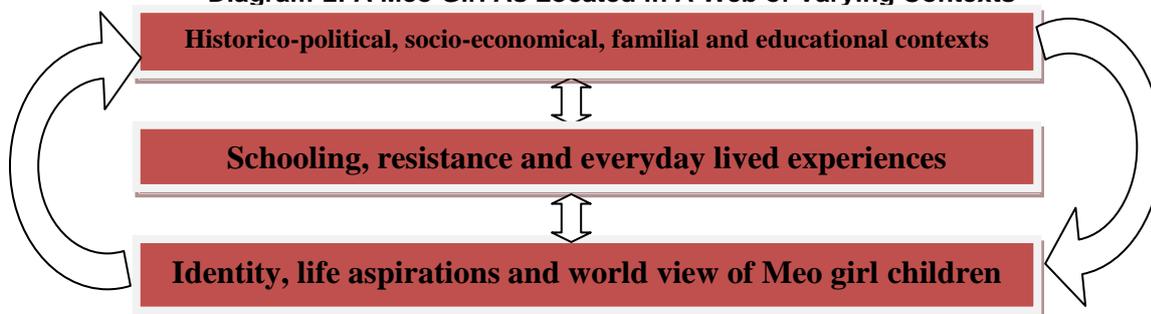
There seemed to be substantial continuity between the Meo girl as an individual, and as a member of a family. It reflects in contexts of a member of community and that of the society. This is because of their shared cultural milieu in contexts of member of a family, community and society. This interrelation may be seen through the diagrammatic representation below (Diagram 1).

**Diagram-1: Interrelation of Meo Individual as A Member of Family And Community**



The projection workshop gave an idea that a Meo girl is located in varying contexts which can be seen diagrammatically in the following manner (Daigram-2):

**Diagram-2: A Meo Girl As Located in A Web of Varying Contexts**



The formation of everyday perceptions of the social world as an individual, often lead to construct and reconstruct social life which bring order and meaning to Meo girls' collective social life. Further, the fragmented responses of the Meo girls reflected range of perspectives and approaches, with regard to their world view.

### Shattered Hope of Opportunity, Trust Deficit and The Sense of Powerlessness

It emerged that majority of Meo girls feel a sense of powerlessness just because of being a girl in the region of Mewat. The general perception with regard to education reveal that Meo girls firmly believe in the developmental aspect of education. However, on the contrary, they feel that the opportunity structure for them is entirely blocked, as they do not have prospect to grow educationally, beyond secondary

classes in the absence of educational institutions in the region beyond secondary classes on the one hand, and, on the other, due to the apathy of the male dominated society, which do not permit them to continue with their studies beyond school. There are several testimonials which corroborate the same. The perception of shattered hope emanating due to causal factors, such as trust deficit, lack of access to educational opportunity especially after secondary school, and so on. The other factors, such as, poor education provided by schools in the region also contribute quite considerably for shattering positive hope among Meo girls. These Meo girls exhibited that the education in the schools located in their areas do not provide them any prospects of growth and their upward mobility in their life. Actually, majority of people see education in terms of life prospects that it

brings to the person (Ahmad, 2016; Alam, 2008; Hasan, 1995). The same is also true in majority of the case of Meo girls, who do not see any life prospects from education in their region. The poor curricular transaction also contributes in diminishing the growth and life prospects of the Meo girls. It also diminishes the quality of education which spiral other problems in life. In case of non-achieving capacity of such prospects, the Meo girls often gets demotivated, and as a consequence, they slowly develops feeling of estrangement which discourage them to invest time, money and energy in education for longer duration so as to achieve their target (Ahmad, 1981).

Apart from these, the complex triangulation between male-female perceptive relations, generation gap and cultural boundary contribute to draw different parallels between Meo girl children and Meo male in the society. Majority of the first generation male members within the community has realized the importance of education and have got involved in opening educational institutions in the area. As a consequence of the realization of the importance of education, several Madarsas in the region have started Open Basic Education by accrediting their programme from National Open School. However, even the first generation male members of the community have not been able to change the age old male domination in decision making for girl children. Thus, it was found that there exists dissonance acculturation between the neo-literate Meo girl children and the male members among the community.

Due to such dissonance acculturation the girl children and the male parent draw two different parallels of perception and attitude towards education. The Meo girl children strongly desire to continue their study further, after their secondary classes, keeping in mind hopeful better life prospects and aspiration. The Meo girls are well aware of the positive impact of education and dream better life through their educational journey. However, the parent, particularly the male, tries to gets their daughters married even in the unmarriageable tender age by dropping them out of the school. Such marriages are commonly practiced in the entire community, whereby, majority of the Meo girls are married in their childhood. Those Meo girls who are taking education have got the awareness and ill effects of child marriage, but are not able to change the situation within the community which shatters their hope for educational growth and opportunity increases distrust and creates discord among relations. This is one of the major reasons emerged that lead to develops in them the sense of powerlessness.

However, the same sense of powerlessness and demoralization also empower and equip them to resist the male dominated decisions at many occasions with regard to education. Contrary to the above mentioned feeling of powerlessness, there were several instances of resistance, though with tiny might, which show the positive hope of Meo girl children towards education. The analysis also shows that these Meo girls have become able to break their

traditional cultural boundaries and thus, coming out of their marginality, though in very limited sense. Through their resistance, several Meo girls escaped their marginality and became able to achieve much in their educational life journey.

#### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This research has made it evident that there are several emerging concerns that have come up in the process of analysis. Substantial evidences suggest that Meo girl children often face inequalities as a virtue of their circumstances. This particular study as a part of Ph.D. research is a small step to understand such issues from the voices of Meo girls. The Meo girl children in the present study reflect positive experiences of their educational journey in spite of several constraints. The whole study reveals that there is much need to be done in this area as far as intervention in the field of education is concerned.

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