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## **SECTION FOUR**

### **AN EMPIRICAL TURN? THE (VISUAL) ETHNOGRAPHY OF BIBLICAL ENCOUNTER**

## The Use of the Bible in the Institutional Body Language of Christian Schools in India

Mediating Western; Christian; or Western-Christian Culture in  
Contemporary India?

*Sally Elton-Chalcraft*

### Introduction

As a white, British, female teacher educator I had the privilege of spending two summers conversing with children, parents and teachers in Indian Christian schools in India using an ethnographic approach to data collection within a qualitative research design. This chapter draws on some of the findings from a project funded by St Christopher's Trust and the University of Cumbria. Visits were made to a sample of Christian foundation special schools and mainstream schools in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Mizoram—five Indian states which are very different politically, culturally and economically (British Council 2019). The purposes of the project were threefold, firstly to explore the inclusion of SEND (special educational needs/physical disability) children in Christian foundation Special Needs schools comparing experiences with mainstream schools.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, to investigate how Indian/Christian identity informs professional practice in a range of schools in different Indian states.<sup>2</sup> Thirdly to understand the developing debates about the place of Christian foundation schools within the context of a growing vocal and active Hindu nationalism (Hindutva), as part of a secular education system upheld by

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<sup>1</sup> Sally Elton-Chalcraft, Paul J. Cammack and Liz Harrison, 'Segregation, Integration, Inclusion and Effective Provision: A Case Study of Perspectives from Special Educational Needs Children, Parents and Teachers from Bangalore, India', *International Journal of Special Education* 31.1 (2016), pp. 2-9. Available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1099934.pdf> (accessed on 27 November 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Sally Elton-Chalcraft and Paul J. Cammack, 'Christian Values in Education: Teachers in India Narrate the Impact of Their Faith and Values on Practice', *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 41.3 (2019), pp. 284-304. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2019.1647674> (accessed on 27 November 2020).

the constitution.<sup>3</sup> This chapter draws on the project findings, and the three publications cited above, to explore my interpretation of how the Bible was used in a sample of the schools; thereby, both enriching the reader's understanding of biblical encounter in Indian schools and ethnographic approaches to data collection, from an outsider's perspective.

I collected data, including school observations and interviews (with over seventy adults and children), for the inter-related projects concerning Inclusion, how Indian/Christian identity informs professional practice in Christian foundation schools and the wider debate on the place of Christian foundation schools in India. This current chapter illustrates how the Bible is used in a sample of Christian foundation schools drawing on interviews, focus groups and observations in a range of schools in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Assam. In this chapter, from my perspective as a white female agnostic teacher educator I present biblical encounters in context. My two research questions are as follows:

- A. What is the significance of the Bible in a sample of Christian foundation schools in the context of a secular Indian education system, as described by teachers, students and parents?
- B. What is the biblical institutional body language (ethos) of a sample of Christian foundation schools from the perspective of a white female agnostic teacher educator and mother? How is Western and Indian culture mediated in the school ethos?

I investigate the mediation of western culture and Indian culture in Christian schools with specific reference to the Bible and how the ethos of the schools is projected through institutional body language. Institutional Body language is a concept used by Dadzie<sup>4</sup> to interpret the way a school projects itself to others with particular reference to race and ethnicity. Dadzie's *Toolkit for Tackling Racism*<sup>5</sup> encourages teachers to develop anti-racist practice and to improve their school's non-discriminatory 'institutional body language'. In this chapter I draw on observational and interview data to describe the biblical institutional language projected by a sample of Christian foundation schools and discuss tensions and ambiguities within a wider context of the Indian education system.

Although the whole project was a collaborative venture, the data collection and initial analysis was undertaken solely by myself as principal investigator.

<sup>3</sup> Sally Elton-Chalcraft and D.J. Chalcraft, 'Decolonising Christian Education in India? Navigating the Complexities of Hindu Nationalism and BJP Education Policy', in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religious Education in the Global South* (ed. Y. Matemba and B. Collett; London: Bloomsbury, [2021 in press]).

<sup>4</sup> Stella Dadzie, *Toolkit for Tackling Racism in Schools* (Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Dadzie, *Toolkit for Tackling Racism in Schools*.

The chapter begins with a brief contextual section and is followed by a methodology section which explores how the study was designed and I acknowledge that I collected and analysed the data from my perspective as a white, female, agnostic, teacher educator and mother. The next section introduces my three findings where I discuss the significance of the Bible for teachers, learners and parents in a sample of schools in a variety of Indian states. The chapter concludes by showing how the work may have relevance to educators, policy makers and faith adherents in India and other countries.

## Context

### *The Bible in a Hindu Education System Context*

The Christian teacher in post colonial India has to negotiate between exemplifying their biblically inspired values to the children in their school while adhering to the policies of the secular Indian education system. Since Modi and the BJP party came to power India has witnessed a Saffronisation (Guha 2017,<sup>6</sup> Nag 2014<sup>7</sup>) and Christian teachers in Christian foundation schools need to be careful not to proselytise. They are not allowed to impart biblical teaching in order to convert—indeed Modi and the BJP government have instigated laws which promote a nationalistic Indian education system which seems less tolerant of minorities, including Christianity. Young argues that some educationalists wish India to return to a 'Golden Age of homogeneity'<sup>8</sup> where India 'returns' to a nationalist Hindutva. This is both imaginary and impossible—because India is diverse, its Muslim, Christian and other religious minority groups having centuries of history. Also the Golden Age of homogeneity forgets the stark divide between the rich and poor in the class/caste system and Dalits, together with other lower castes would probably do no better than they do now.

Elton-Chalcraft and Cammack<sup>9</sup> have argued there is a tension between, on the one hand, viewing fee paying Christian-foundation schools as part of the cultural diversity of India which provides much needed provision particularly for the elite and also for SEN children; and on the other hand viewing such institutions as being an undesirable legacy of colonial exploitation and higher caste manipulation, or part of the Indian attempt to perpetuate a two tier system.

<sup>6</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi* (London: Macmillan, 2nd edn, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Kingshuk Nag, *The Saffron Tide : The Rise of the BJP* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications India, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> Elton-Chalcraft and Cammack, 'Christian Values in Education'.

Elton-Chalcraft and Chalcraft<sup>10</sup> claim that legacies of both a paternalistic colonial and also philanthropic Christian mission are in evidence with contemporary Indian Christian missionaries endeavouring to maintain a Christian values system amidst growing desire from leading Indian nationalists to include Hindu, Muslim and secular ideas and philosophies into Indian schooling. Strong Hindu nationalism however is more exclusively Hindu—a finding echoed in Webster.<sup>11</sup> The data for my study were collected just after the coming to power of Narendra Modi, leader of the Hindu nationalist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and there was a consequent Saffronisation of the curriculum in schools whereby ‘being Indian means being Hindu’ (Guha 2017,<sup>12</sup> Nag 2014<sup>13</sup>). Thus there is a continuing of a Hindutva Brahmin ethos, perpetuating the marginalisation of lower caste Indians in post-colonial India.<sup>14</sup> In the May 2019 election Modi increased his majority and thus his policies are set to continue for a further five years at least.<sup>15</sup> However, even before the rise of BJP, the secular constitution of India instituted the legislative framework that prohibits the preaching of faith in schools and, thus prohibits a faith school’s desire to represent and celebrate their Christian foundation.

In this chapter I investigate the response to such legislation and in particular how Christian foundation special schools negotiate the legislation, because many Christian foundation schools were established with the express intention to minister to the needs of the most marginalised in society—namely those from the lower castes and those with disabilities.

### *Special Education in India—The Role of the Christian School*

Historically India has not had a good track record of meeting the needs of marginalised children in school. However since joining with other countries committed to inclusive practice and signing the UN Salamanca agreement in 1994<sup>16</sup> there has been a more comprehensive effort to meet inclusion targets. Nevertheless despite India’s legislative policy of inclusive and free education

<sup>10</sup> Sally Elton-Chalcraft and D.J. Chalcraft, ‘Decolonising Christian Education in India?’

<sup>11</sup> John Webster, ‘Christians in India: Living on the Margins with a Diverse and Controversial Past’, in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary India* (ed. Knut Jacobsen; Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), chap. 28, pp. 414–26.

<sup>12</sup> Guha, *India after Gandhi*.

<sup>13</sup> Nag, *The Saffron Tide*.

<sup>14</sup> K. Iliaih, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Samya: Kolkata, 2nd edn, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> James Crabtree, ‘Modi increases Majority’, *The Sunday Times*, 26 May 2019, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Salamanca agreement—a United Nations initiative to address the problem of huge numbers of poor and marginalised children from benefiting from education and thus increasing their life opportunities. See <http://www.csie.org.uk/inclusion/unesco-salamanca.shtml> (accessed on 28 November 2020).

for persons with disabilities Das, Sharma and Singh<sup>17</sup> argue that there are millions of children with a variety of disabilities who do not receive adequate provision and are unlawfully denied access to mainstream education with their peers. There has been a paradigm shift but there is still a long way to go before India meets the needs of the marginalised. Historically many schools were set up by Christian missionaries with the aim to serve and protect the poor and SEND children rather than successfully integrate these children into mainstream schools which is current global policy since the Salamanca agreement in 1994.<sup>18</sup>

However Elton-Chalcraft, Cammack and Harrison<sup>19</sup> claim that although inclusive practice may be preferable to segregation this may not be educationally effective in some instances; and particularly in the Indian context their findings showed that SEND schools did meet the needs of children with specific learning much more successfully than when the SEND children were educated in main stream schools where their needs were either ignored or they were deemed lazy or disobedient. In this chapter I investigate the extent to which the Christian beliefs underpinning the organisation and ethos, institutional body language of the school also played a role in supporting the SEND children and their families.

So despite international and national legislation to integrate SEND children into mainstream education, research shows that inclusive practice is sometimes not the right option. Many Indian families chose to send their children to SEND schools because they feel their needs are met and the ethos is far more supportive of their child. Throughout the world, there is a steady move away from stigmatisation of SEND children but families continue to find their children ill-treated at school not just by other children but also the teachers and this is the case in India too. One of the aims of my research project was to investigate attitudes towards the marginalised—particularly in the context of the Christian foundation school.

Anderson<sup>20</sup> argues that ‘fear, ignorance, superstition, arrogance and pride on the part of the able bodied persons’ has led to the placing of people with a disability into ‘a ghetto’. While arguing for the integration of SEND children into mainstream schools he acknowledges that this has to be accompanied

<sup>17</sup> Ajay Kumar Das, Sushama Sharma and Vinay Kumar Singh, (2012). ‘Inclusive Education in India: A Paradigm Shift in Roles, Responsibilities and Competencies of Regular School Teachers’, *Journal of Indian Education* 38.3 (2012), pp. 69–83.

<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.csie.org.uk/inclusion/unesco-salamanca.shtml> (accessed on 28 November 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Sally Elton-Chalcraft, Paul J. Cammack and Liz Harrison, ‘Segregation, Integration, Inclusion and Effective Provision’.

<sup>20</sup> David W. Anderson, ‘Inclusion and Interdependence: Students with Special Needs in the Regular Classroom’, *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 10.1 (2006), pp. 43–59 (43).



by a positive mindset on the part of the able bodied. He draws on biblical principles to enact such a vision. Anderson<sup>21</sup> formulated a Theology of Interdependence and draws on biblical texts in Romans chapter 12 and 1 Corinthians Chapter 12 to demonstrate that school classrooms should be inclusive and represent the body of Christ where all parts have a role to play. In my research project I wanted to investigate the extent to which Christian foundation schools are built on biblical principles of love, compassion and acceptance; and whether they have been successful in meeting the needs of many SEND children.

### *Christian Ethos in Indian Schooling*

Given time constraints I provide only two examples from the literature to illustrate the significance of Christian ethos. Firstly I show how two 'outsider' Western educators remarked on the importance teachers placed on their Christian devotion<sup>22</sup> before engaging in staff development sessions. In the methodology section, which follows, I discuss in more detail the concept of insider / outsider stance.<sup>23</sup> Secondly I draw on an ethnographic study by an 'insider' Indian ethnographer who reveals the complexity of the outworking of religious identity and moral education in a Christian girls school.<sup>24</sup>

Jukes and Vassel<sup>25</sup> two educators from England, reflected on a learning disability programme they delivered in Kerala, India and concluded that Faith was a very important part of life for the teachers in the schools involved in the programme. They describe the significance of biblical devotion before their SEND workshops commenced,

'At the beginning of each day there was an opportunity for devotional exercise so that the teachers were spiritually blessed by their god or creator ... to guarantee that any mischievous spirit was removed to ensure the day's workshop was successful' and the Indian teachers believed that 'all successful ventures can only take place with God's will.'<sup>26</sup>

As Western educator 'outsiders' Jukes and Vassel were at first surprised by the teachers' insistence on beginning each day with devotional prayers.

However they soon realised that God's blessing on their learning was of paramount importance because their Christian belief was a significant part of their identity and the Bible played a crucial role in their day-to-day lives. In my study I wanted to discover how Christian teachers used the Bible and devotional sessions to support their decision-making and their day-to-day behaviour in their professional lives.

Bhandari undertook an ethnographic study in a Christian girls school in Delhi and she describes the 'inextricable link between religious identity and education'.<sup>27</sup> She discusses the difference between citizenship education (which is taught in English schools) and character education (also known as moral education and civics) which is more instructional than educative. Bhandari describes the Principal's assertion that moral education at the Christian girls school stems from Christianity because 'religion provides moral values that form the basis of good citizenship'.<sup>28</sup> Christian children were the minority with most girls being Hindu or Muslim and one Christian girl at the school reported that the 'non-Christian girls were not as disciplined as the Christian girls' and she said non-Christian girls 'are involved in bitch fights ... and answer back in class'.<sup>29</sup> Although Bhandari notes that, ironically, the non-Christian girls could identify Christian girls because they were 'less helpful and did not mingle'.<sup>30</sup> Bhandari also reported non-Christian children noticing favouritism among Christian teachers who were biased towards the Christian pupils.<sup>31</sup> Bhandari concludes by suggesting that the school's mission to promote positive Christian ethos is actually counter-productive: 'Its religious ethos inevitably seeps into its attempt at providing citizenship education, often creating further barriers among its pupils, an outcome that takes them farther from attempts at good citizenship'.<sup>32</sup>

These two examples, albeit brief, reveal both the significance of the Bible but also how Christian ethos is perceived by Christians and non-Christians. The examples also begin to reveal an awareness about the insider and outsider stance in a research project, which I discuss more fully in the next section.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

While this chapter discusses findings about the use of the Bible in a sample of schools the research project had a wider remit. This section describes

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, 'Inclusion and Interdependence'.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Jukes and Nevel A. Vassel, 'Delivering a Learning Disability Programme in India', *Learning Disability Practice* 12.9 (2009), available at <https://journals.rcni.com/doi/pdfplus/10.7748/ldp2009.11.12.9.21.c7379> (accessed on 28 November 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Michael Crossley, Lore Arthur and Elizabeth McNess, *Revisiting Insider-Outsider Research in Comparative and International Education* (Didcot: Symposium Books, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Parul Bhandari, 'In Quest of Identity: Student Culture in a Religious Minority Institution', in *Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India* (ed. Meenakshi Thapan; New Delhi: Sage, 2014), pp. 182 – 224 (184).

<sup>25</sup> Jukes and Vassel, 'Delivering a Learning Disability Programme in India'.

<sup>26</sup> Jukes and Vassel, 'Delivering a Learning Disability Programme in India', p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> Bhandari, 'In Quest of Identity', p. 184.

<sup>28</sup> Bhandari, 'In Quest of Identity', p. 201.

<sup>29</sup> Bhandari, 'In Quest of Identity', p. 204.

<sup>30</sup> Bhandari, 'In Quest of Identity', p. 205.

<sup>31</sup> Bhandari, 'In Quest of Identity', p. 205.

<sup>32</sup> Bhandari, 'In Quest of Identity', p. 206.

the research design and data collection tools to demonstrate the rigor and ethical underpinning of the whole project.

I worked within the interpretivist paradigm collecting qualitative data from 78 teachers, head teachers, principals, students and ex-students in five Indian states—Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Mizoram, Assam and Tamil Nadu. I used several data collection tools—individual semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observations. The project gained ethical approval from the University of Cumbria and ethical procedures were adhered to throughout with written or verbal consent being obtained as appropriate. My husband, funded by the British Academy, and I, funded by St Christopher's Trust and the University of Cumbria, accompanied by our three children, spent two summers in India staying in theological seminaries throughout India, collecting data for our respective projects.

In this chapter I focus on the way in which Christian teachers draw on the Bible to inform their practice and the challenges this presents in the secular Indian education system as described above. I also draw on data which exemplifies biblical 'institutional body language'.<sup>33</sup> Dadzie used this term to describe a school's ethos and character as presented through the way teachers and pupils behave towards one another, the way the school is organised and physical signifiers—for example in my study this included displays, professionally produced posters of biblical texts, resources, facilities and so on.

Throughout the project I adopted an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach seeing the world from the participants' perspectives. IPA emphasizes sense making by both participant and researcher where cognition is a central analytical concern and I tried to work out the mental processes of the participants.<sup>34</sup> I took Smith and Osborn's advice and adapted IPA to suit my own research design utilizing an ethnographic approach where I gained access to participants through various mutually known gatekeepers in each of the states which my family and I visited.<sup>35</sup>

I sought to gain rapport and empathize with the participants considering the extent to which I was an 'outsider' and attempting to draw closer to their 'insider' context.<sup>36</sup> I contextualised my participants' narratives within their school setting drawing on the institutional body language to interpret the role and significance of the Bible. In so doing I had to consider my own

positionality as a white female, agnostic teacher educator and the impact this might have on the Indian teacher, child and parent participants and on my interpretation of the significance of the biblical institutional body language. In some interviews, I felt an 'outsider' when talking to parents and young people from Hindu, Muslim or lower caste backgrounds, however my experience as a teacher usually enabled me to gain a rapport during the interviews and impromptu discussions. On the other hand given my gender, my research interest in social justice and religion, my status as a mother and teacher, I was able to occupy an insider role when discussing issues with female teachers and parents who shared very personal life experiences with me. Savin-Baden and Major discuss the continuum of participation roles from peripheral, passive, balanced, to active and complete participation.<sup>37</sup>

I adopted balanced participation combining active participation with professional distancing particularly in my interpretation of the displays and resources while at the same time recognising that 'you cannot simply leave your identity at the door when engaged in fieldwork'.<sup>38</sup> I interpreted observational data including the displays of Christian texts, quality and quantity of school resources, the attire of both pupils and teachers, and the interactions between adults and learners which provided evidence of the 'institutional body language'<sup>39</sup> of the Christian foundation schools.

Both Arthur, McNess and Crossley<sup>40</sup> and Milligan<sup>41</sup> have challenged the dualism of insider-outsider research. McNess, Arthur and Crossley<sup>42</sup> suggest that the essentialised definition of the outsider as 'detached and objective' and the insider as 'culturally embedded and subjective' prohibit the researcher from reflecting on similarities and 'entice us to place more

<sup>37</sup> Maggi Savin-Baden and Claire Howell Major, eds., *Qualitative Research: The Essential Guide to Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 396.

<sup>38</sup> Savin-Baden and Major, eds., *Qualitative Research*, p. 394.

<sup>39</sup> Dadzie, *Toolkit for Tackling Racism in Schools*.

<sup>40</sup> Lore Arthur, Elizabeth McNess Arthur and Michael Crossley, 'Positioning Insider-Outsider Research in Contemporary Context', in *Revisiting Insider-Outsider Research in Comparative and International Education* (eds. Michael Crossley, Lore Arthur and Elizabeth McNess; Didcot: Symposium Books, 2016), pp. 11-21.

<sup>41</sup> Lizzi O. Milligan, 'Insider-Outsider-Inbetween? Researcher Positioning, Participative Methods and Cross-cultural Educational Research', in *Revisiting Insider-Outsider Research in Comparative and International Education* (eds. Michael Crossley, Lore Arthur and Elizabeth McNess; Didcot: Symposium Books, 2016), pp. 131-43.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth McNess, Lore Arthur and Michael Crossley, '“Ethnographic Dazzle” and the Construction of the “Other”: Shifting Boundaries between the Insider and the Outsider', in *Revisiting Insider-Outsider Research in Comparative and International Education* (eds. Michael Crossley, Lore Arthur and Elizabeth McNess; Didcot: Symposium Books, 2016), pp. 21-39.

<sup>33</sup> Dadzie, *Toolkit for Tackling Racism in Schools*.

<sup>34</sup> Jonathan A. Smith and Mike Osborn, 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis', in *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods* (ed. Jonathan A. Smith; London: Sage, 2004), pp. 25-52 (52).

<sup>35</sup> Smith and Osborn, 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis'.

<sup>36</sup> Crossley, Arthur and McNess, *Revisiting Insider-Outsider Research in Comparative and International Education*.

emphasis on that which is unfamiliar and strange'.<sup>43</sup> In trying to gain a rapport with all my gatekeepers and participants I endeavoured to adopt an inbetween<sup>44</sup> position drawing on my gender and motherhood status when talking to parents. For example when one Hindu mother talked about her child's complex relationships with her siblings I empathised confessing that my own two younger children had a love hate relationship. Similarly when a Muslim mother spoke about her 10 year old Muslim daughter struggling to fast during Ramadan I confessed my 9 year old son finding it challenging to limit his obsession with cake. Especially as these parents were being interviewed about their perception of the nature of Christian education my attempt to identify as a mother rather than a white British (and assumed Christian) researcher helped provide a more comfortable and open context. Like Milligan I was interested both in the way I presented myself as non-outsider and also in the way the participants viewed me in taking on a role of 'inbetween<sup>45</sup>'. I dressed in Indian clothes, showed a degree of knowledge and empathy of Hindu, Islamic and Christian rituals, belief and practice when participants shared information about their respective faiths.

However I was also mindful of the illusion of being perceived as an 'insider' when I obviously arrived at their school with 'a degree of cultural, linguistic and economic capital'.<sup>46</sup> I reflected on my multiple statuses as a white, Western, agnostic, female, teacher educator and mother, and I tried in each interview to limit the power, privilege and status as discussed in the previous example where I drew on my status as a mother. However, I acknowledge in my field notes that in the interviews with the SEND children in school A, even when accompanied by my eldest daughter aged 18, I was perceived as a White Western adult in a position of power. Especially during the first few minutes of each interview with the Indian children in school A I had to work hard to build up a rapport by drawing on my skills as a former primary school teacher. I had more open conversations when walking around the schools accompanied by my son aged 9 and my middle daughter aged 12. Here I was able to gain an understanding of the 'institutional body language' of the school through observation and informal conversations. Like Milligan I was keen to use participatory methods to engage the more shy and younger participants and challenge the power relations between researcher and researched.<sup>47</sup> This was not always possible,

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth McNess, Lore Arthur and Michael Crossley, "Ethnographic Dazzle" and the Construction of the "Other", pp. 21-22.

<sup>44</sup> Milligan, 'Insider-Outsider-Inbetween?'

<sup>45</sup> Milligan, 'Insider-Outsider-Inbetween?'

<sup>46</sup> Milligan, 'Insider-Outsider-Inbetween?', p. 35.

<sup>47</sup> Milligan, 'Insider-Outsider-Inbetween?', p. 136.

for example, gatekeeper X in school A had organised the child interviews in the large school hall where I sat behind a desk and interviewed the child who sat opposite with the microphone conspicuously on the desk emphasising the formality of the event. This contrasted with the informal conversations on the playground and in the classrooms in school A where I was able to kneel to child level and engage them in conversation within the context of familiar settings.

In schools C (Karnataka), E (Chennai) and H (Mizoram) I felt I gained richer data during paired focus groups with the children participants. Having learnt from the school A experiences I asked the three respective gatekeepers (K, Z and H) if I could interview children in pairs in schools C, E and H, and I asked my own children to act as co-researchers to facilitate the focus groups. My elder daughter was studying for an anthropology degree and so had some knowledge and expertise of research methods and having briefed my three children beforehand, my elder daughter (18) and her sister (12) used a prompt sheet to discuss issues with pairs of teenagers, while my son and I worked with other pairs of teenagers which resulted in richer data as I discuss in the findings section.

Throughout the data collection with different participants in different settings I inhabited an 'inbetween<sup>48</sup>' role in my cross-cultural research where I displayed agency and multiple, rather than fixed insider and outsider, identities.

Table 1 below indicates the identifiers for schools and participants to enable a clearer comprehension of the data collection in India relevant for this project.

Table 1: Data collection settings/schools and participants for the 'Significance of the Bible' findings

School /participants	Context	Indian State and Gatekeeper
School A SEND (well resourced) Focus groups with teenagers Interviews with Principal, teachers and parents	Christian foundation special needs school Bangalore	Karnataka Gatekeeper X
School B SEND (poorly resourced) Interviews with Principal and teachers	Christian foundation special needs school Bangalore	Karnataka Gatekeeper K

<sup>48</sup> Milligan, 'Insider-Outsider-Inbetween?'



School C mainstream Focus groups with teenagers Interviews with teachers	Christian foundation mainstream school with resource unit Bangalore	Karnataka Gatekeeper K
Chennai school E Focus groups with teenagers Interviews with Principal, teachers	Christian foundation mainstream school	Tamil Nadu Gatekeeper Z
Assam Catholic School F Interviews with Principal, teachers	Christian foundation Catholic mainstream school	Assam Gatekeeper Y
Assam Nursery G	Christian foundation Baptist nursery school	Assam Gatekeeper Y
Mizoram Tribal Interview Christian teacher H (also the gatekeeper) from mainstream school  Focus groups with teenagers	Mainstream schools not visited	Mizoram

My approach to interpreting the institutional body language of the schools draws on Goffman's front stage and backstage drama metaphor.<sup>49</sup> Certain areas in schools are what Goffman<sup>50</sup> would describe as 'front stage' or public, for example the teaching spaces, corridors, playground and school hall; and other spaces are 'backstage' such as the senior management offices, staff room, cleaning and maintenance storage, kitchens, dining areas and toilet facilities. I was interested to gather observational data about each school's institutional body language accessing both frontstage and backstage evidence. I wanted to investigate the nature of biblical institutional language—how schools exemplify a biblical ethos through displays, quality of resources and facilities and also the nature of interactions between members of the school community—teachers, senior management, children, parents and visitors.

During data analysis I took on the role of 'self aware translator'<sup>51</sup> inter-

preting participant narratives, from my perspective, as described above. I used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to make sense of the participants making sense of their perspectives towards the Christian ethos of the school.<sup>52</sup> I also interpreted the institutional language of the schools to develop phenomenological insight into the way the biblical values are mediated through interactions between members of the school community.

### Discussion of Findings

I acknowledge that I draw quite heavily on some of the findings from my other publications<sup>53</sup> in answering my two research questions, firstly—what is the significance of the Bible in a sample of Christian foundation schools in the context of a secular Indian education system, as described by teachers, students and parents? And secondly—what is the biblical institutional body language (ethos) of a sample of Christian foundation schools from the perspective of a white female agnostic teacher educator? However additional data, (not drawn on in the other publications) has been analysed and presented here, and the arguments are distinctive because I am focusing specifically on the use of the Bible in a sample of the Christian foundation schools. Three findings are discussed in turn :

#### *Significance of the Bible in Christian foundation schools*

1. Bible study and devotion: sustains personal faith and empowers personal and professional life, within the Indian secular education system.
2. Biblical texts: provide moral guidance for the school community or are tolerated/ ignored by Christian, Muslim and Hindu teachers, parents and children
3. Biblical institutional body language (displays, interactions, dress, power and hierarchy): ranges from distinctively biblical to pluralistic outlooks.

1. *Bible study and devotion sustains a teacher's personal faith and empowers personal and professional life within the secular Indian Education system*  
In the thirty four interviews, all Christian teachers spoke of God supporting them in some way. Also all made some mention of biblical texts and Christian values underpinning their daily lives both professionally and personally. The display of Christian texts, quality and quantity of school resources, the attire of both pupils and teachers, and the interaction between

<sup>49</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

<sup>50</sup> Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

<sup>51</sup> Savin-Baden and Major, eds., *Qualitative Research*, p. 64.

<sup>52</sup> Smith and Osborn, 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis'.

<sup>53</sup> Elton-Chalcraft and Cammack, 'Christian Values in Education'; Elton-Chalcraft and Chalcraft, 'Decolonising Christian Education in India?'

them provided evidence of the 'institutional body language'.<sup>54</sup> Elton-Chalcraft and Cammack<sup>55</sup> illustrate how their Christian faith sustained and empowered teachers in the sample. Using a tree metaphor we showed how their biblically inspired values and ethics underpinned decision-making, like the roots sustaining a tree. Biblical texts and doctrine informed decision-making like the solid weight-bearing trunk of a tree. Biblical values such as obedience, love, honesty, humility, compassion etc. are manifest in the day-to-day behaviours of the teachers—the leaves and fruit of the tree. Thus the Bible is central to the underpinning values, the decision-making and day-to-day behaviour manifest in the institutional body language of the school. The hidden curriculum<sup>56</sup> reveals the underlying biblical values which sustain the teachers personal faith and empower their professional life. Unlike the hidden curriculum in Bowles and Gintis' research the biblical values hidden curriculum was viewed by these teachers as a leveller for marginalised children whose future prospects might be severely limited in non-Christian educational settings. However further research would be required to substantiate such claims.

One Principal, PB, of a poorly resourced special needs school B, drew on her faith to sustain her in dealing with external stakeholders; she had little sponsorship compared with the more affluent SEN school the other side of the city; however, PB remained optimistic. She constantly drew on biblical texts during our conversations to explain her actions and values (also cited in my previous article<sup>57</sup>).

*PB: But God said [to Jonah] 'you must go to that city and change the people there and do something for that city', so I should put away doubts. I think he has a plan. You know, sometimes I think I should leave this job, but then I said to God – 'it is Your calling that I do this work, I will work until you have given me the time, I work for the children'. It was hard in my job because when you go to the authorities and governors they are always negative. I overcome it – I work with the opportunities, what God wants me to do."*

So, the Principal of school A was keen to show me that she both relied on her personal faith in God and also her behaviour was underpinned by

<sup>54</sup> Dadzie, *Toolkit for Tackling Racism in Schools*.

<sup>55</sup> Elton-Chalcraft and Cammack, 'Christian Values in Education'.

<sup>56</sup> First published in 1976 Bowles and Gintis published a later article claiming their original hypothesis—the hidden curriculum having an impact on young peoples' achievement and success—was accurate Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, 'Schooling in Capitalist America Revisited', *Sociology of Education* 75.1 (2002), pp. 1-18.

<sup>57</sup> Elton-Chalcraft and Cammack, 'Christian Values in Education'.

biblical principles. Not only was she struggling against negative attitudes in the prevailing politically Hindutva and secular education system context but also those who should have been supporting her mission to run a Christian foundation SEND school—namely the trustees, were rarely supportive in providing adequate resources. But, like Jonah, she felt compelled to persevere and encourage her small group of dedicated teachers to fulfil their duties to the best of their abilities.

In several interviews including with the Principal from school B discussed above and with Ch, a teacher in her early thirties from school A, described below I felt that my gender, my research interest in social justice and religion, my status as a mother and teacher enabled me to occupy an insider role<sup>58</sup> and thus gain rich data. I got to know Ch over a series of visits to school A. My elder daughter and I gained her trust and she was comfortable in sharing with us, in the presence of the gatekeeper X who was a friend as well as colleague, some very personal details of her life history to demonstrate just how important her faith was to her both personally and professionally. Our interview was conducted in school A with my daughter note taking, the gatekeeper X also joining in the conversation and me asking prompt questions. The atmosphere was relaxed and informal which encouraged Ch to talk honestly and openly about her faith, motivations and past experiences.

Ch told us she was brought up a Hindu and was very devout. Her father 'was lovely but had a drinking problem' and she was the eldest of eight children and found life increasingly challenging. One of her friends who was Christian tried to tell her about Jesus and she rejected this even though she was very depressed. But after a suicide attempt she converted to Christianity as this detailed emotionally charged narration illustrates:

*Ch: So there was a river, close to my house; it wasn't a big river, but you know, at the time I thought that it was a very big river. I wanted to go and jump. So, but it was the rainy season so it was quite big. I was walking towards the bridge: it was pitch dark, and I could not see ... I was kind of determined that I have to do it. And there's no meaning to live in this world, you know: because I didn't see any purpose. So when I walked out, I was crying and I just said: 'Where are you God?' 'Are you there?' 'Where are you?'*

*Then ... I just heard one voice: 'Do not be afraid; I am with you'; and I have never read that before in the Bible, okay; but it said 'Do not be afraid; I am with you' and I am just looking around; nobody was there. And I*

<sup>58</sup> Milligan, 'Insider-Outsider-Inbetween?'

*just wiped my tears; I'm thinking maybe, you know, it's just my emotions. Again I walked out and I was near the bridge and I was where I thought I would jump from, and it happened, twice: again it said 'Do not be afraid'. Third time, err, I literally felt someone standing next to me.*

*But then next morning: early morning, I went, to my friend, who was a Christian, and I—early in the morning I went you know—I remember putting on my uniform, early in the morning and I asked her to give me Bible.*

*So you know she was shocked—she said you know 'why do you need Bible?', 'are you sure?'. I said 'yes, give it to me, please'. So she gave it to me: blue colour, New Testament Bible. So you know whilst she was getting ready I started reading that Bible. Reading that Bible, you won't believe it—that morning I started, night I finished ... because I wanted to know who is this God and I wanted to know because he spoke to me; I didn't want to believe in him but he spoke to me ... And I wanted to know. But when I read John 3:16, you know, I was like, okay nothing ... I just gave my life ... I said, God if you're truly ... You have to change my dad and all kind of thing. I was a secret believer for 1 year. And God changed my dad; so he's a new person now. My dad, my mum, they are with the Lord.*

*Sally: Really?*

*Ch : Yeah; they are in the Lord. Even my sisters, they are in the Lord. And still I am praying for 3 of them, and my brothers. All of them are in the Lord now.*

*Sally: Oh wow.*

*Ch : Yeah; so that's one of the reason why, you know, I am here today.*

*Sally: And so that's an amazing story, thank you for sharing that; that's quite emotional isn't it. And was it after that that you went to help the children in the slums in Calcutta*

*Ch : Yeah, so after that, like I was secret believer for one year, and then I had a lot of opposition from my relatives and in fact all the villagers where I stayed because in fact I was the first believer there. And you know it was new to them. So what they thought is I'd gone crazy because they always had a higher expect[ation] on me—because I was like good daughter.*

*Sally: And the eldest?*

*Ch: Yes. But then they said: 'Oh she's gone'. But then I pray, God led me, and they wanted to send me for my medical training. But then I had to make a decision: do I need to hide this—my belief, or should I tell—because they wanted to send me. But then one time I pray God show me clearly that I had to serve him. Because I had experienced God and I wanted to tell others—because there were so many others who didn't know. So I made a decision. I called all my relatives and my parents and I told them what I believed; and I told them what is the reason I want to leave. That point in time wasn't easy; they told me like 'You can go away; you are out of the family'. I can't ... and I went to ... college. Yeah, so I did my Theology Masters and then I ... I did.*

*She worked in Calcutta with slum children before taking up a position in the Bangalore SEND School.*

*Ch: I think that's the only one reason why I am here; it's cos of God, yeah. And I feel God's presence here, very much. And I know it's not easy; it is challenging, you know, it's really challenging to understand these children sometimes ... and the parents ... and their expectation umm but though we do all other things but behind the scene it's just God—who helps us to keep moving forward every day.*

So, Ch's conversion grew out of a total despair and disappointment with her life. The Bible, which she read from cover to cover in one day, provided her with the inspiration to change her life course, go against her family's aspirations for her, and not only change the direction of her own life but that of her family too, who converted to Christianity as well.

The gatekeeper X had encouraged Ch to talk to me, she knew something of Ch's background but, like me, she was visibly moved and awed by Ch's frankness in the interview. If the gatekeeper X had not been present I do not think Ch would have been so open—I got the impression she wanted to communicate this to the gatekeeper X as well as me. Through my interpretation of the institutional body language of the school, particularly the rapport between teachers it became apparent that many members of staff had a close supportive bond with each other. In my experience as a teacher and teacher educator in Britain I draw on clues from the institutional body language<sup>59</sup> and hidden curriculum<sup>60</sup> of a school to determine the extent to

<sup>59</sup> Dadzie, *Toolkit for Tackling Racism in Schools*.

<sup>60</sup> Bowles and Gintis, 'Schooling in Capitalist America Revisited'.

which a group of staff exhibit a supportive or hierarchical ethos.

Ch saw herself as a role model contributing to the biblical ethos of the SEND school, Ch explained how her constant saying prayers had rubbed off on the children:

*I want everybody to know who God is. And because they are special people and God loves them. And impact: definitely yes. Err, some of their lives I have seen. You know, like even making a prayer, you know, it's sometimes really touching because some of them—when we teach them how to pray—I think they are the one who keeps reminding us: okay pray. Like before a snack; if I forget to pray you know one of them will be reminding me to pray.*

Thus Ch's testimony reveals a reliance on the Bible and prayer to sustain her in both her personal and professional life. Despite the fact that the majority of children were from Hindu or Muslim backgrounds Ch's routine of pre-food prayer had become a natural part of the school day.

And her biblically inspired values system guided her mindset and behaviour, when asked if she believed the SEND children had learning difficulties because of the Hindu idea of past deeds are visited upon people in their next life Ch and the Gatekeeper X responded:

*Ch: Okay, I believe God never make mistake, yeah, it's just that we're living in fallen world and a lot of things happen you know—the sicknesses and the environment, the world we live in, so it just, I don't know, it just happens to any one maybe. What would you say?*

*Gatekeeper X: I don't know, me personally, I think it is a special calling to be a special parent because I don't think everyone can handle that. Cos I know that when we have challenging kids and err, interact with our kids back home it's like err, you err, require extra patience with these kids, and err there are mothers like ... and some others who are parents of special children and still come and serve here. I don't think I can do that. But err, I think it's a special calling to err be a parent of a special child because you need extra grace and patience to be with these children.*

In my role as 'self aware translator'<sup>61</sup> drawing on my observations of Ch's lessons, her interactions with the young SEND people in her care and her interview confirmed my interpretation of her as a very open, supportive teacher with clear boundaries for the children. Her decision-making and

behaviour was clearly rooted in her biblically-based faith.

Having established, with reference to two examples, that biblical texts were used by teachers for support in their professional and personal lives, the next sections discusses responses from the whole school community.

## **2. Biblical texts and ethos provide moral guidance, or are tolerated or ignored by the school community—responses from a sample of Christian, Muslim and Hindu teachers, parents and children**

In this section I draw on interviews with young people, teachers and parents providing examples of the use, or toleration of, biblical texts in the schools I visited. In selecting a sample of narratives from teachers, parents and their children for this section I adopted a flexible criteria. Given that I collected data from five states I selected data which illustrated perspectives from a variety of respondents including teachers, children and parents. In addition I draw on data from adherents of Islam, Hindu tradition and Christianity. Also I chose a sample of displays and participant comments from both mainstream and also SEND schools. This data sample while not claiming to be comprehensive or representative, nevertheless provides a broad selection of responses which illustrates the significance of the Bible in a sample of Christian foundation schools in the context of a secular Indian education system, as described by teachers, students and parents from the perspective of a white, female, agnostic, teacher educator.

### *Learner's responses to the Bible in SEND school A: A source of support or tolerated*

In school A I was able to speak with several young people. As highlighted in the methodology section I was perceived as a White Western adult in a position of power and the positioning of the interview table with me and the gatekeeper X one side and the young person opposite positioned at one end of the large school hall felt intimidating. Despite raising this with the gatekeeper X I was told that this was the only space and time was short so I had to draw on my skills as a former primary school teacher and also my experience as a mother in order to engage these understandably reticent young people. For example having endeavoured to gain a rapport by discussing his skill at driving a moped, which I confessed I was unable to do, I tried to put 17 year old Christian teenager, at ease. He told me his father was a pastor and he wanted to 'lead in the church' when he finished school. An amenable young man, displayed pronounced features of autism—slowness of speech, hesitancy, social anxiety and dyslexia. He said that he liked reading the biblical texts on the walls of the school—particularly the ones which portrayed 'God taking care of everyone'.

<sup>61</sup> Savin-Baden and Major, eds., *Qualitative Research*, p. 64.



id that his sister was doing a psychology degree at a local university and the gatekeeper X informed me afterwards that his sister's choice of degree, psychology, was motivated by her brother's diagnosis of autism. I compared the ethos in the SEN school A to that of a mainstream school which he had left because the teachers 'hit *him*' as he was not able to keep pace with the other children in the class, he also said 'teachers hit children on the hand to keep them quiet'. However he liked all the children in the SEND school where I observed the teachers treating him respectfully, supporting his learning and building his self confidence. He seemed very excited and optimistic about his future helping his father in church duties.

Very few children at school A were Christian and Fv was one of the few learners who explicitly said he took notice of the biblical texts. Given his religious identity and the fact that his father was a pastor, this young man seemed to have a clear sense of direction as his father's assistant in Christian ministry, and the biblical texts supported his conviction that he was indeed a part of God's plan. Several posters bore the same message from Ephesians 2.10 with a note on the poster that this reference is from the Bible *We are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works*. Figure 1 shows the poster displayed in the school hall which announces to every child, teacher, parent and visitor to the school that the school was established in 1993 and serves the needs of a range of SEND learners—*dyslexia, hearing impaired, autism, Down's syndrome, intellectually challenged, slow learners and the physically challenged*.

Figure 1 School A Special Needs Christian Foundation school Bangalore



In a similar fashion to my interview with G, I had to work hard to build up a rapport with R, a Hindu girl aged 15, who displayed social anxiety and severe learning difficulties. It was able to converse with me with the support of my gatekeeper X at SEND school A. R said she *enjoyed reading the Bible texts on the wall* and did not seem to think this conflicted with her engaging in Hindu puja rituals at home with her family after school. She enjoyed *listening to Bible stories and singing Christian songs*. Like G, it was clear she felt safe and secure at the SEND school in comparison to a mainstream school which she told me she had left owing to unkind behaviour from both teachers and other children. 'They [teachers] were mean and never helped' and her learning difficulties were 'ignored'. Thus like G, this Hindu girl R found refuge in the supportive environment of SEND school A and the Bible stories, texts on the wall and singing Christian songs all contributed to a positive institutional body language. From my perspective as an outsider<sup>62</sup> who had only spent limited time at the school over a two year period, the biblical institutional language appeared to be welcomed or at least tolerated by the majority of children from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds as well as being highly valued by the minority of Christian children.

However the exclusive Christian ethos of school A was not tolerated by some parents and their children as I explain later in section 3, where I describe how the Principal of school A would not allow any Muslim or Hindu texts into school. Only biblical texts were allowed.

*Teachers response in SEND school A: Biblical texts provide moral guidance but teachers refrain from proselytising*

J is a teacher at A SEND school who formerly worked in mainstream schools then taught in an orphanage before being 'led by the Lord' to A school. She described her vision for the SEND children 'That they'll be independent and get a job'. When I asked if she felt the children were happy to say prayers and read the biblical texts on the wall J replied,

*J: I think my children are very happy about it because [of] their response during assembly time—they just let themselves go and they do it [pray and sing Christian songs], even in the class. I do scripture classes too ... and [we say and sing] 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', the poem and the song so there is a connection with scripture and their values. When I teach values [from] the Bible they accept it. They are innocent; they are honest and they respond very well to it. They don't have any objections to it. They don't say 'we don't want to learn this'. They never say this.*

<sup>62</sup> Crossley, Arthur and McNess, *Revisiting Insider-Outsider Research in Comparative and International Education*.



Sally: OK. So as far as you're concerned your Muslim children, the Hindu children and any other children, they're very happy to take part in that?

J: They are very happy. They are very happy because some of them have come personally and asked me to go beyond ...

I wondered if J's idea of 'going beyond' merely songs and prayers meant active participation and conversion which, at the time of data collection, was thought to be anti Indian given Prime minister Modi's advancement of Saffronisation of India. The secular nature of India's education system was mentioned by most of my respondents in one form or another and in this interview also J is keen to avoid admitting to converting the children or thinking of non-Christian children less favourably.

Sally: Oh really? So do you try and sort of get them to change from being Muslim or Hindu? To be a Christian or is that not what you're ...

J: ... I share it. I do the sharing. We all pray for our school every day and I believe that God is preparing every one ... there's no bar between me and a non-Christian. They're all alike to me. I have good friends from different faiths so ... the teaching of them is not a problem.

Sally: And none of the families have said that they don't want you to convert their children to [Christianity] ... ?

J: Actually I would not say that ... I will not go and do that sort of thing. I challenge them and talk about the Lord in general; sing a song—they're happy about it and when it comes to behavioural issues I just have to remind them that the Lord is watching them. I mention the name Jesus. That's it. I know it's wrong [to proselytise]

Sally: So you support them in their faith, whatever their faith is?

J: I support in a sense. I accept every child as he or she is. If they share their belief with me I listen very carefully ... I listen and then I talk about mine.

This extract sums up what I discovered in many teacher interviews—that teachers talk about their Christian faith and draw on the Bible in their professional and personal lives but they stop short of converting, believing this to contravene governmental policy at the time of Modi coming to power.

*Parental responses to biblical texts: Supported; tolerated; ignored*

During an interview with Parent P, a Hindu mother with a special needs daughter at A SEND school we explored Indian attitudes towards disabilities and the use of the Bible in the school. Both the gatekeeper X and parent P admitted that in India people on the autistic spectrum are labelled as 'crazy people' said the gatekeeper X. P said that both the general public in India but more specifically within families, there is a very negative view of disability and discriminatory practice is rife. P told us that about 20% of Indians are broad minded but –

P: But maybe 80% of them, when you go to a function, any crowds, if there are any gatherings, you know, the first thing they're asking is 'why is your child like this?' 'Ooh handicapped child, ooh' 'Oh, poor [you] ...' You know. I mean, no positive err, you know, outlook there is. [It is] Demoralising, demotivating, you know, all that, you see, so all [Hindu] you are reluctant to take your child out anywhere.

She went on to explain that even though she was Hindu, she had no issue with A school's Christian foundation. She told me that her Christian friend prayed for her daughter when she was little and this did not conflict with her own family's Hindu beliefs. *God after all is one.* She did not have any qualms about her child attending a Christian school even though other members of the family were suspicious.

*I was OK with it. There are a lot of hymns the school used to teach her and she used to come and sing all that and my in-laws they would say 'my God now she is going to Church and she'll not come to the [Hindu] Temple'*

P also said that her son used to hold his ears when her daughter sang *Silent Night* at Christmas time rather loudly! There seemed to be no conflict with her Hindu faith.

S, a Muslim woman and also parent of one of the young people, works as the co-ordinator at the Vocational training centre at school A. She felt that despite being a Muslim the wall displays of Christian texts didn't 'disturb me' the texts 'are giving you an information which is to look positively'. S emphasised the importance of supporting the young people at school A and the on site vocational training centre:

S: [we want them to ] live their life independently in the society so we are looking at giving them the basic life skills, survival skills; what is necessary for a person and what is lacking in that individual. We try to build

*it in that person so I keep trying to get them independently ... With the help of the parents.*

*S: They shouldn't be a burden they should be able to at least contribute to the family ... have a vocation at least they shouldn't be a burden on the family; they should be contributing to the family. They could take care of the home activities—do the dish washing; do the clearing—so they are needed by the family. They should be wanted and accepted.*

S told me she saw her Muslim religion and cultural background quite separate from being at school. There are some Muslim children and some Hindu children and not very many Christian children. I asked if she felt that the Christian texts are appropriate when there were so many Muslim and Hindu children. She replied,

*S: It can be like secular activities. They do celebrate Diwali. We've already been looking at Diwali and making divas when we're doing it. I understand the sentiment of the school ... rather [a] wholesome thing will be going on but when you practically know that this is a Christian institute it will be a Christian texts [on the wall] because I studied also at Christian institute. I'm quite used to this.*

So S, being both a parent and teacher at the special needs school, felt it was a natural progression for her to send her special needs child to this Christian foundation SEND school given she had been educated in a Catholic school and also a Christian college. She was not troubled by being a Muslim in a Christian school and saw no tension with her religious beliefs in the biblical displays, or biblically-based devotions and prayers.

*S: I don't mind it. I don't mind it. I don't get involved. Maybe it's my way of looking at things. I don't bring my religion into this, I just look at—OK so this is [a biblical text] the children are benefitting. It's my way of filtering.*

*Sally: Filtering?*

*S: Yeah. I don't get into the nitty gritty of all these things ...*

When asked if she minded S was insistent that her religion was personal to her *My religion what I practise is very personal for me, and what you do is your life. I don't comment on it and I don't need anyone to comment on me.* At this point my gatekeeper X who accompanied me in interviews

inquiringly and supportively interjected,

*Gatekeeper X: So how do you feel when we have staff assembly and devotion, what are your thoughts on that?*

*S: Actually as I told you, I'm so used to this ... We also have belief in Jesus you know? There are a few things that we don't believe. But I respect a few parts of it*

*Gatekeeper X: So you switch off?*

*S: ... you know, there are some points that are different, you know ... [and] if I'm not OK with what she's telling I might be just switching off and I might be thinking something else.*

*Gatekeeper X: Could you give us an example?*

*S: Example? Like every day when they are saying the name of Jesus. I say my God, You say Amen I say Armina*

*Gatekeeper X: So given my understanding you are agreeing with the prayer that is said.*

*S: Yeah.*

I held back and allowed the gatekeeper X to satisfy her curiosity considering this would yield interesting data. The gatekeeper X asked twice – Do you feel you have the freedom to say your prayers? On the second time of asking S explained that she went home to say her prayers and the gatekeeper X asked is that because you are not comfortable praying here? She answered that she rushed home at the end of work to complete her five daily prayers because there was no time to do them in the school. Despite the fact that the gatekeeper X and this Muslim women S were obviously friends as well as colleagues and held each other in high regard both personally and professionally, the gatekeeper X was obviously concerned to ascertain if S might feel uncomfortable about the biblical ethos. Again because of their friendship the gatekeeper X continued to probe and asked S about how she brought up her own children. S explained that her now grown up children were 'a lot more open than me', in other words they did not align to Islam as strictly as S did. They did not go to a Christian school; S's children preferred to attend a secular Indian school not wishing to be labelled Muslim

or certainly not Christian.


*S: No they went to a public school, a secular school ... They were at Indian school. For it's for all Indians so it was a very secular school ... They don't like these types of schools. They don't appreciate it my kids. When I tell them the things that the Muslims school [does] they don't like that tag [label]. They want to go to another school. They don't want to have that kind of tag [label]. They are great.*

While obviously being proud of her children—*they are great*—she beamed, S seemed disappointed that they did not share her ability to uphold both her Muslim identity and work in a Christian ethos school. S explained that because her father did not want her to attend a co-education school she was sent to a catholic boarding school for girls and *'we had to attend the Mass'*. She also went to a Christian college and S reiterated the non problematic nature of being educated in Christian institutions *it really doesn't disturb me*.


S did however draw the distinction between her Catholic school and this current SEND Christian school. The only difference was that that was a catholic institute and this is a protestant one. She remarked on the 'idols' in the Catholic school—reminding me of the term used by Christians who are critical of Hindu statues or idols. In fact S seemed to feel more at home in school A because it was Protestant—*In some way I think the Protestants are more like the Muslims they don't have idols worship here*. She agreed that Islam and Christianity were text-based faiths and thus, because there are similarities between the Qu'ran and the Bible she felt comfortable about the use of the Bible in school A in most instances.

In an interview with teacher R, a Christian, who was also mother to a SEND child at the school, we discussed the biblical texts on the walls of school A.

*R: It doesn't bother me. In fact I like it. It's a constant reminder that God's presence is around us. So I really like it around. I just – it keeps me grounded because not every day is easy and not every child remains the same every day so you know, when you look around, especially this particular work I put it in my classroom, and the days that I feel that it is not [going well] God's words are perfect for that.*

 *Interviewer: Yes. And what about the other children in your class? You know because there might be some Muslim or some Hindu children ... are they OK with it?*


*R: I don't think of religion as being part of this world. I think it's just God's love. I don't think you cannot believe in God unless you are an Atheist. Everyone else believes that there is a God. And when you say 'God made us perfect in our weakness' they don't tell us which God. For every child there is a God and ... so I think it's just – nothing specific and if you really look at it every religion teaches us only to love and to do good things ... That's genuinely what the children think. It all comes down to the same thing: love, love yourself, love your neighbour, love God, do good to others and I think that's what these words mean so I don't think anyone – at least that's what I think – that's how I look at it, I don't think anyone gets affected by these simple verses.*

 *Interviewer: So it's just a value?*

*R: It's a value that goes into it. The way that I look at it; the way a Hindu looks at it; the way a Muslim looks at it. The words that in God's eyes you are made perfect in your weakness' it's very true for anyone that looks at it so I don't think anyone is affected by those words.*


I asked her about her vision for the SEND children

*R: For me well it would be bringing out the best in the children. For me that's very clear – bringing out the best and never saying that this child cannot do it.*

 *Interviewer: And that's the same for you as a parent as well?*

*R: Whatever I've told you, what values that I'm able to bring in here is because a lot of it is because of the values ... but I think a lot of it helps me here because [of the values] .... With my own daughter and I don't want these kids to go through those moments of saying that this school did that with me or I wasn't given this opportunity because I'm different. I don't want that to happen.*

The institutional body language of the school is projected through the way the teachers engage with the SEND children on the playground which I noticed each time I visited.

 *Interviewer: And they do all look very happy. I mean when I was observing you on playground duty they all played really nicely together didn't they?*

R: *They do and that's what I said so we need that thing in our minds at all times. But they're all different and they all need, I mean I think every child is special ... but you think differently. I think they all just want to be loved. The kids here want to be loved. Just saying 'good morning', just acknowledging them, just joke with them and that's one thing that we have in the class. That's one thing I teach my class also, you know, to be able to laugh together at a joke. The fun that we have in class we do that quite often.*

Parent Q a Muslim mother whose child attended A SEND school spent time in Maldives and observed that her SEND child was not stared at in the Maldives as much as she was in India.

She commended school A teachers' *compassion, dedication, and the way they handle the children; the way they talk to them.* Which contrasted with mainstream schools *You saw teachers hitting children and I didn't like it. So I don't think they have anything like that in here. I would have heard it in these four years.*

Sally: *No. OK. And because you are a Muslim, you can see on the walls there are biblical texts, do you feel OK about that? Being a Muslim sending your child to a school with biblical texts?*

Q: *It's OK with me. I believe in my religion so I can change her mind so it doesn't bother.*

Sally: *So when she comes home she does the five prayers and observes Ramadan and the fasting?*

Q: *She was fasting a lot this year.*

Sally: *And is she OK with that? She understands?*

Q: *Yeah she likes and she tells me. She's 9. She's going to be 10 in September.*

The gatekeeper X observed that Q was one of the most enthusiastic and supportive parents both her and her husband attended all events together.

Examples in this section demonstrate that responses to biblical texts are varied, ranging from being a source of support, ignored or tolerated. The third finding builds on some of the findings presented in earlier publications,<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Elton-Chalcraft and Cammack, 'Christian Values in Education'; Elton-Chalcraft and Chalcraft, 'Decolonising Christian Education in India?'

but with a focus on the use of the Bible and here I begin to group responses to the significance of the Bible.

### **3. Biblical institutional body language (displays, interactions, dress, power and hierarchy): Ranges from distinctively biblical to pluralistic outlooks**

#### *Exclusive and inclusive biblically-based institutional body language*

As demonstrated in the previous two sections above, the Bible is used by school communities in a range of ways as a source of wisdom, guidance and inspiration by some, whereas others tolerate or ignore biblical texts and ethos. In this section I discuss how the institutional body language of a sample of schools could be viewed on a continuum from distinctively and exclusive biblical to a more pluralistic outlook towards the place of the Bible and Christianity faith.

Some schools were very strict in their use of biblical texts and ethos such as school A whereas others were more pluralistic such as the Assam nursery G. This discussion reveals while faith-based education in India's schools is not supposed to be confessional, in practice in some Christian foundation schools it could be argued that the values and ethos of the school explicitly promote Christian ideals and mind-set. Elton-Chalcraft and Chalcraft<sup>64</sup> argue that in some cases the espoused Christian values appear to promote Western, and sometimes colonial attitudes, and arguably staff epitomise stances reminiscent of the missionaries who first founded the schools. In other Christian foundation schools, however, the staff hold a more pluralistic or indigenously Indian stance often redolent of their geographic context (for example Tribal Christianity), where teachers seem comfortable synthesising Christian and Hindu values and practices. In the sections which follow, examples from a select number of schools and interviews exemplify various points along the continuum to illustrate the complexities of faith-based education in Christian foundation schools in several Indian states.<sup>65</sup>

#### *(i) Distinctively Biblical Ethos*

Through observations of displays, texts on walls, the way teachers interacted with each other, their learners parents and visitors the 'institutional body

<sup>64</sup> Elton-Chalcraft and Chalcraft, 'Decolonising Christian Education in India?'

<sup>65</sup> The structure of this section mirrors our earlier publication but additional data is also drawn on including the photographs. Elton-Chalcraft and Chalcraft, 'Decolonising Christian Education in India?'



language'<sup>66</sup> of each school reflected its ethos. The Bangalore well-resourced school A was full of large beautiful well-mounted and laminated posters displaying biblical texts for example:

*Jesus gives new life?*

*Children obey your parents in the Lord*

*Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God?*

*We are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works (see figure 1)*

The Principal whose conversion from Hindu tradition to Christianity informed every decision explained that she had been brought up as a Hindu but rejected this when she converted to Christianity while studying at a Christian foundation school founded by two English missionaries whose message had been 'Gospel first then education'. The Principal seemed to be promoting such a distinctively biblical message in her own school, despite the fact that 'not all the staff and students are Christian'. She explained that because her school was financially independent it did not have to adhere so strongly to government directives. It also benefitted from government 'stamps of approval'. So despite legal requirements to 'not proselytise' this SEND school was 'permitted' its strong biblical message and the Principal impressed upon me during the interview that this was non-negotiable.

*Here children can be refused. Parents come and read the testimonial [about biblically-inspired education] and if they question 'why do you teach the Bible?' and if they say 'No India's a democratic country' then they can leave.*

The Principal was strict about not allowing Hindu or Muslim scriptures in the school:

*They can teach that at home but not bring in to school, otherwise they must leave.*

The children whose parents were willing to tolerate biblically-inspired education were *allowed to stay* and parents could teach those scriptures at home. She was keen to explain, quite forcefully

*[This is] what we do and why we do it. We teach with the heart. We don't want Hindu and Muslim teaching. The Bible is the life book.*

Figure 2 Art work portraying biblical stories Christian foundation special needs school A



The biblically-based education at this SEND school can be seen to be distinctively biblical with no hint of pluralism allowed in contrast to the schools described in the second section of this chapter. See figure 6 from school C in contrast to figure 2 from school A, which displays art work portraying biblical stories of the Nativity and Jesus' parable of building your house on rock not sand.

However school A despite projecting, in the main, distinctively biblical institutional body language, nevertheless, one display celebrates India's diversity. Figure 3 shows art work which clearly celebrates India's unity in Diversity theme for the Independence day festivities. Also some of the older children were allowed to make Diya lights, associated with the Hindu festival of Divali, only because this was part of the artefact making and the Diya lights were sold to raise funds.

This theme of celebrating diversity is evident in school A but in some other schools in my sample it was even more prominent as I discuss later with reference to figure 6.

<sup>66</sup> Dadzie, *Toolkit for Tackling Racism in Schools*.



Figure 3 Special Needs School A art work showing the Indian flag and unity in diversity



The Principal of SEND school A constantly used the word ‘biblical’ to describe her school’s *raison d’être*, ethos and message avoiding the word Christian which she explained is considered derogatory in Indian culture:

*When they [Indians] hear the word Christian, they think of a vulgar society—women wearing short dresses—Western society. We want people [to understand] we know the Bible, follow the Bible and the teachings of Christ.*

Thus there was some distancing of the Principal from the word ‘Christian’ which in some Indian people’s eyes is synonymous with immoral, vulgar and ill-disciplined Western society. My daughters (who were with me on this occasion) and I attempted to dress modestly with long sleeved tops and long trousers. However at the end of the interview the Principal abruptly pulled down my eldest daughter’s top which had ridden up while seated, revealing a couple of centimetres of midriff flesh. Preferring the long tunic and trousers (shalwar and kameez) no teacher at the school wore the traditional sari which can reveal part of a woman’s midriff.

The Principal had banned morning devotion when she felt it was becoming habitual—like a Hindu ritual. However, this strong-minded woman

did listen to her staff who felt the morning biblically-based prayers really helped prepare them for the challenges of the day ahead with the particularly demanding SEND children with whom they worked. And so the morning prayers were reinstated. This was similar to Jukes and Vassel’s findings, whose participants demanded devotions before they began work.<sup>67</sup>

The majority of staff, and educationalists who visited school A, suggested that the faith based learning was an advantage for these societally marginalised learners. A speech therapist, T, who visited the school regularly to support various learners said,

*T: I am Christian and I like the devotional times which happen before class begins. This doesn’t happen at other places where I visit children. I feel part of this community – other places [schools] are just work and the discussions are just professional ... [The devotions] help me overcome difficult times [give me] inner strength. There are no Bible passages [on the walls] in other schools, but Hindu statues at the entrance and parents bow down as they enter even though it is a secular education system.*

Thus the speech therapist is acknowledging the lip service paid to the secular education policy’s non-proselytising which seems to be ignored in both Christian foundation and government schools. Religion is such a part of Indian life that it seeps into many educational establishments.

*Biblical Assemblies in SEND School A, SEND School B and mainstream school C : distinctively biblical*

The learners from school A gathered together with staff for assemblies to listen to biblically-based assemblies twice a week where either the Principal or an invited group would tell a biblical story, bring out the Christian meaning and invite all the children and teachers (regardless of whether they were Christian, Hindu, Muslim or other) to pray to Jesus to follow the imparted guidance.

An assembly I observed in school A to a gathering of about a hundred teachers and children, involved a group of young lively Christian workers employed by the Church of South India (CSI) to inspire young people at Christian foundation schools to draw on the Bible for moral guidance. They spoke in English to the children because the Principal and all the teachers used English when teaching and talking to the children and each other. The explanation being that being able to speak English would afford more opportunities to the young people. The Christian workers told, via drama,

<sup>67</sup> Jukes and Vassel, ‘Delivering a Learning Disability Programme in India’.

the story of the feeding of the five thousand and how Jesus selected a poor boy to perform this miracle and thus each child in the hall should feel valued and special and worthy to fulfil their place in the world. The assembly was interactive, fun and there was some laughter from both children and teachers. The message was clear and aligned with school A's biblical education rejecting the stigma of disability inherent in Hindu culture with their emphasis on the intellectually and physically 'perfect' man and woman who are rich and powerful.<sup>68</sup> These findings echo my parent interviewees' sentiments—that all children, including those with a disability, should be valued.

An assembly I observed in School B SEND focused on a part of the Lord's Prayer 'Give us Today our daily bread'<sup>69</sup> and was led by a volunteer Youth Worker who conducted the assembly in the local language of Kannada given that the majority of the twenty children were from low socio-economic backgrounds with little English. The majority of the thirteen teachers spoke in Kannada too compared with SEND school A where the medium was English. In contrast to the lively dramatized assembly in school A described above, the school B assembly leader stood still and spoke to the children many of whom were looking elsewhere but this may have been because of their disabilities for example one child on the autistic spectrum was unable to concentrate and was gently ushered to another room. However the majority of the twenty children remained silent. I asked for a translation following the assembly and was told by the Principal that the Youth Worker was drawing a link to the story of Moses where manna was supplied to the Israelites in the wilderness and in the same way God would provide daily bread for them if they offered themselves to him. So, similar to the assembly at school A described above the Bible messages were told to emphasise that the SEND children are valued in the Christian faith and that God would provide and take care of them.

I observed a scripture session in Mainstream school B in Bangalore which was an optional biblical studies club held at lunchtime. However it seemed to only be attended by about forty children who were mainly from Christian families. I was informed by the lead teacher. The session began with singing of Christian songs accompanied by electric guitars played by some of the older children. The lead teacher invited me to give my 'testimony' because I was a visitor with the assumption that I was Christian because I was white and was undertaking research in Christian schools. I said I would prefer to talk about how Religious education is taught and its place in the education system in England and children and teachers asked me questions

<sup>68</sup> Pavan K. Varma, *Being Indian: The truth about Why the 21st Century Will be India's* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004).

<sup>69</sup> Matthew 6:11.

about how this differed to India with some incredulity that other religions are taught with equal status alongside Christianity. Next the lead teacher told the parable of the house built on the sand from Matthew's gospel.<sup>70</sup> The lead teacher, LT, asked the young people if they felt shaky and insecure in their lives—like the house built on the shaky foundations:

*LT: How many of you feel shaky – like the house built on the sand. She said It's good to be frank. Today we can be assured that [we can put] all our negative feelings on the Lord. Only the Lord Jesus knows what we are going through. We can put all our troubles on that rock. You may be having a lot of negative things. But he is the one who is capable of removing this from my heart.*

She then began to pray with the young people

*LT: Jesus I am very shaky in my heart today. [But] the sand will be going away.*

The children then all joined in with another Christian song accompanied by guitars 'You are all we need – you are my freedom'. The scripture session ended with 'God bless you' from the lead teacher. This use of scripture in this session was, from my perspective as a self aware translator,<sup>71</sup> very personal and supportive of the children having a direct, unmediated relationship with God. The Bible is seen as a vehicle for sustaining their personal faith and empowering them in their lives in a distinctively Christian context.

In this section I have discussed examples of where the Bible is used in schools to promote a distinctively biblical institutional body language. In the next part of this section a different stance is shown.

### (ii) Pluralist Ethos

In contrast to the narratives, observations and pictures in the section above which predominantly reveal a distinctively Christian, biblically-based ethos, this section exemplifies narratives and pictures from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Assam schools which I interpreted as having a more pluralistic outlook, again I build on findings in Elton-Chalcraft and Chalcraft in press 2021<sup>72</sup> alongside additional data.

<sup>70</sup> Matthew 7:24-27.

<sup>71</sup> Savin-Baden and Major, eds., *Qualitative Research*, p. 64.

<sup>72</sup> Elton-Chalcraft and Chalcraft, 'Decolonising Christian Education in India?'; Elton-Chalcraft and Cammack, 'Christian Values in Education'.

### *Citizenship – the Chennai Principal school E*

My visit to the Chennai high school E almost did not happen. My tenacious gatekeeper Z, a lecturer at a local University, had pre-arranged the visit but on arrival the Principal's car was cruising towards the exit and my gatekeeper Z flagged it down and persuaded him that my research was important and worthy of his precious time. We were both impressed and pleased that this Principal devoted twenty minutes of uninterrupted time to give voice to a Christian perspective on education.

Like the majority of other teachers and Principals in other Indian states in my research sample, the Chennai E school Principal talked a great deal about policies and initiatives which encouraged children to prioritise their education and thus increase their life chances. The school's website stated that the school is 'like a society built around ethics and human values' but there was little mention of explicit Christian or biblically-based values in contrast to the well-resourced SEND Bangalore A school's website which was liberally punctuated by Bible texts and Christian values. In the interview he described 10 virtues which are taken in turn as a focus for a month through the values education programme:

*This month is a virtue about cleanliness, how to keep the classroom clean. Last month it was discipline. So for example we told the staff keep the classroom clean, and children [are encouraged to keep it clean] that is one way we do it [Christian values].*

Figure 4 Campus Plaque in Christian foundation school Chennai



Of course I was only a visitor for a couple of hours in each school and only gained a snap shot of espoused vision as articulated by each Principal, nevertheless by adopting Milligan's 'inbetweener'<sup>73</sup> stance, as an education-  
alist, my interpretation was that the Chennai Principal's pluralist vision echoed the constitution where cleanliness is cited as a value for all Indian children. The text (see figure 4) 'Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not to thine own understanding' in large font is followed by a smaller font instruction to 'keep the campus clean'. These two statements on the plaque nailed to a tree on the campus might not at first seem to have a logical connection but this institutional body language illustrates the Principal's desire to both strengthen the Christian ethos and also adhere to wider political move to address India's problem with the accumulation of rubbish. Appropriate disposal of rubbish in India was one of Modi's key issues at the time of data collection and this synthesis of cleanliness, as espoused in the constitution with the political move is seemingly validated by the biblical text which dominates the plaque. School E Principal was keen to explain that while 95% of the teachers are Christian [only] about 20% of the students are Christian and 80% are Hindu and other religions. He went on to say that caring for the children and also for the community at large is what Christ requires as articulated in the *concept of love*.

The Chennai progressive educationalist emphasised how his faith motivated a relentless commitment to furthering the life chances of the learners in his care. Everything he said and showed to us demonstrated a focus on the individual and meeting their needs whether they were Christian or from another faith.

The Chennai Principal told us how his policies were played out in school –

*We have scripture union classes for the students. We teach them the scripture, we have an hour of teaching scripture also. The teachers have Christian devotion. In the last Friday we have fellowship and every year we organise a Christian retreat for teachers held in our school auditorium. And the boys are taken on a retreat and to scripture union camps.*

The Chennai Principal outlined that his drive for communicating Christian values was not limited to the school but he played a leading role in his local church community also. His espoused vision for his school promoted inclusionary practice and his staff provided the nurturing but disciplined context for effective learning to take place which was underpinned by Christian values. The teachers I interviewed at school E confirmed

<sup>73</sup> Milligan, 'Insider-Outsider-Inbetweener?'



this vision. Biblical values, particularly selfless love, appeared to underpin decision making and day-to-day behaviours. One male teacher at school E said that 70% of the children attended scripture union classes and he felt that the Scottish missionary who founded the school intended the education to be accessible to all high caste, low caste, rich, and poor, Hindu, Muslim or Christian.

*We are open to all – for all castes all creeds, all religion, all economic class, all castes. Education for all.*

#### *School F Assam Catholic school and Nurse G*

The relationship between Christian and educational vocation in school E Principal can be compared to that of the Catholic Priest who was Principal of a Catholic High school in Assam. At the outset of the interview he was keen to convey that he was *a priest first and teacher second* so his faith was of *'upmost importance'*. A picture of the current Pope hung on the Assam Catholic Priest's office wall. He was proud that his parents and grandparents had been Christian and that he wanted to be a priest since he was in class 5 (10 years old). He explained his vision for the school was to provide discipline and moral values. He told me that the school's Christian ethos was evident from the beginning of the day where the assembly included a prayer to Jesus and God – *the children have moral science where they learn about good and bad*. His aim was to educate the 1500 students at the school to be *simple, honest and sincere*. Although the Priest exemplified a Catholic outlook nevertheless during a focus group interview with his staff I learnt that they all wore a uniform with a similar fabric made into either shalwar kameez, sari or other dress which they told me instilled a sense of equality.

The principal of an Early Years nursery G in Assam stressed throughout her interview, her desire to witness to the parents and their children and she saw education and imparting Christian values as of equal importance.

*GP: we sing Christian songs have prayers; we bring them in fear of God. Discipline, habits, respect, etiquette all are very important. Our nursery is different to other nurseries – we teach them from a Christian perspective.*

She echoed what I had heard in numerous other interviews<sup>74</sup>—that while fee-paying schools paid low salaries teachers preferred to be employed in Christian foundation schools because of the job satisfaction it afforded in comparison with the higher salaried government schools which afforded

low job satisfaction owing to ill-discipline, poor administration and high absenteeism of fellow teachers which echoes Ramachandran's findings.<sup>75</sup> Another issue in common with other interviewees concerned non-prose-lyting, 'GP: *We can direct but we cannot force them*'. Also, she stressed the need for patience when dealing with children but, unlike other interviewees, the Assam Principal did not explicitly mention prayer to God for direction, sustenance or support. However, this may have been due to the intake of the school—two and a half to five year old children from families who are dedicated to education may not present the same challenges as children in special schools or schools with older pupils whose parents are not as sympathetic towards education.

#### *School C Karnataka Christian foundation school Church of India*

Christian foundation mainstream school C in Bangalore has an intake of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian children but all engaged in Christian prayer at the end of the day (see figure 5). This was an accepted part of the school routine. So the children who were not Christian nevertheless put their hands together and prayed to God mostly with their eyes closed because that was what the teachers required them to do. The prayers varied from class to class but the Lord's Prayer<sup>76</sup> was commonly said.

Figure 5 Prayer in school C



<sup>75</sup> Vimala Ramachandran, 'Equity, Quantity and Quality: The Precarious Balancing Act in India's Schools', in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary India* (ed. Knut A. Jacobson; Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 78-98.

<sup>76</sup> Our Father Prayer - Matthew 6:9-13 Bible

<sup>74</sup> Elton-Chalcraft and Chalcraft, 'Decolonising Christian Education in India?'

The same classroom where the children are seen praying in figure 5 also had a wall display (figure 6) which celebrated other faiths. Nine year old children in school B Christian foundation school in Bangalore had worked on a display which I felt demonstrated a pluralistic stance (figure 6). Here the art work celebrated Hindu cartoon character Chhota Bheem's birthday with 'Unity in diversity' as the strap line and pictures of religious buildings and founders from the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian religions. This class of 9 year olds was taught by a recently qualified teacher who told me she was keen to involve all the children's backgrounds in her lessons and, unlike the Principal from school A, she did allow images from other religions including this display.

Figure 6 Art work celebrating Hindu cartoon character Chhota Bheem's birthday with Unity in diversity School C



The final picture figure 7 captures the ethos of school C's resource centre which was crammed with edifying posters only one having a Christian message :

*Don't let what you can't do stop you from doing what you can do*

*I have no special gift I am passionately curious*

*Indicators of learning difficulties – eg illegible handwriting, restlessness*

*in class poor attention span etc*

*A good Teacher – teach from the heart, praise others, appreciate the talents, be practical etc*

*A hand drawn poster with a man holding a stack of crosses*

Figure 7 Resource centre school C with encouraging, but non-biblical texts



This resource centre in school C ministered to the needs of children with a range of learning needs who are unable to function effectively in all the mainstream classes and they receive extra support for specific lessons, usually Maths and English, from the four teachers. But I considered this resource centre to exhibit a far less distinctively biblical institutional body language compared with the classrooms in SEND school A.

*Learners in mainstream schools C Karnataka, E Chennai, and H Mizoram perspectives on ethos of school*

As described in the methodology section I was able to talk with pairs of children in several schools to gain their insights on the ethos of their school—whether they liked school, if the teachers and children were kind and helpful and how SEND children were treated. While gatekeeper K facilitated my access to school C I was then required to organise my observations, focus groups and interviews with specific teachers and groups of



children through one of the assistant teachers which proved challenging at times owing to logistical issues. However while teachers were always present in the same space I was often left to interview children without the gatekeeper or assistant head sitting with me and this allowed children to be more frank and open. Also my three children assisted in the gathering of data in the focus groups. My eldest daughter (aged 18 and studying for an anthropology degree) and my younger daughter (aged 12—a similar age to the interviewees) interviewed 3 pairs of school B teenagers and my son (aged 9) asked the questions and I took notes for another four pairs of teenager interviewees. I would argue that the children from school C were much more honest because my three children asked the questions. In my role as ‘inbetweeners’<sup>77</sup> I was not wholly outsider as a white, western, agnostic, female, teacher educator rather my children’s active role as co-researchers afforded me more of an insider role because of their rapport with children from school C.

Findings from the 8 semi structured focus groups with school C pairs of teenagers revealed all of them liked school and felt most teachers were supportive. However one pair of teenagers aged 14 and 15 voiced concerns that some teachers at the Christian foundation school had *favourites* and *if teachers don’t like you then you are neglected*, and some teachers *support students who they like the most but shout at you if you are not a prefect*. They told us that some teachers were lazy but *if teachers don’t do anything [to help you learn] you can’t complain because you will drop marks*. They felt that some teachers forced them to learn about Christianity and tried to convert them. They just ignored these teachers. This pair of teenagers did tell us about some very supportive teachers who *meet children after school* to support them with their studies.

Two 15 year old girls bemoaned the fact that some teachers are *too old*, *have no patience and loose their temper*. This is in stark contrast to the teacher approaches described earlier who drew sustenance from the Bible to support their professional and personal lives.

One pair of teenagers said some teachers would *help when we have doubts* whereas others reprimanded children for not understanding. Two 13 year old boys at C school said *everyone is treated equally at this school there is no low caste division*. However this same pair of teenagers said that some teachers and children would treat SEND children as if they were a low caste and they felt that SEND children are often treated with suspicion by some non-SEND children who feared they may *get infected with a disease* because one of the teenagers had been to an orphanage with his father and had *seen*

*SEND children with diseases because they didn’t have enough money, and they were hurting*. However, from my perspective these two thirteen year old boys held a positive attitude towards SEND children and on the whole felt there was a positive ethos in their school C. Two 14 year old girls painted a similar picture but also mentioned that the school placed a high priority on Christianity *too much emphasis* in their opinion, and although the school had a right to charge Christian children a reduced fee because it was a *minority institution* nevertheless one felt this was unfair to non Christians.

We were only able to meet two pairs of teenagers at E school in Chennai one pair said that Christianity is not forced on all and they spoke a lot about equality. This was echoed in the Principal’s interview with me and the institutional body language seemed more egalitarian which was echoed by my gatekeeper Z who said he was surprisingly impressed by what he saw of the school having not visited before. The other pair of teenagers while admitting that there was evidence of *bad words and fighting* this was not common and they enjoyed working *as a team* with others in their class. All four teenagers agreed with integration of SEND into mainstream schools even though at times this caused problems—one girl admitted that her *slow learner* friend asked her to translate into Tamil what the teacher said in English and this sometimes held her back from getting on with her own work. However she also said that this *helps with my own learning—the more I teach her the more I understand*. Such a philanthropic attitude stemmed from teachers at E school who promoted equity.

While unable to visit school H in Mizoram I did interview a Christian teacher who taught at the school and two 16 year old teenagers who attended a Catholic foundation school J through gatekeeper L. The situation in Mizoram is very different to other states in that Christianity is the dominant religion with some cultural assimilation of tribal religion of the indigenous Mizo peoples. In comparison with the focus groups in Karnataka and Chennai schools the Mizo teenagers were the most positive about both teachers and learners being kind and caring towards one another. However the sample is obviously small and more research would be needed to substantiate this claim. In both formal interviews and also informal conversations during my visit to Mizoram most Mizo people stressed the importance of sociability. The teenagers said *I can’t say for all but yes teachers are very caring in Mizoram schools – maybe because they are Christian. They care for our studies and our personal life ... some just come and teach ... They vary ... There are first rankers and failers*. The impression I got was of a system which was quite different to the other Indian states I had visited where Christianity was more visible because it was the dominant religion. In Mizoram the tribal ethos of sociability and acceptance of all, was what the teenagers wanted

<sup>77</sup> Milligan, ‘Insider–Outsider–Inbetweeners?’

to talk about rather than Christian or biblical ethos. This I interpreted as a more inclusive or pluralistic outlook compared with the exclusive and distinctively Christian ethos of school A.

Thus this section has demonstrated that there was a continuum ranging from distinctively biblical to a more pluralistic approach in the schools where I collected data. In the concluding section below I draw on all three findings to summarise the significance of the Bible in a sample of Christian foundation schools in India.

### Conclusion

From my perspective as a white, English, female, agnostic, teacher educator, I have described the biblical institutional body language of a sample of schools and illustrated the significance of the Bible for a range of teachers, learners and their parents. Building on findings articulated in my three previous publications I have also drawn on additional data from the research project undertaken over two summers in five Indian states.

#### *Significance of the Bible in Christian foundation schools*

1. Bible reading and devotion: sustains personal faith and empowers personal and professional life, within the Indian secular education system.
2. Biblical texts: provide moral guidance for the school community or are tolerated/ ignored by Christian, Muslim and Hindu teachers, parents and children.
3. Biblical institutional body language (displays, interactions, dress, power and hierarchy): ranges from distinctively biblical to pluralistic outlooks.

Elton-Chalcraft and Cammack<sup>78</sup> argue that all professional practice is underpinned by beliefs, whether religious or secular, and this chapter makes sense of the interaction between biblically-rooted beliefs, values and actions, in the professional practice of these teachers despite governmental attempts to restrict the influence of Christianity in schools. There is an inherent conflict between the teachers' desire to introduce their youngsters to Christian texts, values and principles and the shared Christian values espoused through the teaching and learning and the schools' institutional body language on the one hand, and the imperative of adhering to governmental directives to refrain from proselytising on the other hand. The participants attempted to resolve this conflict by asserting that although they made their faith explicit in their work in the school, they did not coerce

children to convert to Christianity.

From my analysis of the whole data set, I firstly illustrated, through a few examples from two contrasting Christian foundation SEND schools, that Bible reading and devotional sessions sustained many teachers' personal faith and also empowered them personally and professionally. In SEND schools in particular a teacher has to deal with their learners' behaviour and high maintenance learning needs—some children displayed angry or aggressive emotional outbursts, others were withdrawn or displayed repetitive behaviours such as rocking or chanting. Many teachers said they draw on biblical messages and values to help them deal with unpredictable behaviours. Many of the teachers at the SEND schools and SEND resource centres in mainstream schools I visited were not necessarily SEND trained, but from my perspective I felt they brought a great deal of Christian *agape* to their professional role in dealing with the challenges of a diverse set of learners. Despite there being a worldwide move towards inclusive practice and integration of SEND children in mainstream schools I felt that, the Christian foundation, SEND schools I visited provided a sanctuary for stigmatised children, an appropriate education tailored to their specific needs and life skills for their future independent living.

Secondly I discussed the reception of the biblical texts and ethos in each of the schools. Findings suggest that the Christian teachers, learners and their families found them edifying whereas Hindu Muslim or Sikh teachers, children or parents either tolerated or ignored displays of biblical texts.

My third finding revealed stark differences between a schools' outlook towards the diversity of its school community. I have provided examples along a continuum of distinctive and exclusive biblical institutional body language to a more pluralistic perspective. For example the Principal of SEND school A which I considered to display a distinctively and exclusively biblical ethos, was not willing for Muslim, Hindu or Sikh parents to infringe biblically-based practices, whereas other Principals held a more pluralistic approach such as Nursery G in Assam and also Bengaluru's mainstream school C. Different schools emphasised different aspects of Christianity dependant on their own identity—for example Mizoram participants talked about sociability rooted in their tribal heritage, a Muslim parent discussed the similarities between Church of India with Islam, whereas Catholicism with its emphasis on icons was more akin to Hinduism. Many children ended their day at school with a prayer similar to the American pledging of allegiance to the flag.

Throughout this chapter I have acknowledged that I collected and interpreted the data from my perspective as a white, female, agnostic, teacher educator and mother. Thus these findings need to be viewed through this

<sup>78</sup> Elton-Chalcraft and Cammack, 'Christian Values in Education'.

lens. However I hope these insights into how the Bible is utilised in a sample of Christian foundation SEND and mainstream schools in India will provide a springboard for further research. But also I hope my publications thus far will provide policy makers in both India and elsewhere to reflect on the intricate balance of diverse faith outlooks, political, geographic and national educational contexts of school communities and how this can impact either negatively or positively on the school experience and life chances of learners.

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