

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Laura A. Henderson for the degree of Master of Arts in Applied Anthropology presented on June 7, 1999. Title: Defining Oppression, Demanding Childhood: The Vision and Work of an Indian Social Action Group.

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Mukti Ashram is a rehabilitation center in north India that works with ex-child laborer boys. Fieldwork completed at the ashram in 1997-98 centered around the issue of the organization's attempt to enact social change through the engineering of community within the ashram's walls. Several fundamental processes that contribute to this goal have been identified: the construction and presentation of personal narratives which are ideally encased in a common structure; the encompassment of heterogeneity through careful focus on a singular point of commonality; and, the creation of national and transnational ties of horizontal solidarity, literal and "imagined." The nature of the activists' intervention, which becomes codified in the dominant ethos of the institution, presents an internal contradiction that is essentially unresolvable. It is found that power is always to some extent fought using those same tools of the powerful. Though in this case their goal of empowering the boys is to some extent compromised, such attempts still constitute a positive influence. Mukti Ashram's example demonstrates both the constraints and opportunities that may be met by organizations that work with subjugated groups.

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Defining Oppression, Demanding Childhood: The Vision and Work
of an Indian Social Action Group

by

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.



Laura A. Henderson, Author

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Defining Oppression, Demanding Childhood: The Vision and Work of an Indian Social Action Group

Chapter I Representations of power, power in representation

Introduction

At 6:00 a.m. at Mukti Ashram, a north Indian rehabilitation center for ex-child laborers, the cook Prakashji would strike the bell, and I would rise with the 60 boys and their resident activist-teachers to perform *shramdaan*¹. In the symbolic acts of sweeping the paths, weeding the gardens, and cleaning the rooms, without distinction between leaders and subordinates, we would daily acknowledge many shared understandings of our solidarity, interdependence, inner dignity, and common struggle against the elements of the dominant culture that would keep us acquiescent. Such routinely symbolic tasks are integrated with bold attempts to encourage these boys to think critically of their society, with the hope that when they return to their villages at least a few will choose to work as activists themselves. Ultimately, all aspects of the rehabilitation process – from meeting the boys' nutritional needs, to providing literacy and vocational classes, to involving them in public demonstrations – define rehabilitation itself as personal affirmation.

In many arenas, the organization's objectives necessitate complex, ongoing engagement with numerous outsiders. District magistrates must be appealed to in order to rescue children from illegal work environments. Press releases must be coordinated in order to maximally establish public awareness. The ashram itself does not exist in pristine seclusion, for in

seeking both recognition and financial backing, numerous aid agency, media and foreign government representatives are brought to the center to view its activities, but most especially to meet the boys and hear them talk about their ordeals and liberation. Visitors depart with comments of how they have been profoundly affected by this experience, and some choose to return repeatedly to this discovered source of inspiration. The delicately interwoven global-to-local relationships formed in Mukti Ashram's venture have developed into an imperative, intrinsic part of their endeavor; indeed, I venture that the organization draws its identity partially from the establishment and maintenance of relationships on such a scale. A central part of my project is to illuminate the significance of these relationships through scrutinizing the depictions of self and worldview that characterize this "meeting of worlds." From Mukti Ashram's example I hope ultimately to draw out pertinent questions concerning the problems and prospects that many groups, similarly directed and constrained, face when attempting to enact social change.

The domain of concern here, the ashram which itself is defined by its participants through their engagement with each other, is a unit that merits a similar consideration to the traditional venues of anthropological research. Similar to the utility of the construct of "culture" in order to make sense of an assemblage of people, practices and beliefs, the ashram is a community formed on the basis of certain common understandings and goals, though additionally in this case the community itself has been planned and constructed. And like the culture concept, its boundaries divert speculation away from the issues of its deep connections with various influences outside its walls, as well as of the divisions existent from within, but even as such it is the necessary locus of examination. The plurality of roles and perspectives intrinsic to every society is the very

counterbalance to the homogenizing narratives that anthropologists have been inclined to write. With an attention to the inherent variety of experiences but an awareness of the potency of the unified organizational creation, I attempt to explain the articulation between the two as expressed in a variety of interactive situations. Mukti Ashram performs the diffuse function of social change through direct, incremental individual change, which itself is accomplished through the assertion of an organizational identity that mediates, even mitigates, such pluralities.

Sociologist Alberto Melucci has called for increased attention to the microcosmic manifestations of social movements by asserting that "collective action is nourished by the daily production of alternative frameworks of meaning, on which the networks themselves are founded and live from day to day. . . . the potential for resistance or opposition is sewn into the very fabric of daily life" (1989:45). In this instance he is referring to what he calls the "latent" periods in the lifespan of collective action, yet in the case of Mukti Ashram the daily process of meaning-construction is an "active" and vital component of collective action itself. On a more general level, Melucci's view corroborates with other researchers who in recent years have called for deeper analyses of the functional dynamics of social movements and the organizations that focus and channel these movements (Weisgrau 1997; Fisher 1997). This would include examinations of the *production* of collective action. Such attention would help to illuminate the nature of the mediating role that these organizations have claimed, as their role as advocates entails the charge of representing the interests of their clients. Their aims are complicated by the necessity of ensuring the congruence (or appearance thereof) of their clients' interests with those of the organization. The question Spivak (1995) has posed, "Can the subaltern speak?" must be approached by looking at

the meanings of these sorts of ideological and structural mediations. Always there exists this problematic element of the powerful role of activists, who themselves conceptualize society from the vantage point of a certain social position. What are the consequences, both in what is represented and for those who are the objects of the representations?

Through the complex relational networks that characterize social movements in both their local incarnations and their overarching political economy, representation of various "selves" encompassed by the movement, as well as the movement's own "self," are of central importance. The discourse strategies that are employed to address the issue of child labor within its broader social context find their vehicles through these idiosyncratic representations, which become imbued with a transparent authority. Mukti Ashram asserts a set of simple and powerful messages supported by diverse, localized experiences. Just as they bring together children from remote villages, middle class urban activists, and representatives of international development agencies, so too will I analyze how they understand and characterize child labor and its related social problems in local, nationalist, and universalist terms. I argue that studying the use of language in social settings is central in order to understand "larger" political realities (Fairclough 1989; Irvine 1996).

After all, what figures prominently in the day-to-day work of the ashram is the generation and continuous retelling of people's stories, and of the messages of social critique that are given meaning through personal drama. The different participants relate their own social analyses to each other; these crosscutting representations are themselves the substance of the creation of the composite counterculture that the ashram embodies. The boys resident at the ashram are particularly encouraged to express their memories of suffering. Such expressions fulfill a multitude of

purposes, including the emotional healing and inner strengthening it encourages, as well as the educational impact and political mobilization that these words can have. Other people too who have experienced injustices and are prepared to speak on them come to embody a portion of the ever-enlarging message of the ashram itself.

The organization's identity, as well as its daily work, are thus inextricably intertwined with representations of individuals' lives, often with the telling and retelling of personal stories. The representations, whether displayed in posters, told to reporters, or documented in case files, are nurtured into certain normative shapes and contain implicit, core values. Thus, the stories cannot be seen as transparent reflections of reality but instead are intrinsically connected to their generative process, which involves the agentive intervention of activists-as-facilitators and of the ashram community as a whole. Through the interactive process, events are reconstructed and come to inhabit the commonly-held narrative of the organization. In a positive sense these images, stories, and values are continuously redistributed and re-presented, utilized by the organization's agents to further its undeniably worthy project.

The messages of social critique and documents of injustices elaborated upon in the variety of avenues of expression involve the boys in the making of the social movement. However, there is another issue whose nature is less outwardly discernible, which is the impact of this movement on the boys themselves. Are the alternatives in values, outlooks, life choices introduced in the ashram's environment useful for them, particularly after they leave? Though the question remains for me unresolved, I will present factors that would be necessary to approach the question, as well as direct attention to initial indications of how certain individuals had responded while they were resident at the ashram.

I will also attempt to point to areas that might indicate things that were left unspoken, viewpoints that perhaps couldn't emerge to challenge the zeal of the apparent consensus within which the organization worked. This problem brings out questions of how people can gather together to resist domination, when collective action seems to entail limitations on individuals in the interest of a new group that comes to create a new field of power. Consequently, though this study is an analysis of an organization that works for the benefit of people who embody victimization in its epitome – “scheduled caste” ex-child laborers who in many cases needed to be liberated from forced labor by raids -- it is centrally concerned with understanding the exercise of power.

I believe that by understanding the details of the predicament of the need to fight power with a new form of power, we can come to a better understanding of the prospects and limitations for social change. Within this controlled environment, the leaders of the ashram have developed and continuously maintain a state of hegemony through which the boys' experiences of rehabilitation are engineered. Thus the challenge this organization asserts to those who hold material and ideological control over society at large – the people in business, government, and a myriad of supporting roles who all benefit materially from the continuation of child labor and economic exploitation generally – is not a simple matter of “speaking truth to power.” Rather, such a stand is taken but with the underlying necessity of maintaining a unified voice. It is, of course, necessary for the ashram to present its work in the purer, simpler terms of consciousness raising and mobilization of the people. They achieve this coherence in presentation, which is essential in this case for effective action, by a number of transformative processes, to be elaborated upon in successive chapters.

This report is organized to highlight the activities that regularly take place at the ashram as well as some of the significant events that occurred during my ten-week stay. Background information is provided in Chapters II and III. Chapter II gives a factual background about the ashram in terms of its structure, activities, goals, and brief notes about the activists themselves. Chapter III outlines the essential ideological and material issues that underlie the problem of child labor; it also discusses the context of the NGO sector in India. The remaining chapters consist of the bulk of the situations with their analyses, which are organized around the core components of Mukti Ashram's methods that I have identified. Chapter IV centers on the common narrative of adversity and empowerment that is retold in many different ways. The processes of narrative development – how narrative is encouraged and its multiple uses, are included. Chapter V examines the process of encompassment of diverse voices, perspectives and interests, together with the muting of difference and focus on the fundamental commonality of poverty, which takes place in the building of the organizational identity. This together involves making sense between the abiding valorization of personal experience as a source of truth and the formation of national and global connections that bring to mind new questions but also furnish new strategies.

From the starting point of tracing out Mukti Ashram's structuring of representations and thus of experiences, I have attempted to create a space in these pages for the stories of the people I came to know to be told, but it has been impossible to extricate the stories "themselves" from their environment. For just as the representations constructed at the ashram are not transparent reflections of reality, it is also true that the boys are not directly and unproblematically empowered; instead, they are presented with an array of new tools with which they *might* be able to strategize an

enhanced way of life, but within constraints that ensure the continuation of their benefactor, Mukti Ashram. On these tenuous grounds an important challenge to the dominant culture does take place in the spirit of renewed expectations and bolstered courage. This is the setting in which the boys and activists, under the gaze of the public, unite to enact their transitory, utopian “social experiment.”

Matters of Position

It is impracticable to take a “dispassionate” position on a subject such as child labor; indeed, though some disavow their own interests, there are *always* interests. Child labor has become a subject by which researchers, particularly a subsection of elitist Indian academics, have fueled their own careers by regenerating assessments on how the problem is intractable (having its roots in a poverty that they conveniently assert to be impossible to eradicate), thus smoothing the way for its continuation through suggestions on how to ameliorate the pain of the burden for those who must carry it. The more negative aspects of the political economy of academic “knowledge” production aside, there is also important, vibrant research taking place which claims a position and lays out a commitment that their representations need to entail a positive outcome for the subjects of their studies.² I too have taken a position as an advocate, for both the boys and the community of activists with whom I worked, and I do not find this incompatible with the imperative to understand and explain what is true. It is often a choice of emphasis that determines the political consequences of a body of research. My other role as an intern, taking case histories, writing for the organization’s international audience, and helping

to host visitors, was crucial to my own research and enhanced the alignment of my direction with theirs³.

Methodologically, my position as an advocate was the most appropriate and viable approach to take. The activists scrutinize visitors to the ashram for the beliefs that they hold. These beliefs are demonstrated even through (what are in the western view) personal matters such as dietary habits. Thus vegetarianism was the rule at the ashram, but even when I visited the family of the *Kshatriya* (an upper caste category) auto-rickshaw driver Ramolah and dined on mutton with them, I was met with questions and subtle disapproval upon my return. This was passed off on the basis of cultural difference, but disagreement on political matters would have created serious communication barriers. Fortunately in this area I had no serious complaint with their position, and certainly as my relationship with the activists developed over time I came to identify increasingly with them and view Indian society somewhat from their perspective. A traditional element of participant observation – that of living in the community – was a mandatory (and personally fulfilling) part of coming to be seen by them as an ashram member, of establishing real relationships with people. Everyone at the ashram was inured to the constant flow of foreign visitors who needed to be given a condensed and simple account of child labor in the course of their 2-to-3-hour stay. Neither the activists nor the boys would have talked frankly with me to the extent they did had I not distinguished myself from these others by participating in the community from morning till night. My uneven, incomplete acquisition of conversational Hindi was the minimum amount necessary in order to exist in an almost entirely Hindi speaking environment; meanwhile, being a foreigner who knew some Hindi was a pleasant anomaly in their eyes and had a positive impact in numerous ways on my developing friendships

with them. I was pleased to discover that my ability to converse in Hindi improved with the growth of emotional ties.

The adage that every action entails consequences, which some have refashioned to say that "everything is political", was brought to experiential clarity for me toward the end of my stay at Mukti Ashram. Accusations of corruption and incompetence had been presented to Mukti Ashram's main funding agency in Holland (Novib), by a disaffected Dutch volunteer, which caused the agency to send a delegation of 14 to investigate the ashram's activities. As an ashram resident, by then considered an ally and family member, I sat with the activists through the nights of worry and indignation at the impending scrutiny. The floods of reporters and officials came to the ashram through several days of activities designed for them; I was viewed by them to be an outsider, a foreigner myself who had the special advantage of in-depth knowledge of the institution that they could tap into. I, in turn, viewed them in relation to the workers who live at the ashram 24 hours per day, whose lives revolved around committed efforts toward getting some shred of advantage for the boys. I understood the irony and unfairness of the state of economic dependency of Mukti Ashram on Novib and reflected that the European colonial "past" was with us still. As the teacher Rajnath remarked to me in unveiled frustration, how could they really understand what goes on by just one or two days' visit? "Let them come and stay, for one month, one year, and then they will understand." Unfortunately, the foreigners' questions – persistent, specific, asking to know but not knowing what to know -- potentially entailed severe consequences for the futures of all people at Mukti Ashram and many more to come.

Yet this question of the effects of the researcher's representation remains a difficult one for me. My analysis of Mukti Ashram is

precariously balanced between attending to constructs and realities (though in one sense constructs are experienced as realities, and so the division itself is misleading); this tension reflects my dual identity as researcher and ashram member, with two corollary audiences who ask very different questions. In regard to the “postmodern” issue, I see a great range of results that the challenge to objectivity has produced, and I generally appreciate the complexity of understanding to social contexts that such thinkers have developed. For South Asia particularly, the Subaltern Studies group⁴ has made important advances in challenging traditional notions of culture and history, in connection with their project of understanding the lived realities of the millions that constitute the region’s underclasses.

Yet the postcolonial/postmodern paradigm at its worst tends to entice researchers away from maintaining focus on things deemed “real” by the communities written about; Knauff characterizes this as “a declination or even a paralysis of nerve: a shying away from authorial declaration, explicit program, or systemic exposition in favor of veiled authorship through indirection, contradiction, and irony” (1994:118).⁵ Beyond even such a glaring lack, Briggs (1996) identifies potent, neocolonial consequences of such related scholarship as Hobsbawm (1983) and his followers who elaborate upon “the invention of tradition,” alluding to a circular movement where the left (represented by postmodern thinkers) comes to join with the right (those with a “modernist”, positivist approach) – not in epistemology or intention, but in outcome.

I view the abstract, etic category “subaltern” as useful in that it persistently focuses attention upon the priority to recover through documentation the experiences of dominated, or subaltern people.⁶ Can ethnography both provide insight on the *creative processes* of subaltern,

subversive representation and ideological contestation, while still honoring those representations and not subverting *their* power? I hope to begin to do so by explaining that I fully share Mukti Ashram's commitment to counter the effects of social inequality and domination; in other words, I understand that such things as oppression exist, and I am willing to name them. I share Eric Wolf's realist position, particularly in terms of his call for anthropological explanation (not simply Geertzian interpretation) of systems of power, "power that not only operates within settings or domains but that also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves, and that specifies the distribution and direction of energy flows" (1990:586). Of relevance in this case is the larger political-economic context in which Mukti Ashram operates, the very cause of the problems that have necessitated the formation of the activist project in the first place. Explaining the intricate strategies and processes that are employed by the group to work against domination necessarily means scrutinizing things that they do not project as part of their message. Whereas they intend to communicate the realities of oppression as experienced by the ex-child laborers in the interest of securing their vision of social change, I intend to enlarge the avenues of discussion to more fully understand the meanings they develop, the constraints that they face, and the impact they have. The messages of the activists and of the boys, though not neatly separable from their social context of creation, are still at the core of my project and I greatly hope they will be represented adequately in the pages to follow.

Chapter II

The social experiment

After a little time spent in discussion with a circle of auto rickshaw drivers in New Delhi's fashionable Connaught Place, it is possible to find one (after convincing him that your directions don't place the destination in the state of Haryana) who believes that it is worth his time to take you past Delhi University, past Kings Way Camp, to a roughhewn town called Burari whose main road is unpaved, and beyond that six more kilometers to Ibrahimpur village, the site of Mukti Ashram. The 1.5 acre center stands in the midst of single-room houses made of brick and fields of sugar cane, cauliflower, and potatoes. Water buffalo and camels are the dominant load pullers on the roads. The area is remarkably green and quiet after the sensory inundation of urban Delhi -- an appropriate setting for a project designed to cultivate a distinctive worldview in the boys. A tall brick wall surrounds the ashram, and hand painted on the outside of it are messages, some in Hindi and some in English. One reads, "We are born with merits of humanity, please don't make your actions an act of cruelty."

Walking through the gate, you will notice that the ashram is composed of a group of several small buildings which line the outer brick wall and all face into the courtyard. Some of the buildings are made of brick with a mud, straw and lime plaster that cools and insulates; two other buildings -- the meeting room and the main office -- are made entirely of thatch and bamboo. In the very center of the ashram is the *gol kutiya* -- a gazebo of sorts that is the location of everything from important announcements to lunches between the director and reporters, to the distribution of wool blankets and shoes to the boys. The environment is fully verdant, with a profusion of trees and flowers, and a small vegetable



1. A view inside Mukti Ashram's gate

garden that is tended by everyone. A milk cow and bull are also resident, as are their two calves, Monu and Sonu, who have become endearing just in the mischievous way they graze off the landscaping when let loose. With sporadic and idiosyncratic exceptions, the boys at the ashram remain in this small, protected place night and day for the duration of their rehabilitation.

The organizational context of Mukti Ashram's work

Mukti Ashram is a special branch of the work of Bachpan Bachao Andolan (Save Childhood Movement), which itself works throughout north India under its umbrella organization, the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude. SACCS claims over 400 affiliated organizations throughout the region. Kailash Satyarthi is the founder of both BBA and SACCS. A Brahmin and former engineer, he turned his energies in the 1980s toward freeing bonded laborers alongside Swami Agnivesh, under the name Bonded Labour Liberation Front. They parted ways antagonistically (the story of which I could not obtain even after repeated efforts), with the swami continuing his work with bonded laborers of all ages and Kailash concentrating on the issue of child labor, bonded and not. Headquartered in the quiet neighborhood of Kalkaji in New Delhi, SACCS/BBA is the busy hub of activities, with field activists based in various parts of north India passing through sporadically for such things as meetings and funds, while the offices themselves are the permanent workplace of a handful (approximately 12-15) of activists and support staff.

SACCS/BBA's activities span an impressively wide range. They have had an impact on international trade policies with the institution of Rugmark, a way that carpet manufacturers can certify that their products were made without the work of children; on the other end, this has been

enthusiastically received by some importers and consumers in Germany and the UK. They have organized several high-profile *yatras* (marches) in India and other South Asian countries, and in 1998 completed the Global March Against Child Labor, which terminated with a flourish at the International Labour Organization meeting in Geneva. (The Global March is the subject of a section further into the report.) Other events are held throughout each year to reach the public and stimulate the attention of the media, often at particularly significant times. In 1997, *Azaadi ki Ore* (Towards Independence) was held on the two days prior to India's 50th Independence Day, as a demonstration involving the testimonies of several ex-child laborers who spoke in detail about the abuses they had suffered. This was accomplished through a mock court called *Bal Adalat* (Children's Court), "to examine the grievances of children of India against all the elders, including their parents and grandparents, about the breach of their duties and responsibilities entrusted upon them by the Constitution of India" (SACCS 1997a:21).

Working collaboratively with the main office, the field activists are often involved with rural communities to raise awareness about the alternatives available to compelling their children to work, simultaneous with helping to clear the barriers of gaining access to those options. This includes helping released bonded laborer families to obtain the "rehabilitation" compensation packages owed to them by the state government. Communication is maintained by the main office with such officials as National Human Rights Commission officials and District Magistrates in order to advocate for bonded laborers as victims of human rights abuses. Finally, one of the main goals of the organization is to liberate bonded child laborers through identifying illegal work sites and organizing raids with the help of local officials. Because the carpet industry

in eastern Uttar Pradesh (Mirzapur-Bhadoi) has been particularly onerous in the way the business owners frequently have boys abducted from Bihar to work the looms, and also because of the international-level attention already focused on this area, a liberation camp has been established by the organization in Mirzapur. The camp serves as a temporary holding place for the recently released boys, as well as being a visible center that does preventive communication to surrounding communities.

Obviously the organization attempts to gain dominance in the media, and their activists achieve a significant measure of success considering the formidable competition of the thousands of other innovative social service organizations that exist around the country. The library at the ashram houses binders full of press clippings from international and national journals that highlight their work. Certain European countries, particularly those that are home to the funding agencies (the main ones being Bread for the World in Germany, Christian Aid in the UK, and Novib in Holland,) are more familiar with the names SACCS and Mukti Ashram, whereas until the Global March they have been virtually unknown in the United States.

The ashram itself

As mentioned earlier (and elaborated upon later), Mukti Ashram is an important site for public representations of BBA's work. However, the great majority of time and energy spent at the ashram concerns the task of working with the boys and promoting their rehabilitation. This is conveyed as well in the name of the center, for as their introductory pamphlet states, "the term MUKTI stands for comprehensive liberation -- physical, mental and spiritual -- and ASHRAM means a retreat where a

constant and persistent endeavor is on" (SACCS 1997b:1). The ashram was built in 1991-92, and since that time has hosted a steady series of "batches" of boys, in groups of around 60, for periods of three months.

The age range of 7 to the early twenties reflects the fact that though the majority of them are boys, occasionally it is found to be appropriate to bring in young men who had gone through childhood in bonded labor themselves, since in some ways they are even more disadvantaged (in not having a local school to be enrolled in). The boys come from states (and hence linguistic regions) throughout north India, but particularly strongly represented are the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, and Punjab. They are overwhelmingly from the lowest caste groups (the legal term being "Scheduled Caste") or from tribal communities.

Oftentimes they have either not been able to attend school or have scarcely done so, so they generally lack basic literacy skills. The boys come to the ashram with different work backgrounds; some of the areas represented are carpet making, *beedi* (handmade cigarette) making, spice processing, agriculture, brick kiln, and domestic service. The boys begin working for various reasons; in some instances it is a case of intergenerational bonded labor, in others sheer abduction, and still in others a boy's whole caste group -- all members of families -- works in the same industry.

The ashram's regular staff is comprised of three full-time teacher/counselors (with still others who come periodically to participate), five assistants whose duties include maintenance, security, supervision, and secretarial work, and one cook. All but two of the assistants live at the ashram. In addition, there are four part-time vocational skills teachers who reside in nearby communities. Not surprisingly, the staff members who reside at the ashram can generally be said to have qualitatively richer relationships with the boys, and indeed some remarks have been made in

passing indicating that the residents perceive themselves as the committed core. Suman, the director of the ashram, is brought almost every day by her driver, Surendra, though she divides her time between work at the SACCS main office and the ashram. Additionally, Kailash Satyarthi himself, whose visits prompt frantically reverent preparations, comes especially when there is significant news or children are needed to testify at an upcoming event.

Activities for rehabilitation

The rehabilitation program itself has a number of components. Prakash, the cook, is in charge of providing the nourishment of three solid vegetarian meals daily to all children and staff, and the food is always made in such abundance with no limited number of helpings that the boys can regain some of the weight and nutrients they had lost. A weight scale is made available in the office for the children to measure their own changes, and both weight and height are regularly charted by the staff. Breakfast time usually finds the boys in various stages of preparation for the day, from bathing to washing clothing to standing in front of the kitchen taking food, where *chai* and often something very intense and nourishing like *kala channa* (black garbanzos) are provided. For lunch and dinner the boys load up on *chappati* (whole wheat flat bread), *chawal* (rice), *dal* (lentils), and typically a lesser amount of *sabji* (vegetables), seated on the classroom floor together in rows, then wash out their plates individually at the communal faucet.

The pre-meal morning activities are physical exercises and *shramdaan* (as mentioned in the introduction). Through *shramdaan* the children and staff daily work to take responsibility for the ashram, attending to its



2. Taking a meal together

regular upkeep, and through such physical work demonstrating their communal bonds. Numerous times I made rounds with one or another teacher, following them into the rooms where the boys sleep (around 30 each), checking to see if someone was sleeping in or staying in bed from illness. None of the boys was recalcitrant, and individual disciplinary measures were largely unnecessary in order to compel the boys to fully participate in these (or any other of the ashram's) programs.

After breakfast, studies are called into session, by assembling all of the boys and taking attendance and then splitting them up into the various classes. The younger boys, generally below the age of 13, spend the morning learning basic literacy skills. They sit together on the ground, outside when the weather permits, and with notebooks and pencils (often leftover supplies from UNICEF and the like) they trace out letters and memorize the names and characters of numbers up to 100. Two colorful posters, one of Hindi letters and the other of Hindi and Roman numbers, are their templates. As the young boys practice assiduously, one or another teacher will regularly intervene and check their work, with firmly gentle corrections made and steady encouragement. As the boys tentatively test out their emergent skills, they can be seen writing their names, and those of their family members and address, dozens of times on their paper.

They find literacy reinforced from all angles at the ashram, but many take special interest in the newspaper reading stand that props up one Hindi and one English language newspaper back-to-back. Before they are even able to make sense of the Sanskritized terminology of *Rashtriya Sahara*, many of the boys regularly pore over the flood of information, crowding over shoulders and jostling for a better view. The older boys are expected to acquire literacy skills in the afternoon/evening "social education" class sessions, alongside the younger boys, but in the morning they focus on

learning a trade. The assortment of trades that are taught -- motor repairing, tailoring, carpentry, welding, weaving and masonry -- reflect identified skills that can generate an income at the village level, and the boys are placed in the particular trade class appropriate to the needs of their home village. When they return to their villages, the ashram makes efforts to acquire the tools and other materials necessary for them to start a business.

Afternoon and evening times are spent in variable combinations of recreational activities, study, and what is called "social education." At any one time there is only a single one of these classes that is attended by everyone. The social education sessions are ones that promote critical thinking and political awareness by being primarily problem-centered. For instance, civics lessons concerning the roles of government officials and their hierarchical structure posits the ideal with questions posed to the boys about what they think the officials *really* do, or bold statements of criticism against corruption and inaction are made by the teachers themselves. The teachers are in agreement that the social education component is the most important part of all of the rehabilitative work that is done.

As evening approaches night more lanterns are lit and teachers, children and staff (with the exception of Prakash and his helpers, who are preparing dinner) convene for singing sessions. With the aid of a *tabla*, a tambourine, and other instruments, but particularly the powerful voice of Ranvir Singh, a teacher who is also a well-known vocalist on radio programs in the nearby state of Haryana, the children clap and sing, often at the top of their lungs. The songs are in a sense a continuation of the social education program, since they themselves address social problems and people's desires for justice. Often, as the pace and volume of the growing fervor increase, several boys rise up and dance, surrounded by

their clapping and singing cohort. The sessions are punctuated with the type of slogan shouting engaged in during other parts of the day: with one boy leading the series of slogans, the rest repeat them in unison with fists raised. In the words they are reminded of their own anger and growing courage: "*Inklaab zindabad! Bal mazduri khatm karo! Har bacche ka hai adhikar! Roti, khel, padhai, pyar!* (Long live the revolution! Down with child labor! Every child has the right to bread, play, education and love!)

The activists attempt to give the boys a fully festive experience at the ashram alongside the serious endeavors. Festivals are liberally indulged in, from the winter harvest festival of Lohri in mid-January, to the prominent Hindu holiday (actually celebrated by people of every religion in India) of Holi, even Christmas. Though the vast majority of boys are from Hindu homes, there are typically several Muslims in the group as well as an occasional Christian, but these matters of religion are not dwelled upon. Mukti Ashram is explicitly secular⁷ in proclaiming acceptance of and a belief in the equality of all religions; the holidays are celebrated with the boys as part of a shared cultural tradition and with a generous attempt at compensating for the lack of holiday time that constituted their previous roles as laborers. Religious practice is not actively encouraged and the negative consequences of communal divisions are discussed openly, but the boys are passively permitted to attend the local temple on holidays.

BBA/Mukti Ashram's Position on Child Labor

The organization must first work to differentiate itself from other entities on the basis of definitions. Confining their attention to the children who are compelled to work and who in the process are "forced to sell their childhood merely for existence" (Satyarthi 1995:4), they distinguish child

labor from such things as helping family members with household tasks. In so doing, the organization's restricted definition of child labor is regularly interchanged by the activists with the term "child servitude", since children's vulnerability to authority always makes labor something more complex than a freely agreed upon contract⁸. Child labor is thus characterized as labor that precludes primary education (a focal point of their more general belief that children should be invested in, instead of seen as an investment). The activists attempt to naturalize the idea that childhood is rightly, normally comprised of non-productive activities. Beyond this they do not endeavor to be more specific in the category of the population they seek to assist. They engage in direct, implicitly unproblematic critiques of the complex of factors that cause the perpetuation of child labor, but this hard line is taken with an unstated understanding of the fuzziness of categories. For this reason there is a divide between their practices, which indicate a more nuanced understanding, and their absolutist public posture.

The organization also positions itself in prominent contrast to the dominant portrayals of child labor. Media images tend to emphasize the extreme deprivation faced by the families whose children work, and implicitly or explicitly attribute child labor to poverty, to the exclusion of examining the social forces that lie behind poverty itself. BBA activists assert that this becomes a way of justifying child labor. The causes of child labor that they identify are primarily within social institutions that have the ability to change the circumstances: "the prevalence of myths to justify child servitude/child labour, lack of social awareness and sensitisation, lack of political will, ineffective legal instruments, large scale ignorance among children in servitude and their parents, and finally anti-childhood developmental policies and programmes" (Satyarthi 1995:6).

Kailash and Suman characterize their organization as the loner among other child welfare organizations in India, in that they take an unambiguously absolutist position on the issue. They are most explicitly opposed to any efforts to improve working conditions or provide piecemeal evening literacy courses for children, since they contend that this is a way that society is able to become comfortable with, and continue to accept, the perpetuation of the problem. Rita Panniker, a local activist who works with street children in the neighborhood of Delhi that has the highest concentration of them in the city (approximately 100,000)⁹ is viewed as working against BBA. Her main project is a restaurant called Butterflies, which is run entirely by some of the street children she works with. She argues for empowering children as workers – giving them transferable skills and helping them to establish their own labor union, whereas BBA argues for children to remain economically dependent on their families as non-wage earners, in order that they might obtain an education and develop properly.

Indeed, one of BBA/Mukti Ashram's most important interests is to induce the national government to uphold its stated commitment to provide universal primary education to all children. The activists heavily emphasize the inadequacies of the village school systems, contending that schools throughout rural India are characterized by absent, abusive or incompetent teachers, caste-based discrimination, and lack of accessibility. They also criticize the class division that is reproduced through English medium education, advocating uniform Hindi medium instruction to mitigate disadvantages met by non-English speakers¹⁰.

In taking this uncompromising stand, the activists have placed themselves in some ways against both the Indian government and the business sector. They criticize the government for continuously failing to

resuscitate inert laws against bonded labor and children working in hazardous industries. Of course the business sector, which one SACCS document characterizes as "obsessed with self-aggrandizement" (Satyarthi 1995:2), would be identified as the source of the problem itself, in the willful employment of children by numerous companies. While both businessmen and government officials have labeled BBA as anti-national – working against national interests in coordination with western goals to subvert India's growing economy – BBA in turn reverses the accusation, by aligning itself with the welfare of the future generations of the country. Kailash writes: "we cannot allow the vested interests and the government to flout all laws of the land, constitutional guarantees and international conventions (to which India is a signatory) related to child labour on the pretext of 'western pressure' and use it as tool to crush childhood" (Satyarthi 1995:2).

BBA/Mukti Ashram has decidedly not formed any alliance with a large political party represented in Indian national government. On the contrary, the activists are blatantly critical of every party, including those that have claimed to represent the lower class/caste communities, such as the Janata Dal and the Bahujan Samaj Party. According to BBA, none of the parties has demonstrated a sustained interest in combating child labor, and all are riven with varieties of corruption, all of which work against local justice. Through SACCS, BBA finds its strongest allies on the international scale. Their primary sources of funding are several northern European organizations. They have also formed working relationships with the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) and other human rights organizations. These connections have given rise to large scale campaigns, including the recent Global March Against Child Labor, the idea of which was hatched jointly by the ILRF's Pharis Harvey and Kailash during a dinner meeting. The international alliances, while provoking criticism on a

domestic level, have simultaneously given the organization augmented levels of prestige and leverage, both of which the activists work hard to maximize. Underlying this, their cause is given the validation of universal merit and truth: "The reality is that child labour is against the ethos of humanity . . ." (Satyarthi 1995:15).

Chapter III

Mukti Ashram and its clients: social contexts

My intention in this chapter is to provide some contextual background that will be helpful when considering the detailed example of Mukti Ashram. In other words, I anticipate three questions that readers will likely begin with. What characterizes the worlds that the boys at Mukti Ashram come from (and where they will return to)? What can we know about child labor -- that specific issue that brings the organization and the boys together? Just what does this organization exemplify, particularly in relation to other groups operating in India?

The pressures of landlessness, debt bondage, and migration

Some of the boys at Mukti Ashram had found their way into industries in urban centers, either through being abducted from their villages or through traveling with their families to such places. Other boys had never left the setting of the rural village. But whether it was a "push factor" prompting internal migration or something that compelled them to work on the lands of others in their home villages, the disparities in landholdings they and their families face are central to their experience of poverty and necessarily linked to their laboring for others at a young age. As the source of life-sustaining nourishment, land is also the source of power; as power differences are daily asserted in an array of hierarchical relationships which render one either dominant or submissive, rewarded or deprived, land is linked with life itself. In this scheme the powerless are the

landless. To the landless (as to the landowners), land is highly significant, both materially and symbolically.

The *jajmāni* system of patron-client relationships and hereditary rights to employment and service is the traditional system within which communities have operated (Wiser 1963; Kolenda 1978). Though implementation of ideals is always problematic, the system is widely understood as having been one where those providing services to the powerful were looked after in times of hardship (Wadley 1994; Freeman 1979). However, the division of roles codified in the caste system has also traditionally circumscribed the opportunities of people at the bottom. Patnaik traces the class of propertyless laborers to India's precapitalist economy: "They were in hereditary servitude to the landed families, were forbidden to hold land, and were employed in agricultural production and certain specific tasks considered to be particularly menial, in return for their mere subsistence" (1985:3). With the incorporation of rural communities into widening exchange relationships catalyzed by colonial rule, this system evolved into the institution of bonded labor, an economic relationship in which a lifetime of servitude was the price to be paid for relief from financial crisis. The landowner was assured of his cheap labor source by extending credit while paying too little for the laborer to ever be released from debt, entailing the family in the same demands of labor through future generations (1985:8). Differences in economic power have always been present in the villages, and these differences have been formally expressed in terms of established (though sometimes contested) hierarchical relationships which in turn validated the continued control by the powerful.

For better or worse, many scholars agree that the *jajmāni* system has significantly deteriorated throughout many parts of India. Breman

contends that the “moral economy” is only now only a memory in south Gujarat, and that while legislation exists to prevent indentured slavery, still a form of “neo-bonded labor” persists (1997:167). Kapadia speaks in similar terms about Tamil Nadu, where nowadays “production relations between workers and employers appear to be much closer to a self-interested ‘business-like’ norm” (1993:298). In West Bengal, Bhattacharyya has observed the frequent replacement of *bargadar* (sharecroppers) with landless wage laborers (1979:720). There is a notable and widespread decrease in the permanence of relationships in the context of economic production.

Within this context of the changing economy, the enduring irony is that those who have done the actual work on the land have been the landpoor (who have needed to hire themselves out as well for subsistence needs) as well as the landless. This Kapadia ties to how the upper caste landowners have considered agricultural labor to be defiling; they maintain their status by having the landless untouchables or other lower caste groups do the work (1993:303). Though the polluting nature of agricultural work might not be subscribed to throughout all of India¹¹, there does seem to be a widespread correspondence between it and low caste status (Breman 1997:4-5). With social status reinforced by the ability to have others do the work, economic power is enhanced in the amassing of material gain, which circulates back to building status within the social and ritual hierarchy. Simultaneous to this, the agricultural laborers are compelled to perform the low status work, which in turn assures their low economic and social status. Compounding this, the low position in which they are situated vis-a-vis the village hierarchy becomes the useful justification for their poor treatment (Breman 1997:220-221).

Agricultural wage labor is seasonal and often compels people to move out of the village to find work at non-peak times. Temporary migration for supplemental non-agricultural employment, though not new in India, is a phenomenon that has grown both with industrialization and the commercialization of agriculture and consolidation of land ownership (Breman 1997:10). In profile the "footloose labourers" are in every way at the bottom of the system. Breman identifies "the rural army of unskilled and illiterate labour as being landless or landpoor from the agricultural-economic point of view, and as members of Scheduled Castes/Tribes or Other Backward Classes from the social viewpoint" (1997:83). Already relegated to the margins in the village, these people often go further afield into the deplorable working conditions of urban industries, where their living conditions are at least as difficult as in the village (1997:51).

The women of landless families must take on the burden of dishonorable wage labor when they can. Certainly no modicum of seclusion can be maintained with inadequate living conditions and the additional necessity of interacting with employers. While it is often true that women can wield more power in the household when they contribute to the overall income (Mandelbaum 1988:34), this is problematic in situations of such desperate poverty where the pressure to work is omnipresent yet where work is sporadic. In fact, when unemployed they are often blamed for placing the family in danger (Breman 1997:31). In this context of compromises made for survival, it is no large step to involve one's children in contributing to family earnings.

Mrs. Nirmal Sharma, whom I met during my stay at Mukti Ashram, described to me the details of a particular, local manifestation of the above mentioned social issues. Specifically, she gave me an idea of the labor situation in the districts of Karputala and Jullundar in Punjab, where she

works for an organization (affiliated with BBA) called Volunteers for Social Justice. She listed the problems of landlessness, being from a Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe, and the institution of intergenerational debt bondage as the important things that make exploitation possible. The people she works with are largely from the Valmiki and Ramdasiya caste. The Ramdasiyas are higher in status than Valmikis, but both are Scheduled Caste and live in the same village, though in separate areas. They work primarily as agricultural laborers, though a few do other tasks more traditionally ascribed to their caste; for example, Ramdasiyas have engaged in leather working. The people of Scheduled Tribes in the area also work in agriculture, as well as in the brick kilns and in construction. The minimum wage in Punjab is Rs. 62 per day, or Rs. 2000 per month, but this cannot be enforced, particularly in the agricultural sector.

Financial difficulties propel many people into debt. Landholders often distribute loans to the workers. A typical amount might be Rs. 1000, but in a short time the debt has mysteriously increased to Rs. 10,000 and the worker has no way of catching up on the debt. She noted that if lenders were offered the full amount in repayment they would not want to accept it, for from this debt they are able to enlist the entire family to labor for them. The government has implemented welfare schemes to increase the ability of the poor to earn money, but she has seen these schemes fail. It was planned that Scheduled Caste families could receive Rs. 5000 from the government in order to invest in a water buffalo (*bhains*). But in the processing of this benefit, the bank officials and others take portions of the allocation for themselves, to the point where only Rs. 3000 remains – not enough to buy a water buffalo. The officials would all be complicit in getting the paperwork processed – the doctor would certify the health of the animal, the bank would approve the expenditure, the marketer would

certify the sale, etc. . . . But the lender would receive neither funds nor water buffalo. When confronted about the disappearance of the funds, the officials would point to the paperwork and claim that the poor man had cheated the system.

Debates over childhood and child labor

The project of critiquing the effects of colonial rule, and of westernization more broadly, is one that requires a thorough scrutiny of the multitude of avenues through which our understanding of others' realities is impaired, and how these misunderstandings have had negative consequences for the people of subjugated regions. Definitions are rightfully called into question; in this case, those of childhood and child labor are particularly relevant. With a bow to the work of Ariès, Ashis Nandy agrees that childhood is culturally defined and historically situated, and locates a division between Indian middle-class notions of childhood and (implicitly) those of the lower classes: "Nobody who has read the lives of the reformers, political leaders and writers of nineteenth-century India can fail to notice that the Indian middle-class child became, under the growing cultural impact of the British rule, the arena in which the all-important battle for the minds of men was fought between the East and the West . . ." (1984-5:366). The enduring effects of the ascendant Indian middle class' relationship with the colonizers can be seen in, among other things, the myriad value-system divisions between themselves and the underclass. This legacy is certainly part of what the leaders of BBA/Mukti Ashram carry with them as they survey and judge the lives of (underclass) child laborers. But most importantly, instead of deeming those children to be appropriately suited for labor (a widely accepted understanding based in

part on caste separation), they assert that all children are inherently entitled to their envisioned proper childhood.

I do not reject the importance of critical appraisals of otherwise unquestioned and simplistic assumptions of the universality of such definitions of childhood, but I am concerned that the road that some take in relativizing is one that forgets other social determinants of differential experiences; the relativist position can be a way of homogenizing experiences of variously positioned individuals within the construct of "traditional culture." Government officials have in this way countered the efforts of BBA/Mukti Ashram by upholding child labor as an intrinsic part of Indian culture, particularly in the learning of traditional handicrafts. Though almost obsolete in practice, this romantically peaceful image appeals to an Indian (middle class) society which is continuously negotiating its balance between embracing western influences attendant with participation in the global economy, and its own "traditional" cultural heritage (see Appendix A).

Leela Dube (1981) explains that child work in India has been traditionally valued by families -- it has been a normal part of the lives of children, and was given an ideological explanation in Hindu epics. She notes: "Nowhere does one find any mention of the desirability of, or insistence on, restricting childhood only to play and education, separating it from productive work" (1981:184). She goes on to carefully posit the ideals against the exploitation that lower- class/caste children face, within the context of such important factors as intergenerational debt bondage and caste discrimination: "limitations and deprivations of a particular group characterised the life of their children also" (1981:185). In this way she has juxtaposed people's desires to view society as consensually interdependent

and stable, with examples of excessive advantage taken by some actors within society.

Olga Nieuwenhuys (1996), who conducted research on children's work in Kerala (the state with the highest literacy and lowest child labor rates), states that child labor, in being defined only as work that directly produces a commodity, unfairly excludes consideration of the preponderance of unremunerated work that children perform. Just as other feminist scholars have argued for crediting women for similar work, the "invisible" work performed by children indirectly enables others in the family to engage in work for compensation. She contends that nonremunerative work is often devalued in Keralite families, which itself leads to exploitation of children. Elsewhere, however, her collapsing of categories has her defending the rights of children to work: "children's ability to step out of the moral economy to which they are relegated should not lead, as happens recurrently, to the wrong conclusion that they therefore have no childhood or are robbed of it" (1996:204). Her corrective emphasis on children's agency has caused her to characterize their actions as in some ways fully conscious and freely made, as if normative family values that induce children to work cannot be questioned, and as if material deprivation's impact on the formation of those values should not be a central factor to be considered. The difference between her variety of generalization and that of people such as Suman who speak of children being "robbed" of childhood is one of emphasis, and Nieuwenhuys' unfortunately tends to err on the side of ignoring the complex and often subtle ways in which children are exploited.

The enduring economic benefit from the continuation of child labor is overwhelmingly gained by business owners at the cost of the childrens' and their families' futures. Deo implicates the government as the main

collaborator; government officials proclaim their agenda of eradicating child labor, but in the last decade they have conceded the necessary continuation of it through the verbage of the Child Labour (Prohibitions and Regulations) Act of 1986 and the National Child Labour policy of 1987: "being forced to accept child labour as a 'harsh reality,' the Ministry proposed to take measures to improve the working conditions of children, rather than removing them from the workforce" (Deo 1991:269).

But can child labor be simply seen as a necessary evil? Researching the "matchbelt" of Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu, Chandrashekhar (1997) has identified wage discrimination as the driving cause of the rampant hiring of children for matchmaking, where the employment of these children at lower wages than an adult would accept then forces adults to competitively offer themselves for the same low wage. Adult wage earners' incomes being thus inadequate for the family's subsistence induces parents to continue to involve children in work: "Poverty, thus, while not the proximate cause of the phenomenon of child labour, is the seed-bed in which it thrives" (Chandrashekhar 1997:144).

The ascendance of NGOs in India

Like elsewhere, NGOs in India administer programs that either compensate for (reasonable or unreasonable) lack of engagement by the state, or that directly challenge the reasonableness and authority of state practices. Some scholar-activists have lodged condemnatory summations of the Indian government, particularly in its profoundly felt failure to meet the needs of the vast majority of the population in such basic and broad areas as poverty alleviation. Smithu Kothari contends that the state actively participates in the perpetuation of systemic power disparities: "Despite all

the official rhetoric, the large-scale terrorization of poor communities asserting their constitutional rights continues unabated. Industrialists, landlords, contractors, and upper- and middle- class peasants continue to receive state protection to suppress any political mobilization of the poor" (1993:151). Rajni Kothari has labeled this the "*goonda raj*," with a "horrendous level of brutality practised as a matter of course by officials, police, landlords, upper-caste groups and hooligans (*goondas*) employed on their behalf all over India" (Eldridge 1984:411). Moreover, the Nehruvian top-down, industrial development schemes that have been emphasized by the central government since independence have been widely understood to be a source of the increased marginalization and "immiseration" of the poor.

In what has been seen by some as a "quiet revolution" in southern countries, NGOs have proliferated in the post-independence period, but particularly in the 1980s (Fisher 1997:440). In India, they are so numerous as to defy an accurate count, particularly as many decide not to register with the government (and thus not be required to report on their financial flows); one informed estimate places the range from 50,000 to 100,000 (Kothari 1993:142). The omnipresence of multiple organizations that vie for clients offers its own difficulties for groups such as BBA, which must vigorously work to distinguish itself from others, especially considering "the existence of numerous official development programmes supposedly directed towards the urban and rural poor and an official ideology that emphasizes goals of distributive justice and popular participation" (Eldridge 1984:421). State sponsored development programs as well as NGOs can all be seen to have motivations that are not purely altruistic, not least of which is the perpetuation of the service industry of development or social reform upon which their existence is based. Those that are relatively

more centered on doing the work they profess to do are often faced with the cynicism of people who have had contact with less scrupulous groups.

NGOs are considered to have roots in quite various traditions: they are seen to spring primarily from the failed socialist movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Omvedt 1993); they are seen to be broadly related to the mass mobilization that characterized the Indian nationalist struggle (Eldridge 1984); while another researcher asserts that NGOs' origins span the disparate and often contradictory work of Christian missionaries, social religious reformist movements, and political movements based on Gandhian, communist, and socialist ideologies (Bodhisattva 1998). This variety of influences is reflected in the fact that NGOs themselves span a wide range of intentions and philosophies; indeed, the term NGO has limited utility resulting from the degree to which it accommodates very different entities (Fisher 1997). Subcategories have been developed in India in every Indian language; in English several common ones are "social action groups," "political action groups," and "voluntary agencies" (Kothari 1993).

Some of these groups offer a strident social critique, while the more conservative do not focus on ideology but instead seek incremental material improvements that do not detract from existent power relationships. Kothari believes that the only successful programs are those that seek to fundamentally alter people's self-concept and view of society; in India there is a particular requisite of "shedding of a deep-seated belief that oppression is part of one's *karma*, that is, that it is inherited. Often the realization of economic rights facilitates the capacity to make demands for delivery of services and for implementation of laws that guarantee protection against oppressive conditions" (1993:135).¹² The many organizations that identify as part of the Gandhian tradition are more

moderate, their approach characterized by Eldridge as “gentle anarchy,” which in this particular cultural context means “rejecting everyday manifestations of power-seeking, manipulation, mismanagement, corruption and violence by politicians and officials, linked to considerations of prudence which weigh against becoming entangled in the machinations of ‘the system’” (1984:410). Mukti Ashram is a combination of both, though I believe it tends toward the more radical social critique, but it does not escape being influenced by the Gandhian tradition, particularly through the personal proclivities of numerous of its activists.

But the orientations of NGOs cannot solely be described through paradigms that are on the national level; India is, of course, deeply and increasingly involved in a great multitude of ways with forces on an international scale. So Mukti Ashram’s continuous contact with other South Asian, European and North American organizations is not unusual; indeed, this aspect epitomizes the changes that have been strongest beginning in the 1980s. There has generally been a notable and important thickening of ties between NGOs and international groups, a building of relationships on a transnational level (Fisher 1997). There are significant benefits as well as drawbacks that are the consequences of these associational ties. The northern NGOs serve to “keep information flowing” and “lobby those who can place pressure on the international agencies,” whereas the southern NGOs are attributed the “moral authority” to represent local interests (Fisher 1997:453).

With the added factor that the northern NGOs tend to be the most powerful funding sources, issues of dependency and control often color relationships, which tend to preclude honest, mutual evaluations, and “frank dialogue” (Eldridge 1984:423). Organizations that raise critiques or suggestions that belie international value systems, most notably in the

context of human rights, are susceptible to accusations by state officials of being antinational (as was at times acutely the case with BBA/Mukti Ashram). That powerful groups within India attempt to maintain a monopoly on defining what constitutes the "national interest," (a message implicitly lodged in the "antinationalist" charge), reflects the very fact that NGOs are arenas "within which battles from society at large are internalized" (Fisher 1997:449). These battles are refined, distilled, and articulated within many NGOs, who as a consequence become the symbols and sources of cultural and political dissent.

Chapter IV

Narrating social change

The generative process and its significance

Narrative's social utility

Everyone at Mukti Ashram is engaged at one time or another in telling others, in narrative fashion, about their lives. As would be expected, these life stories are selective in their details, according to what is relevant to both the life of the institution and the greater movement against child labor. The experience of shaping representations in this and other social settings has important implications for the individual narrator. Ochs and Capps assert that "we come to know ourselves as we use narrative to apprehend experiences and navigate relationships with others" (1996:21). David Carr discusses that the *context* of storytelling should direct us to critiquing the simple referential meaning that people often attempt to derive from the stories: "narrative is not a description or account of something that already exists independently of it and which it merely helps along. Rather, narration, as the unity of story, storyteller, audience, and protagonist, is what constitutes the community, its activities, and its coherence in the first place" (1997:20).

The personal narrative rebounds onto the teller, and other tellers, in this social way at Mukti Ashram. It is an important means through which people are able to situate themselves within the group; in an extension of this, the group members who are listening to a life story that corroborates their own are able to draw a link between themselves and a generalized, imagined *dalit*¹³ community. The ashram then presents these same

narratives, particularly the boys', to outside audiences, through which the urgency of the group's mission is underscored. Furthermore, lessons learned from the narratives, about rampant exploitation and the ability to combat it, are explored on a more abstract level in the social education classes. In these classes, personal narratives are the very substance of pedagogical explorations and the development of a critical understanding of society. In this chapter I outline the content and context of these centrally important personal narratives, focusing ultimately on how the institution's firm tutelage shapes the stories of activists and children into a consensual societal commentary encased in an ideal narrative structure.

The exemplar

Though only in his mid 20s, Bhoj Raj has a dynamic countenance that arrests one's attention. He strode confidently into Mukti Ashram one sunny February morning, wearing *khadi*¹⁴ from head to foot, and looking remarkably refreshed after a 46-hour train ride from his village in Orissa. He was returning to Mukti Ashram as an ex-trainee - turned labor activist, making this journey every year, partly in order to tell his own inspirational story to the boys. On this trip, he was also chaperoning four teenage boys from his block (administrative group of villages), landless agricultural laborers who could benefit from Mukti Ashram's program. As they settled in, Bhoj Raj mingled with the other boys at the center, being not only a message for them through his example but also a presence that all of us could view and be graced with. One afternoon, Bhoj Raj and one other activist retreated to an office with my tape recorder, and emerged a half hour later, after he had recorded his testimony as a document for the ashram. In a later manifestation, it was refashioned by me into a

biographical presentation for the European funding agency representatives whose visit was imminent. Like many others that surface, his narrative is exhibited in various situations for diverse purposes, the most immediate being the role-modeling for the boys, but also including the maintenance and fortification of the organizational ethos. His narrative begins¹⁵:

My name is Bhoj Raj and I am a resident of Orissa, the name of my village is Janpalli, post office is Bhandarpuri, and the district is Bhargat. I was first studying but due to the problems in my home, as my father was a laborer, and due to the small amount of money that he would get he couldn't support my studies, and I had to quit studying. I have studied till class ten and after that I have started helping my father with work. And also in the household agriculture. I stayed in the village and would go to a place which was ten kilometers outside the village.

For Bhoj Raj, a self-described *dalit*, the battle for respect for himself and his fellow *dalits* can be acquired most palpably through the terms of economic justice. When I asked him on a separate occasion about his village, he explained that it is approximately 65% *dalit* and 35% split between Brahmin and the dominant landholding caste. Very few *dalits* own any land at all – instead they are wholly dependent upon the landholders' hiring them for day-to-day wages, which are paid in the form of rice at the equivalent of 15 to 20 rupees, or around 50-65 cents for one day's work. The minimum wage for the state of Orissa – what is deemed necessary to remain above the (in itself) unrealistic poverty line is Rs. 30. (This amount, though often unrealized, is an inadequate income, for it only represents the amount of money necessary for adequate caloric intake, disregarding such necessities as shelter, clothing, and medical care.) He notes that girls in his caste group tend to marry at the age of 14 or 15, and will have a couple of

children by the time they are 20. Of course, these caste groups are stringently endogamous; thus, they always will be marrying into virtually the same poverty they grew up in. The *dalits* are segregated into a separate, outlying part of the village. The landholding families in contrast own roughly from 20-50 acres each. He recounts vividly what he sees when he pictures them -- they (the men) sit together all day, talking, drinking, smoking, and don't work their own land -- a symbolic show of wealth that is amplified by their conspicuous consumption of meat.

For women laborers there was a big conference in our block called Jharvan. In that there was someone from Pithora called Mr. Jaijeji and Kailash Satharthiji from Delhi. And they talked about laborers in this conference, but I was there as a laborer, and I didn't know anyone there. And they told me a little bit about Mukti Ashram there, so from that information I went to this Jan Jagriti Kendra, and Jan Jagriti Kendra sent me to Mukti Ashram in Delhi. I reached Mukti Ashram on 15 March 1989 and I started to learn welding there. When I came to Mukti Ashram, I did not know what the law was or wasn't. I didn't know this beforehand, but at Mukti Ashram I came to acquire legal information. When I stayed there for three months I learned the work I went there for, but I had an interest in social issues, and I would participate in the social education. Three months passed.

Like other boys and young men who eventually find their way to Mukti Ashram, Bhoj Raj came upon it when its activists were participants in another related NGO that was organizing an event in his locale. Kailash's brightness and energy regularly draws people to him, as Bhoj Raj seems to have experienced. Bhoj Raj notes that Mukti Ashram changed his life, for though he initially intended to go there primarily to receive instruction in welding, he soon found that the social education classes were most important to him. Social education -- a critical examination of social

problems in order to discern their causes and potential solutions within the boys' reach – is indeed the aspect of Mukti Ashram that distinguishes it most prominently from other, more ameliorative “upliftment” measures attempted by other organizations.

So I went back to my native village, and I met my friend, my brother, my parents, people in my village. I met all of them, and told them about Mukti Ashram, that it is such a place where poor children can come there and learn about child labor, about their rights, learn occupations, and legal information is also given to them. After all this, the village people heard me out, and asked me “how far is this true?” for they were feeling apprehensive and unbelieving. Then I thought about what I have been told at Mukti Ashram, can I do this thing here, or not? And I kept on thinking about it, and so one day I thought to myself that I will also do something in my village. So I got 2-4 people and I first told them “See, brother, we have been working for so long, and we keep on working for so long, but even then our stomachs are not full.” And then those people asked me “how come you’re asking us this question today?” So I told them that I went to Mukti Ashram and there they look for all the questions and answers, and there you get the signal that in our country, in our villages, in our states, we have certain rights, that we as laborers have been kept away from the fair payment that we should get and from everything else of which we have been deprived. So we as laborers, what do we achieve with only 5 *thane* (of rice) or 15 rupees? Is it enough for our day-to-day livelihood? Can our children get enough food to eat to fill their stomachs?

Bhoj Raj was clearly affected by the activists’ strikingly empowering and sweeping reading of the interconnected dimensions of oppression that comprised his own daily experiences – as a child worker, as a member of a low caste, as a member of the rural proletariat. For the first time, knowledge of guaranteed rights and strategies to go about obtaining them

were directly presented to him. He returned to his village profoundly changed and emboldened. The turning point that he narrates above, of his realization and resolve, is central to his testimony. Having returned to his village he must now decide if his training is relevant to his life. One day, after much deliberation, he views himself anew, for he decides that he too can make a difference. He immediately goes out to his people to find the ultimate validation from them -- that they can be persuaded to stand with him. But his own decision making process, and theirs, and all other components of his narrative, center on struggle -- on the sense of purpose and solidarity necessary to prevail, and how summoning that will is more difficult than capitulating to the powerful.

We talked about all these matters. Some people understood what I was saying, and some said "God has written out this fate for us". That's how they thought. But I kept on stressing my point for 2-3 months, and I kept telling those people, that "Brother, this is not a godly thing. This is not fate. This is our right. Till the time we confront it we will not achieve what we want." So then we called a meeting. 15-20 people came to the meeting, and we discussed how we should do it. So the laborers told me that "Brother, we don't have such a mind, so what you're telling us, how far is it true, and what is it?" And so again I discussed it with them, then we finished the entire meeting and all the laborers of my village sat and decided that this year instead of 5 *thane* of rice if we didn't get 7 *thane* none of us will go to work. So this is what we decided. And then we decided in which month we should not go to work, because in order to keep the work going the landlords would need to call the laborers. So we decided to refuse when they decided to call us to work. We plowed our land but when the landowners time to transplant the rice came, then we stopped.

So those landlords called laborers from another village, and when those laborers from the other village came and they worked we were in big trouble, because we said to increase the wages, but those people would come and do the same

work for that same wage. Then we thought what should we do about it? So again we called a meeting, and together told those laborers that "brother this problem is not just in our village, this problem is about the entire society of laborers. We are first fighting it in our village. So if you would help us in this fight it would be good. But right now you are helping the landowners and we will die of hunger and our wives and children will suffer for everything." This is the way we talked. But some of the people even said this, that "You are not working, and you're not letting others work, too." But all my comrades – laborers of my village – they all were opposed to what those people said, and said "Brother, what you were saying is not good. If you come here forcefully we will come to blows." So these people thought about it and came to the conclusion that we were right. They said "If we die out of hunger would you be happy?" So we talked about a lot of such things. After that they also didn't come to work, since then those people also understood what was going on. So then I said in my village that see, whatever has happened has happened - we will continue to fight in this battle, but till all these laborers can work for more pay, nobody is going to go to work.

So we kept on fighting this battle for two weeks, for 15 days. After 15 days the landowners made an announcement that they will give 7 *thane*. So they gave 7 *thane* but they did not call me to work. They said that they will not call me to work because I was the instigator. The landowners try to divide and rule. But then the other laborers understood and recognized what was going on, and when they fully understood all the people came to me and said "you will come and work with us and we will tell the landowners." They went to the landowners and said, "Look brother, if you will not call Bhoj Raj to work for you, we will not come to work for you." So then the landowners called me to work. And now the 7 *thane* is working well in my village. Then we spread the word around to other villages and we again made an attempt in 2-4 villages for the same amount of compensation, and there also the 7 *thane* has started.

We see that eventually this young man successfully led the agricultural workers on a very trying two-week strike for increased rice payment. This is an impressive accomplishment in a village setting of intergenerational exploitation and the most extreme of constraints, including the threat of physical violence to the disobedient, where the landholders have been able to set the wage and demand the labor when and only when they have such a need. On another occasion he noted that his next project is to secure the payment of minimum wage (as an equivalent measure of rice payment) for all workers in his block of 85 villages. Also important to note are the changes that he attests to in the attitudes of the other *dalits*. His own father, like other subordinates in the village, used to sit on the ground when facing the landlords, but now he sits squarely, boldly in front of them. People are learning by example to speak out for their rights. Bhoj Raj explains that now his comrades can buy an extra set of clothes, have adequate amounts of food, and might even be able to look forward to saving a little money. His widening project receives a bit of monetary support from Suman, who takes it out of BBA's funds; she encourages him to avoid taking any funds offered from other NGOs, as they would then exert pressures on him according to their own agendas.

Bhoj Raj's model narrative is meant to give the children a way that they can believe that they too can do the work of a social activist. It is meant to realistically present the facts of struggle, divisiveness, and (in another section) potential violence, but at the same time to show that change is possible. At Mukti Ashram the children enjoy a protected space in which they are able to explore what they might become -- those possibilities that might otherwise seem unthinkable. Their inevitable return to the village moves from a hazy dream to acute and jarring clarity with the passage of their stay at Mukti Ashram. Bhoj Raj's testimony imparts

resolve even as it sharpens that picture. He demonstrates how he has used the tools at hand, of NGOs and knowledge made available, to move from being incognizant to aware, from being one whose life is affected by circumstances to one who makes changes. But the essential value of his message concerns the recurring impact of his own volition. It is a running theme through the narrative, and the fact that he looks ahead to future projects at the narrative's end reinforces the drive to create and transform.

Intertwined narratives

When the boys first arrive at the ashram, they are understood by the activists to be fragile, traumatized and disoriented. For the first few days they are largely allowed to find a comfort level with their surroundings by having their days unstructured. They rest, talk to one another, investigate the ashram grounds, and slowly get to know Rajnath, Suman, Fotolal, and the other staff. However, the activists attend closely to the children's socialization process. After several days Suman will talk with every boy on an individual basis, asking them about their home and work experiences. The basic information arising from these interviews, such as family composition, father's/parents' occupations, the child's work conditions, the circumstances leading up to him working, his educational level, are recorded under the boy's name, age and village, in a log book that the coordinator Premanand fills out.

I have been told by Suman that the information initially provided is often incomplete, and that new, sometimes contradictory information surfaces later. Suman has also recounted that they are largely not able to explain their personal circumstances in a coherent, understandable way. She commented to me on occasion about one or another boy who did not

do so well in telling his story at one time, but then did better in a subsequent session. The emotion invested in telling the story, as well as the fineness of detail, are key elements that are hoped for as the boys develop their accounts. The scattered details the boys present at first do develop over time into structured narratives, for they are questioned repeatedly in a variety of venues about their lives, and are led by the questions to see what they need to emphasize. They also see more advanced speakers, including activists such as Bhoj Raj who have been in their shoes, modeling their own stories. Generally, the scope of their audience gradually widens, beginning with the activists alone, then moving into classroom settings where their peers are included, and then often taken further to the international audience that awaits them.

In considering the context of the boys' home environment, and whether their development of personal narratives at the ashram is a new form they learn or whether they have already been exposed to it before coming, I am presuming that they have at least heard elders speaking in this way. I only say this with the qualification that I have yet to find a source that addresses this issue specifically in regard to north India. For instance, in writing the life history of an untouchable man from Orissa, James Freeman (1979) speaks about the factor of his own agency as it comes to bear on the emergence of Muli's story, but he fails to address what would have existed had he not been present. I am also assuming that the tellers of personal narratives give bountiful details of the hardships they have encountered, particularly since one can see that their lives are indeed full of hardship. From Benedicte Grima's (1992) work on the expressions of suffering that Paxtun women in Afghanistan relate in certain genres, it is apparent that there is an accepted place for sharing these emotions, at least among women. It is quite likely that in addition some of the boys would

have become familiar with other expressive traditions that offered a societal critique. Vatuk (1979) discusses that the itinerant singers of devotional songs (*bhajans*) in Western Uttar Pradesh often become conveyers of the agendas of organizations that work for various forms of social change; these *bhajnopadeshaks* have the goal of an “alteration in the traditional relationship between capitalist and labourer, between the haves and have-nots” (1979:147). From this context we can see that the boys would not be entirely unfamiliar with the expression of grievances and criticism of the powerful. Mukti Ashram’s role would be to give *them*, even (or especially) as children, the same authority that they would see exhibited by adults elsewhere.

The boys’ stories are given full authority in the effort to find the truth about not only themselves but tangentially about their (often abusive) employers. BBA has been known on occasion to file lawsuits pursuant to the complaints. More frequently, a boy’s story will become publicized as a continuous, seamless component of the organization’s story about itself. In this type of circumstance the organization may be seen as staking its own reputation on the veracity of the boys. However, unless the business owner is singled out by way of a suit he will largely not be publicly named and accused. Instead, the boys and their circumstances are described to the exclusion of naming specific owners or exact locations; these stories are used, then, in a generalized account directed toward society more broadly.

In all cases that I have seen, in the context of communication at the ashram the boys are not treated with any suspicion about their stories – if anything, the more harrowing their tales, the more attention the stories (and they) are given, and the more often their stories will be summoned in the successive instances of representation. This reliance on their own words is true regardless of age, although for the very youngest (such as

Ashraf, who at the time of my visit was only 7) parents' accounts are supplementary sources of information, and the activists themselves might help the story along by adding other details they have ascertained. By attending to and acting from their stories, the organization takes them out of the condition of obscurity that is the fate for untold millions of similar incidents, and elevates each as singularly worthy.

Learning how to vocalize one's experiences, coming to a better understanding about oneself through the process of telling, seeing the story given credence by the listeners, hearing the stories of others who have had similar experiences, and moreover seeing how this sort of testifying can promote their interests, are together the basis for how narrative building is used for rehabilitation at Mukti Ashram. The utility of the narrative process in the interest of healing holds a striking resemblance to the use of *testimonio* in Latin American countries. As Aron explains, memories of terror that had been perpetrated by the state have impelled victims to speak out about their experiences: "This process of bearing witness to injustice by public declarations, although not undertaken for relief from psychological symptoms, has distinctively therapeutic features . . ." (1992:175). But she continues by explaining that in *testimonio*, too, the importance of the process is found most strongly in its social significance:

The government lays the blame for the nation's social convulsions on the people themselves; and only when the people have formally contested this accusation does the locus of culpability move to where it properly belongs. With this knowledge formalized, the community is liberated from an ideologized reality that has become internalized. . . [1992:178]

Even beyond the necessary critique is the formulation of a transformative vision of the future (Gugelberger and Kearney 1991), and here as well

testimonio holds a great deal in common with the narratives that are developed at Mukti Ashram, speaking of the global significance of their surfacing.

Each boy's distinctive story is valorized (to greater or lesser degrees), but the even more significant gain for Mukti Ashram is made by the formation of the corpus of stories taken together. This corpus also substantiates the truth value and worthiness of each individual story. Though the boys' experiences are really the reason for Mukti Ashram's existence and are central to its very functioning, they are complemented by the activists' personal narratives as well as the story of Mukti Ashram/BBA's genesis and growth as an institution.

The common shape these narratives take describes a process: the initial setting of adversity, a coming into awareness that is concomitant with alliance building, and the decision to engage in the ongoing struggle against enemies, (who are variously landlords, the state, business owners, or the general circumstances of economic and social disadvantage). Certain counter cultural meanings emerge from these life stories, themselves quite regular between each other, including a conceptualization of a singular oppressed community in opposition to the rich and powerful, as well as underlying ideas about power and individual agency. Additionally, the multitude of venues for telling and retelling the stories results in each storyteller developing a useful routine. In describing nationalist histories, Ana Alonso notes, "Not only does the fixity of the printed word or the freezing by repetition of the spoken word aid the work of simplification and reification but also, it helps to establish the authority which representations require if they are to be seen as representative. Public language, through its very publicity, acquires a measure of truth and legitimacy" (Alonso 1988:35). A similarly simple and reified message is

required of Mukti Ashram in order to present itself to different public groups in a coherent and trustworthy way.

Pedagogical techniques

In the classroom and elsewhere at the ashram, a reciprocal relationship between the organization and the boys is fostered. Particularly in the social education classes, individuals' experiences are relied upon as specific examples to substantiate the organization's overall social critique, and this social critique is at once also presented to them to cause them to understand their specific circumstances in their larger social context. They are led to make the conceptual jump from articulating one's own experiences to thinking in abstract social categories. Eldridge has noted that "an enormous step in the development of poor people's consciousness is required, in that the identification of exploiting classes must shift from an immediate, personalized environment to more distant, impersonal arenas" (1984:415). Several teachers have noted that this is a quite difficult shift for the boys, and is met with differential success. One teacher linked the difficulty in acquiring this cognitive skill with their late exposure to literacy.

In one social education session that took place approximately four weeks after a new group of boys had begun the program, Suman informed them about a just-published newspaper article in which several supporters of the carpet industry in the Mirzapur-Badhoi area had come out in defense of their own labor practices. Their testimonies were given individually, complete with photographs and names on a full page of the paper. In the testimonies it was claimed that the loom owners only employed local adults, that the local economies were strengthened as a result, and that the

proprietors themselves were only able to make a modest living. During class the children, seated on the grass and gathered in front of Suman, looked up with interest as she held the article up so they could see the reality, importance and immediacy of it. She began by telling them one point an author in the article made, that the *maliks* (bosses) do not bring laborers in from outside the village, and then asked them if the statement was true. They angrily responded that no, *Didiji* (big sister), it's a lie. She continued¹⁶:

- S: So this has become an untrue statement, but they had it printed in the newspaper, and now all the educated people will read this, so nobody will hear what you have to say.
- C: He didn't speak for us, who is going to say anything for us -- they said a lie to Didi.
- S: Not to Didi, son, it was written in the newspaper.
- C: In the newspaper. . .
- S: This is printed around the whole world, now the whole world will read this. Now how will you prove your case? How will people hear your statements? *You* know what is true. *You* know the truth, don't you? And how do you know the truth? Because you worked in that (industry). Right? And the person who was not involved with carpets.
- C: (*inaudible*)
- S: What?
- C: Didi, I . . .
- S: They beat you and made you work, right?
- C: (*Loud chorus of responses, several voices, unclear*)
 . . . inside the ground
- U: Yes, yes, under the ground, they made a house under the ground. (They) used a ladder and in this made rungs out of wood, and in this they fitted the loom and . . .
- S: (*Translates for Laura*)
- U: He dug a pit, and covered it with stones, and put the machines underneath.

Further on, Suman drew out the larger picture after the children had a chance to relate more details of their experiences:

- S: What's going on? What's happening in this industry?
In reality what's the true picture? What really happens there? From where do they bring all the children?
- C: From the remote villages (*dehat se*).
- S: From the *dehat*, yes?
- C: Yes, yes.
- S: And what do these people make of the lives of the children?
- C: They ruin them.
- S: They ruin them.
- C: Yes, yes.
- S: They're not giving them a trade. What is happening there?
- C: (*inaudible*)
- S: Life is being wasted, isn't it . . . so they say here, brother . . .
- U: The *shamder*¹⁷ became rich. We're all . . . crazy.

(S - Suman, C - a boy in the audience, U - Udayraj, one of the boys)

Through the lesson, Suman outlines a provocative interpretation of the newspaper article, one of collusion and deception. She calls on the children to provide the counter narrative of truth. She stresses the irony of how those who do not know firsthand -- those who have not made carpets themselves -- are the ones who have stolen the stage. She tells them that their words can be powerful, but first they must have the will to use them. She is also demonstrating the value of literacy, by holding up to view an example of how it is used to portray a viewpoint and disseminate it to the multitudes. Observe the power of print, she is saying, and think what can happen if you too can wield it . . .

Several of the children urgently try to tell their stories, vociferously and at once, and the details that they give are additional to the more straightforward case histories they had given earlier. The very act of telling is central. And indeed the details of abuse and manipulation that they tell are most urgent things to be known, between themselves and by others. Certainly the boys have some level of awareness, brought with them directly from their experiences, but the task of the activists and what constitutes a crucial part of their rehabilitation is the channeling of these impressions and anecdotes into cohesive narratives pregnant with import. An important stage in this awareness-building is to understand and thus rage at the injustices they suffered, but most importantly, to link these concrete, anguishing experiences to the more abstract concepts which fasten each boy's narrative to those of the others, so that they understand themselves in relation to their society. Udayraj knows this implicitly when he says "the *shamder* became rich . . . we're all . . . crazy."

Sanjit's lesson

One Sunday afternoon, as I sat outside my room and wrote fieldnotes, I was very nicely interrupted by 12-year-old Sanjit. He gazed at the English words forming on the page and asked me if I had written anything in Hindi. So I showed him some vocabulary lists that I had compiled, which seemed to thoroughly delight him. He blithely missed the fact that there were English translations next to the words, and proceeded with the utmost care to interpret the single Hindi words into full Hindi sentences, beginning, "the meaning is this (*matlab yeh hai*)" I was struck by the fact that though the words often did not concern child labor or even social issues more generally, Sanjit's examples all neatly corresponded with

the teachings of the ashram. The immediacy of his experience here was the material from which he found his lesson plan. For instance, *unnti karna* means "to improve." His example was that if there are problems for poor people in their village, that this is a place from which improvements could be made. *Bhavishya* means "future," as Sanjit explained that we are here now to learn so that in the future we can do good work. His initiative to carry the lessons of the ashram further into a new venue is notable, especially in that it indicates his developing understanding of their ubiquitous significance. In another sense, the fact that he related these and other words to the overall program, and the parallel fact that I happened to choose these particular words, had both developed out of the social setting of the ashram. In this sense the examples he drew from were entirely fitting, maybe even predictable.

The boys "themselves"

One afternoon Rajnath, in a state of excitement and urgency, approached me with important news. On that day a young boy named Chedi revealed something new in class while repeating the story of his capture by the middleman, years of forced labor at a carpet loom, and eventual liberation through the *chappamari* (raid). It was now known, from Chedi's revelation, that his mother had wept in despair for her son, from the time he disappeared all the way through the five years of his absence, and when he returned home to her she had lost her sight from this continuous stream of tears.

Chedi seemed to have discovered that it was important to make explicit the depth of his and his family's suffering, and by meeting this aim he received the response of grave awe and respect. The detail that he

brought out might be true or untrue, and he might have believed it to be true or known it to be false. But I contend that such an evaluation does not apprehend the importance of the *telling* of this anecdote. Chedi's search for his peers' and teachers' approval -- a desire to be a member of the ashram community -- impelled him to devote detailed, emotional attention to properly tell his story.

Chedi immediately integrated this anecdote as a part of his routine narrative. This became clear when several days later a Spanish journalist arrived at the ashram from visiting the Global March Against Child Labor (which at that time had just made it across the border from Nepal to India). Chedi was the one singled out to be interviewed in detail by him. Rajnath, the journalist "Dusster" Sánchez, Chedi and I sat together in a circle and the three-step translation process began: the journalist would ask me a question in English, I would ask Rajnath in faltering Hindi, and he would translate in rapid Hindi to Chedi, who himself could often anticipate the sequence of questions or understand my words, and would start excitedly to answer. Then, the translation process would reverse itself, and I would receive a slow, careful Hindi translation from Rajnath of Chedi's Bihari dialect. Rajnath was soon called away and the three of us continued. Dusster asked what he thought to be his final question, and after receiving Chedi's answer he solemnly offered a handshake to the 11-year-old and a colorful plastic pen. Chedi's eyes sparkled when he took the pen, but as we began to stand he realized that we thought the interview to be finished. In a commanding voice he said "*baitho*" (sit) and Dusster and I looked at each other and sat. With a fiercely sober look, Chedi said that there was one more thing he wanted to say. He explained about his mother, her tears, their reunion, and of course the reporter dutifully recorded the details.

There is no simple recounting of facts, and consequently no core narrative that exists to be found or created. Instead, the memories that are selected and given a place in each narrative's structure, (which simultaneously structure the narrative), are generated in the social context of the ashram. During my stay there I was involved in this process of creation, taking several of the boys' representations the next step by writing about them for the Novib guests. My emotional ties to the activists and boys was already well cemented by this time. On a brief excursion from the ashram, I sat in the urban Kalkaji office, which was electrified by the activities surrounding the Global March in progress, and I wrote both from my heart and with careful attention to Suman's expectations. In view of this series of linkages between the boys, the activists, myself, and the reading/listening public, I present below the polished representations of several of the boys at the ashram.

Bala Sada, Udayraj and Upender, all very young and former carpet weavers, were often at the fore of Mukti Ashram's presentation to visitors. Their stories and the stories of others from the infamous carpet belt of Mirzapur-Bhadoi are some of the most brutal and dramatic among all the incidences of exploitation in child labor. This is especially the case since many boys are abducted from their homes, making the parent's role unproblematically innocent. In this way the audience members' sympathy is not threatened with the potential interruption of a question, such as might occur in situations where the parents feel compelled to commit their children to work in exchange for a loan. The enormous pressures placed on the poor in India, often driving them to alcohol consumption and other habits that are economically detrimental to their families, are rendered into unnecessary details that the audience need not hear, (and indeed this streamlining is necessary given the audience's desire to hear concise,

digestible accounts that leave them with the satisfaction of time well spent in understanding "the truth").

Bala Sada

As a 10-year-old, Bala Sada wears the grave expression of a grownup who has lived through very hard times. Indeed, he himself has. When he was 5 years old, he was taken out of the desperate poverty of his family and village, to the unimaginably greater misery of a life seated in front of a carpet loom. His family lives in a village named Sunindabad, which is situated in the district of Saharsa, in Bihar state. Bihar is the poorest state of India, with infant mortality and literacy rates clearly reflecting this; Saharsa itself is one of the poorest and least developed districts in this state, and it is there that many children are captured to become workers in the carpet belt of Uttar Pradesh. The middleman who approached him said not a word about carpets, or even about work. He was lured away by promises of all the things he craved -- the chance to study, lots of good food, the chance to relax and play in an environment free from worry about that next meal ("*Usne kaha chalo, parhne, khane milega, khelne ke milega, apna sute, baitne ke milega, chalo, ham chal diya*").

The beatings began as quickly as he began his new life as a carpet weaver, since he did not know the first thing about how to do such work. The hope that the beatings might stop was his only incentive to learn the job. Every day he would be woken up at 4:00 a.m. by the *malik* (factory owner) to begin weaving. Sometime later in the morning he and the other six boys would be allowed to go out into the woods, which served as their latrine. Bala Sada continued his work with only a noontime break of two or three *chappatis* (unleavened bread) and a little *dal* (lentils). His needs as a growing boy were certainly not an issue to the *malik*, and that his hunger was not satisfied by so little food was never acknowledged. A second evening meal was his only other break in the day, as he worked late into the evening, often till midnight. He and his work companions were not allowed to speak with each

other. He worked, ate and slept in the same spot, each and every day. His only bedding was an old *bori* (sack).

Bala Sada pleaded for release from his work. The *malik* replied time and again that upon completion of the carpet on the loom he would be sent home, but it seemed that a new carpet always needed to be made. One time he and two other boys tried to escape in the night, while the *malik* was away. Two other men from the *malik's* family caught them just outside the village, and held them for the owner's return. The next morning, the beatings began afresh. Retaliation culminated with the *malik* coming at him with an iron machete, saying that he would cut the boy into pieces. Bala Sada was pulled onto the floor, and the *malik* raised the machete over him. He grabbed the *malik's* hand in a plea for life, and suddenly the man turned away.

Bala Sada says that he felt resigned to his fate, thinking that he would never be able to leave, but then the day of the rescue operation came. His father came -- the boy finally was in the same room with him again after 5 long years, but the police were there, too, and for this he wept in fear. Would the police beat his father? He remembers knowing that he did not need to be afraid any more, as soon as the policeman called him "*beta*" (son), and promised that he could now go home.

Udayraj

Udayraj's parents were not home when the *dalal* (middleman) came to take him away -- they were harvesting rice in the fields owned by other families of their village in Saharsa district, Bihar. Now all of 12 years old, Udayraj is the oldest child with two brothers and one sister. But when the *dalal* came he was only 8, and then he eagerly left his younger siblings behind to go with the man, to see a film in the nearby bazaar. He had never seen one before, and the prospect was so thrilling . . .

It gradually became clear that a film was not part of the planned itinerary. The *dalal* took him to the station platform, onto a train, and then off at another platform to wait for yet another train. By then it was dark. Udayraj started to cry. The *dalal* consoled him, "Don't worry, I'll show you the film". Udayraj didn't even know where he was -- his village constituted his only known environment. By the end of the journey he was hundreds of kilometers away, in Mirzapur district of Uttar Pradesh.

Like many children who are forced to work on the carpet looms, Udayraj had never been to school, because his parents did not have adequate money to send him. His only "education" before coming to Mukti Ashram was in weaving carpets. And like other children of the same fate, he was forced to work from early in the morning until 11 or 12 o'clock at night, with only a brief break for a paltry meal -- just enough to enable him to continue weaving. He was beaten often, even for voicing the slightest complaint. He could not eat or sleep until he finished his daily quota of weaving.

His father finally found him after one or two years (Udayraj cannot remember exactly how long), and came to take him home. In an act of utter arrogance, the loom owner offered him the address of the local police station, and challenged him to go there and try to file a case to get his son back. Thinking he was defeated, and not knowing what else to do, the father returned home. He again tried to reclaim his son, this time bringing Udayraj's maternal uncle. Knowing the man's desperate poverty, the loom owner told him to come on the 14th of the month for his son -- it was only the 10th, and he did not have enough money for the food necessary for such a long wait.

Udayraj also saw the frustration of the defeated attempts of his father. In a frantic attempt to go home, he and two other boys fled in the middle of the night. They were found, though, at the train station, and were brought back to the loom owner's house. For this act Udayraj was hung upside down from a tree and beaten severely, on his head and legs.

Shortly after this incident, SACCS activists conducted a raid and released him from the loom. His first experience of freedom was in the camp at Mirzapur, where he had the important experience of meeting other children released from carpet looms. His return home is a dramatic memory in his mind, for at that time he saw his mother and siblings for the first time in four years. He says that his family could all recognize him, even after so long, because from the ages of 8 to 12 he did not grow. Udayraj is now fully engaged in catching up on this stolen time.

Upender

16 year old Upender was abducted by a *dalal* when he was 11 years old, when he was at the river taking a bath. The other children at the river managed to escape, and when they reached the village they told Upender's mother, but by then it was too late to find him. His father could not protect him either, as he was in far-off Punjab at the time, having left the family out of economic necessity for the promised opportunities of that prosperous state.

Upender's father came back and managed to find his son, where he was working at carpet weaving in the Bhadhoi district of Uttar Pradesh. He wept upon seeing Upender, and demanded that the loom owner release him. The loom owner put him off, easing the tension by promising his son's freedom just after a few days, after he finished the carpet in progress. The promise went unfulfilled. The father demanded both his son and wages for all the work he had done, but went home only with 200 rupees (about U.S. \$5), which he took to lessen his family's critical poverty. Upender remained at the loom.

A little rice and watery lentils. Rice husks as a cover for the winter nights. A single set of clothes that could never be cleaned for lack of time. Weaving, weaving, from before dawn to well into the night. Upender and 12 other boys at the factory had nothing else in their lives, except to witness the

factory owner in drunken celebration at their completion of another carpet, another stack of rupees for his pocket.

After 5 years of labour Upender was able to return home, after the rescue operation which targeted his workplace. At the reunion with his family in his home village, he found his childhood again. His weeping mother sat with him and presented him with a long awaited home-cooked meal. As they sat together, she fed him from her hand to his mouth. He was really home.

There are four exceptional boys who will live at the ashram for several years, possibly until adulthood. Govind, Mohan, Shaukat and his little brother Ashraf are all deeply involved in the public activities of BBA/Mukti Ashram, and after one to two years of speaking as representatives of child labor they are such an intrinsic part of the organization that they must be viewed as a separate group. All socially flexible, articulate, enthusiastic and photogenic, they are the reliable witnesses for Mukti Ashram's long-term work. In successive chapters I discuss Govind's and Mohan's experiences, particularly as ashram residents and Global March participants, but Ashraf will stand as a representative of this subgroup as his narrative was related to Novib alongside those of Bala Sada, Udayraj and Upender.

Ashraf

He is everybody's darling. Ashraf meanders on the grounds of Mukti Ashram, hands in his pockets, watching the daily events unfold. When cuddled or gently teased, he produces an insouciant smile and the brightest sparkle that could ever be seen from a pair of eyes. His outward shyness masks an inner spirit of strength and courage that has come from his

early experience of brutality. At 8, his tiny frame belies a childhood of nutritional deprivation and hardship.

Ashraf's family journeyed to Delhi from Bihar state before he was old enough to remember his own ancestral home. They came like millions of others -- because it is said that in Delhi there is everything -- you can work, and from this you can have food and clothing. But for Ashraf, his parents hoped for more, and so they accepted the job offer given to them, that Ashraf would go to live in the home of a high-ranking government officer named Hamid Hussain, solely to be a companion and playmate for his children. In return, he would be well cared for, given an education, and a government job when he was grown up. The transaction was mediated by a neighbour who knew Hussain's servant.

Two weeks after Ashraf moved in, he was dismissed back to his parents. Aslam, the neighbour to Ashraf's parents, came to pick him up, and found him with his hands and feet bound. A fresh burn was apparent on his hand, which the officer said was the result of an accident the boy had while making *chappatis*. Blood was oozing out of his mouth and cheeks, his lips were swollen, and he had other wounds on his chest, groin and legs. Ashraf had been threatened not to talk about what happened to him, and so he was quiet and frightened.

A couple of hours after returning home, he recounted his experiences to his distressed parents. He spoke of the promises broken by the officer -- how he was poorly fed, forced to do heavy domestic tasks, and beaten regularly. The abuse culminated in an incident where he desperately sneaked a gulp of leftover milk from the glass used by a child of the officer. As a punishment his hand was held in the flame of the stove, he was hit in the testicles, and a hot iron rod was applied to various areas of his little body.

His parents nursed his wounds at home, but his health deteriorated throughout the night, so they took him to a local clinic. The doctor there assessed that his burns were severe, and ordered him sent to Safdarjung Hospital for treatment. He was so badly injured that his parents had to carry him as

they journeyed from the hospital to the police station to demand action.

There they came face to face with the same corrupt social system that created the initial context of abuse that Ashraf experienced. After some delay, the police produced Hussain, but instead of arresting the official the police tried to force Ashraf's mother to take a 500 rupee (U.S. \$13) payment to absolve him of any legal battle. She adamantly refused and continued to seek justice. Shortly later, SACCS intervened on her behalf, took up the case, and introduced Ashraf to the healing environment of Mukti Ashram.

Today, Ashraf loses his shyness in the infectious atmosphere of singing and slogan-shouting sessions. His voice rings out clearly and confidently, and he dances with energy and joyfulness.

I did not include in these profiles a regular component of the boys' narratives that is encouraged, particularly in front of visitors. A boy is encouraged to publicly announce that he, too, wishes to fight for justice in his village. When he adds this satisfying conclusion (which actually signals that the story is not really over just as the struggle as a whole is not over), he is making the most decisive choice to identify with the ashram. In the manner of Bhoj Raj's transformation from ex-child laborer to being an activist himself, he also takes a step closer with this statement to share in the visions of the activists.

Chapter V

Extending the meaning and augmenting alliances

The leaders of Mukti Ashram have perfected the organization's defining narrative. The particular activists and boys who can frame the telling of their lives within this structure are given the preponderance of responsibility and opportunity to represent the organization publicly. But this narrative in its various incarnations is *only* the model and cannot involve everyone equally. The scope of Mukti Ashram's goals, its resultant activities, and ultimately its success in drawing support, would be severely constrained if it did not simultaneously produce a wider vision within which others could actively participate. This entails numerous strategies, particularly those of involving other people to varying degrees, seeking out commonalities to capitalize upon and re-present to the tellers as well as to wider audiences, and muting extant differences that might serve to divide the community. This chapter serves to elaborate upon these processes that go into the consolidation and fortification of the group.

Strength in inclusiveness

Profiles of activists

There is a predictable, fairly consistent social division that can be seen between the leaders of BBA/Mukti Ashram and the resident activists. Kailash and Suman are clearly highly educated and metropolitan in background. The resident activists, on the other hand, are variously ex-trainees themselves (hailing from Scheduled Caste or Scheduled tribe

groups), from lower caste rural backgrounds, or upper caste but still rural in orientation. For the resident activists particularly, the decision to devote their lives to this work has entailed voluntary poverty. Ideally, all workers align themselves with the movement by repudiating aspects of their background, such as their families' value systems or their caste identity. Of course, the realization of this ideal is uneven, as is the parallel set of expectations for the children. The group flexibly accommodates activists who choose to retain more traditional roles. An example of this can be seen in Ranvir Singh, who has been a teacher at Mukti Ashram since the very beginning. He is married, and at the time his wife was expecting their first baby. She is integrated into his family in the standard patrilocal manner, and resides in their village in Haryana. Approximately once monthly, she either comes to Mukti Ashram and stays with him or he makes a trip back to Haryana himself. However, as will be seen, the assumption of leadership or activist identities does often entail some sacrifice of traditional expectations. Below are portraits of Suman and Rajnath. Since these two are (along with Kailash himself) the most revered of all the staff, the examples they set in their chosen lifestyles and outlooks can be seen as the most emphatic displays of the organization's ideals.

As a 37-year-old unmarried professional, Suman has taken an atypical and likely quite difficult path in life. Living in the city with her attorney brother and mother, she makes the journey almost every day to the outpost of Ibrahimpur, usually after sitting through meetings at the main SACCS office in Kalkaji. Her driver Surendra, whose reckless bravery on the road is offset only by his constant, wide smile, shuttles her back and forth in journeys that easily total 4 hours in an average day. The arrival of the vehicle through the gate is noisy and anomalous with the bicycle and pattering scooter of the ashram, and her entrance always causes several of

the boys to approach her and respectfully touch her feet in greeting. My fieldnotes indicate that early in my stay at the ashram, I thought her to be "fiery, opinionated, manipulative, controlling, arrogant." Now I would emphasize her seemingly unlimited and infectious energy and masterful, intense demeanor that kept everyone focused on the struggle at hand.

Like a minority of other urban intellectuals have done, Suman has purposefully dropped her family name because it would automatically locate her on a social hierarchy. She speaks very little about her life, but when questioned she will provide some skeletal details. Her interest in social issues goes back many years. She received a Master's degree from Delhi University in Political Science and Social Work, and worked on various welfare projects for several years. These included working with ragpicker children in the city, with poor women workers in crowded Old Delhi and in flood relief efforts elsewhere.

Her tenure with BBA goes back to the organization's beginnings in the late 1980s, and she was one of the original builders of the facility of Mukti Ashram in 1991. She described to me that she would come out to the site with Ranvir and sporadically with other people, and work evening and night to build the ashram and plant the trees. They would be so exhausted from the effort that they would simply stay there overnight rather than take the journey back into the city. But she was motivated, led on by memories of seeing child workers throughout north India, spending their childhoods grinding chillies, carrying molten glass, breaking rocks. She would dream about them, and in her dreams she would talk to them, and they to her. This is how she describes the commencement of what has become her singular devotion to her work today.

Mornings after *shramdaan* and evenings before dinner, Rajnath would knock on the door to my room, with two cups of tea in his hand,

invite himself in to talk but not take a seat until I insisted. He would bring up such various mundane details about the ashram that would lead fluidly into his favorite topics – social problems, movements for social change, and the pivotal factor of electoral politics. Barely 22 years old at the time, he had already been asked to take the position of ashram manager, but most importantly he was the most revered teacher by the children. He was always, it seemed, being sought out by someone there, and as he would walk from one building to the next he would be followed by someone urgently shouting “*guruji!*”

He comes from a family of small farmers in the Gorakhpur area of eastern Uttar Pradesh. When I asked him how much land his father owned, he indicated vaguely that it was a very small parcel – only one-two acres. More important was the fact that he was from a poor, rural background, that though his parents are illiterate he completed school through the force of his own determination and against serious barriers. These things he adamantly emphasized. He attended Lucknow University as an undergraduate, and it seems he left the program prematurely to take up full-time work as a social activist. Now completing his M.A. in Sociology in his spare time (by way of readings and a written exam), he downplays the importance of formal education, saying that Suman has insisted he do it for the doors that will open, just as he explains his reluctance to take up the position of manager at the ashram.

This is linked to his self-ascribed location among all those who work in social movements. In his view there are three categories of occupation in social movements. The professional worker is in the background, writing or researching, and while his/her work is important, the effects are indirect. The social worker solves immediate problems but without a larger vision of social change. Finally, the social activist such as himself is



3. Rajnath (left) and Fotolal: two of Mukti Ashram's resident activists

engaged in solving the small problems but working simultaneously all the while on the big picture. He has purposefully renounced his social background and family obligations and has thrown his lot in with social activists, and this has had enormously significant reverberations. His parents were at the time trying to marry him to a woman of his caste group. When I questioned him about what he would do, he grinned and said that only one caste was acceptable to him for marriage – the “social activist caste.”

Not being victims of human rights abuse themselves, the activists instead purposefully reject aspects of their identity that would situate them on the winning side of the society that has perpetrated the abuses – they refuse material comfort, downplay prestige, and forego caste-based privileges. Rejecting these things that mark them as separate, they often work toward a purer connection with a fundamental, common humanity. They exemplify what James Jasper has described concerning the leaders in “post-citizenship protest”, which he says is “composed of people already integrated into their society’s political, economic, and educational systems. Because they need not demand basic rights for themselves, they often pursue protections or benefits for others, including on occasion the entire human species” (1997:7). They seek justice for these boys not in the name of partisan interest, but instead by asserting the implicit equality that underlies the identification of that common humanity.

The cart driver’s story

Mukti Ashram’s ethos includes an open welcome to all visitors who wish to come and learn. But some of the visitors can contribute their own perspectives -- these people who are not central actors but whose stories

either exemplify this organization's narrative or in other ways substantiate it are on occasion called upon to give their accounts. As the resident researcher and intern, with my expressed desire to understand the social issues through the lenses of individualized accounts, and because of the duration of my visit, I was invited to listen to much more than versions of the standard presentations, and so included in my schooling were conversations with these others.

On a bitterly cold December afternoon, after children and staff had finished their lunches and new lessons had begun, a man pulling a cycle-cart approached the gate. Subhash opened the gate, and the driver, standing with all his weight on the pedals, slowly wheeled in the two metal *almiras* that he was assigned to deliver. Rajnath assisted him in carrying them to the appropriate rooms, and then asked the driver if he had had a meal that day. The man, first reticent and cautious, said quietly that no, he hadn't, and with those words Rajnath shouted "*Prakashji! Prakash! Kuch khana layie!*" Some of the remaining rice, *chappatis*, *dal* and *sabji* were brought out on a plate. Rajnath and I sat with the man while he ate, and then three cups of chai were brought out and we warmed our hands around the cups as the man explained his circumstances to us, and of the difficulties (*samasyaen*) that stem from social problems. We had read newspaper reports of people dying on the streets of Delhi from exposure to the record cold nights, and of other people driven to suicide by the addition of yet another misery; now this man himself explained that he was living under the very cart that sat beside us as we enjoyed the hot, sweet drink.

With Rajnath listening carefully and nodding gravely in recognition of such a story, the man recounted that he was from a village near Lucknow, and indeed his wife and children remain in the village. He had worked as a clerk in his local police station (*thana*) from 1988 until 1992.

He stated that he lost his job suddenly, because another man had paid a bribe to receive the position he held. With the sudden loss of income, and a lack of opportunity in his area, he traveled to Delhi where he managed to find the job he has now. These details he recounted patiently and calmly, in a matter of fact way, and with an incisive observation about the connection between his own circumstances and larger social problems. Surely speaking for other people who live on the streets in Delhi, he explained that the problem is not an urban one but rather one that originates in the villages. With a sense of certainty gained from experience, and the fervent agreement of Rajnath, he reiterated that the government needs to focus on the problems of poverty and obtaining a livelihood in the rural areas, that these are the *samasyaen* that must be given priority. Rajnath chipped in, excitedly and in English, "corruption"!

The driver's story was affirmed and valorized through the venue it was given. In turn, it confirmed and reinforced the societal assessment that had brought Rajnath into activist work initially. The story emphasized an aspect of rural life that draws its strength from existent inequalities which in turn spawn further degradations, such as those that the children then at Mukti Ashram had experienced.

Nageshwar's father, Laxmi's mother

The boys go through the program without the presence of their parents, who remain at home. On occasion circumstances arise that call for the assistance of parents. While I resided there, the activists wanted to bring Nageshwar and Laxmi, among other boys, out of India on the Global March, and the parents were needed to intervene in the bureaucracy and permit the boys to leave the country. Remaining silently in the shadows,

Nageshwar's father and Laxmi's mother neither initiated nor were actively encouraged to take part in the ashram's daily activities. However, I was able to speak with each of them briefly, with the avid assistance of my companion Rajnath. I approached the small circle of boys and parents who sat gazing into the fire, and another chair was brought out for me. Rajnath told me to ask Nageshwar's father questions, saying that his story is very good, and so we began.

Nageshwar's father spoke to me of omnipresent suffering and a series of tragedies as characteristic of his life. His own mother and father died when he was very little (yeh high he indicated, motioning with his hand), so he set out to work in the village as a laborer at that time. His only brother died 20 years ago. His wife is ill with stomach problems; because of this she cannot work, which presents a serious problem to their survival.¹⁸ Nageshwar's father explained that he works all the time because it is simply necessary for survival. In fact, when I asked about whether sometimes there is no work (thinking about the agricultural cycles in Bihar), he emphatically stated that he works all the time. He works in the village when he is able to, but otherwise must travel up to 10 kilometers away to find work. The family's diet consists only of four items: rice, onion, *dal*, and potato. There are no other family members in their household to help in earning wages – only himself, his wife and two sons.

Nageshwar and his younger brother were both lured away from home by a *dalal*. Nageshwar himself (who at the time of the interview was said to be 16-17 years old), had worked for 5 years in carpet weaving (from the ages of 10-15) and was never paid. When he tried to escape he was caught in the vicinity, and in retribution the loom owner cut him up with a knife and burned parts of his body. He nearly died from the 35 wounds that had been inflicted. All the time that this had happened, his father did

not know his whereabouts. He went to the Benares area alone, searching for both his sons. When he was there, a story was circulating about a carpet weaver boy named Nageshwar who had been sliced up, was discovered abandoned, and taken to a hospital, likely dead by this time. Hearing this, his father stood weeping in the street – whereupon a policeman approached him and asked him why. He told his story and the policeman helped him locate and rescue his other son. So Nageshwar's father returned home with his youngest son, being fed on the journey home through the kindness of others. But he said that his grief over Nageshwar was so strong that he could not eat for 3 months, thinking his son was dead. Meanwhile Nageshwar had been brought by activists from the hospital to Mukti Ashram to rehabilitate. He did not speak for 40 days. In a dramatic moment he finally said his name and where he was from. After his stay at Mukti Ashram he was brought home, where everyone still believed him to be dead. As word spread, people came from surrounding villages just to see this child who was actually alive after all.

Laxmi's mother works in her home village in Saharsa District of Bihar. Her father died some years back whereas her mother died when she was very young. She was the youngest child in her family, and her two brothers and five sisters now live some distance away from her. She is a laborer (*mazdur*), working for a local *zamindar* (landlord) for daily wages. Her husband died six years ago, and by that time Laxmi was already in Benares at a carpet factory. He and 3 other boys from the same village had been taken away by a *dalal*. Laxmi worked for five years, receiving no pay and allowed no contact with his family. She noted that Laxmi's growth has been stunted from the lack of proper nutrition he received while a carpet weaver, but that he has grown some in the three years since his release

(through a raid conducted by BBA), and she plans to arrange for his marriage quite soon.

In describing their village, she stated that there are 390 households of *dalits*, only around 20 households of *zamindars*. These are the two terms she used to categorize the village's composition. She noted that all the *dalits* are poor, and that the government has done nothing for the people of her village. She lives in a *kaccha* (mud, not brick) house. The *dalits* have not organized themselves politically under threat of death or other physical punishment. However, Laxmi wants to be the village head and is quite sure he will win. He plans to make life better for the poor people of his village – to work for the building of a road, bringing in good water, and having the minimum wage enforced. I asked her whether she is glad about Laxmi's goals, and after several moments reflection she did say that she approves, and commented that he is not afraid.¹⁹

A mental map of Uttar Pradesh

While the activists concentrate on their immediate charges in the contained environment of the ashram, they constantly draw linkages between the individuals' experiences and the intersecting social problems that they see as characterizing the nation as a whole. They have identified pervasive systems of exploitation, and this has colored their vision of society so thoroughly that when they look at the world they see all things in relation to exploitation. Accompanying Suman, Rajnath, and the driver Surendra on a road trip to Garwha, a district in southwest Bihar, this became strikingly clear to me.

Though I never made it myself all the way to the area, I was earlier briefed by Suman on the project.²⁰ Garwha is one of the prime catchment

areas for the carpet industry of the Mirzapur-Bhadoi region of Uttar Pradesh. This means that the area is worked by the *dalals*, who are paid by loom owners to seek out boys and bring them to UP (and of course we have seen that their methods are either coercive or deceitful). Suman noted to me that their success depends partly on the fact that the parents are “ignorant” – they do not watch for these *dalals* or know to warn their children against them. Some even agree to send their children with them because they are completely unaware of what would really happen to them. Giving a context for the situation, she explained that the parents are often without work. They live in areas with no irrigated (only rain fed) farming, and no drinking water, electricity, or good roads.

Suman was planning to meet with some of the mothers of several villages to explore business ventures that might make them more self-sufficient and provide periodic profit. She had several ideas at the time. She might help them commercialize their production of pickled vegetable (*achaar*) if she could find a market for them. (Suman was especially interested in finding an international market for their pickles, and I helped her make some initial contacts with U.S. agencies.) She did also note that some family members had acquired the skill of making carpets, and she might help them acquire orders and raw materials. Another potential scheme was to find better buyers for the plants they gather for Ayurvedic medicinal production, since they are only able to sell them for a very low price. This was to be a reconnaissance journey for the initiation of another BBA project. In focusing on the mothers of families in the area, this is an example of how the organization, though publicly a “single-point programme”, relates the problems that the children face to the original problems in the home.

For the approximately 250 miles that took us from Delhi to Kanpur, Suman acted as my host and explained to me what we were seeing as we barreled down the Grand Trunk road. The earliest memorable town we passed through was Khurja. I remember thinking to myself that I had never seen such a dreary and oppressive place. We passed by what seemed to be miles of ugly factories with smokestacks churning out black clouds of chemicals. The air was ferociously smelly, and we rolled up the car windows in the interest of self-preservation. Behind the walls, according to Suman, children labor away in the pottery industry. She pointed to the protected gates, where access is controlled by armed guards, noting that groups such as BBA are unable to gain access to ascertain working conditions. To compound the endless misery we imagined to be taking place all around us, we saw men walking on the roads, herding their water buffalos and goats in front of them. Heading to the slaughterhouses in town, the animals were honored by their owners with garlands. Suman and Rajnath clicked their tongues in pity and displeasure, as Suman explained that these men could sell them since an upcoming Muslim celebration (which I believe was Eid) demanded a good supply of meat.

Proceeding out of Khurja, we passed through far more colorful and peaceful settings. The car negotiated past tongas and bicycle rickshaws in the crowded, festive old market area of Aligarh. I was delighted by the profusion of sights – mountains of gorgeous guavas and oranges being sold at street stalls, women wrapped in brightly colored shawls. Remembering an historical account of the city by David Lelyveld, I commented that I had heard of Aligarh Muslim University, that I understood it to be quite famous in India, though I remember not receiving more than a monosyllabic response. Passing through Mainpuri I discovered that it was garlic season,

for all the areas alongside the street was covered in garlic heads, from the beginning to the end of town.

During the journey, Suman's sole instructional task was to direct me to what was less apparent as I gazed out the windows. We passed seemingly endless miles of sugar cane fields, and there she explained that poor, small-scale farmers are forced to sell their sugar cane at cut-rate prices because the processors who buy it starve them out, waiting for weeks before buying, till the sugar is nearly rotten and the farmers are pushed to desperation. Some return home, desolate and not able to sell at all, bringing the sugar cane home as fuel. I asked what were the huge cement buildings that stood in isolation on the rural landscape, and she responded that they were cold storage buildings. The problem with them is that they are privately owned and charge too much for small farmers to take advantage of them, thus placing another layer of advantage between the rich and the poor of the area.

The representations given above are internal to the organization – they do not become part of what is conveyed to the public. Their Indian audiences would often already have access to such information as rural poverty and exploitation, particularly given the large number of NGOs that work to deliver this information, whereas the international audience is given few details on the social context, instead receiving a simplified story about child labor. Instead, these stories form the perennial background that informs the work of the activists. When they extend their vision out of the ashram, reflecting upon and interacting with others, the connections that they make are on the basis of the commonly shared situation of poverty. People both describe themselves this way, and this element of their lives is acknowledged directly by the activists in their formation of ties with others.

The organization taps into the economic basis for lower caste identity that Mark Juergensmeyer describes in his research in Punjab:

Perhaps the most direct indication that the Scheduled Caste perspective is set in a consciousness of poverty was given in response to my open-ended question, "Who are you?" – the largest number of Scheduled Caste respondents said simply, "a poor person." [Juergensmeyer 1980:27]

Marginalized voices: the subaltern's subaltern

We have seen that Mukti Ashram seeks out commonalities between peoples' experiences and attempts to put them forward in order to solidify participants' identification with the group as well as with the underclasses of the nation and of the world. What they exhibit self righteously through valorizing personal narratives are things otherwise treated as demeaning and pathetic by society at large, such as poverty and victimization; in this group, the individuals who exemplify these things are quite purposefully and publicly ascribed dignity. The power inversion thus comes directly from the elevation of society's marginalized.

Valor is not evenly distributed, however. People seem to adhere to the group to varying degrees, often (but not always) in response to the degree to which they are favored. The four boys who are long-term residents (Govind, Mohan, Shaukat and Ashraf) are skilled speakers who are favored for press conferences and out of town events. The boys from the carpet belt, fresh from their forced labor experiences and vehement in their condemnation of the *maliks*, are asked to tell the visitors at the ashram about their experiences. Their relative youth and small frames also fulfills visitors' expectations when they imagine with sympathy about children

and victimization in an orderly, uncomplicated manner. The majority of the boys, though, form a part of the larger audience during the events for the public; they sit in the undifferentiated group that offers its symbolically unified voice in the shouting of slogans and raising of fists. Their stories are fundamentally commensurate with the more high profile ones, but they include factors that would make the casual listener pause in doubt, or their stories cannot be cast into a purely black-and-white case of the BBA hero activist against the evil *malik*. They adjust to the program – the vast majority do stay and derive some satisfaction or practical skills from it. I do not believe that their partial, less ideologically-connected involvement represents any failure on the part of Mukti Ashram; just as the organization's "one point programme" really challenges a complex of social issues, so their clients receive from them a range of benefits.

As would be expected, several factors do impede optimal effectiveness, and they are built directly into the structure of the organization. The very fact that public venues demand a certain type of representation does leave a mark of difference between different groups of the boys, shaping their experiences including the degree of attention they receive. Ironically, the power inversion creates a new marginalized majority within the ashram itself, at least in these public venues.

Parallel to this is the internal contradiction of the existence of the leadership structure of the ashram, despite their elevation of the common person's truth and their symbolic attempts to level distinctions based on status. Though critical of their society, the activists are also members of that same society and will inevitably replicate power disparities to some extent. The cultural foundation of education, of adherence to a guru, is based on the student's (*shiksharthi*) trust in and lack of criticism towards the guru.²¹ And of course leadership structures are practical ways of dividing

tasks and providing coherence. The extent to which activists work successfully in the service of their clients is, as many development critics have pointed out, dependent upon the extent to which they relinquish authority. But to identify with one's work is intrinsically to have a vested interest in its importance and in its continuation, so the activist cannot entirely be a selfless worker. Mehta has pointed out that for employees of a similar type of political action group, "the psychological and cultural need for them to exercise power and patronage is as strong as it is with people of similar backgrounds in government" (1996:30). One outcome is that the replication helps to create a familiar environment in which people know how to act. The boys touch the feet of their guru and their gesture is accepted with ease. Many seem joyful at the opportunity to express their allegiance in this way, but as will become apparent in the following sections other people adjust to their mis-fit to varying degrees of success.

Ramu

Wonderfully patient, calm, seeming to always be ready to smile, Ramu was a boy who seemed interested in visiting with me steadily during my stay at the ashram, though as in other cases the extent to which we could communicate was limited by the amount of Hindi I could (not) speak at the time. But he was happy to grant me an interview-style conversation, and like Sanjit he was very perceptive about the need to speak in slow and simple Hindi. I learned that he was 14, and was from Saharsa District like many other boys at the ashram who are from Bihar. He has three younger brothers and one older brother. The older brother has already been married off, and he said that he is next. He attended school until he was 8 years old, which is when he was beaten by the teacher. He decided not to

go back and started to work instead, in the brick kiln in his village.

Performing what he said was very difficult labor, he worked there for six years. He was extremely proud of the weaving skills he was mastering at the ashram, and noted that Suman told him he should go back to his village and teach other people the trade.

Though he put a good face on it, he was trying to cope with homesickness the day we spoke at length. He impressed upon me that his home is so far away – it would take four days to make the round trip from Mukti Ashram. Friends have written to him – they don't like that he was not there. He said they were all still in school, in various classes (4th, 8th, 9th standards). At the time we spoke his *nana* (maternal grandfather) was ill, and he requested of the activists that he might be sent home to visit, but they told him that only Suman could give permission, and at the time she was in New Zealand. I asked him what he would like to do in the future -- a commonly asked question that tends to condition the boys to answer about their high career hopes, but Ramu said "I want to be a good man." I replied, "but you're a good man today, now." He gravely answered that he will improve slowly, continuously. His father, whose work he likened to that of Suman's, is a social activist (*samaaj seva karte hain, jaise Sumanji karti hain*). He collects money and clothing from the villagers and distributes the materials to the poorest of the village, or food if they don't have enough to eat. He has fought the government, having houses made for the villagers and wells dug. I asked, but you're from a poor family, and he replied "yes, but we understand some things."

Raj Kumar

With a little extra persuasion to enlist the help of Premanand in the interview process, I was able to add one more profile to the Novib report that I was hastening to complete before the arrival of the delegates. I would regularly notice Raj Kumar as he sat in the social education classes, quietly tolerating the slogan shouting and singing, and receding to the background of press conferences and diplomatic visits. I hoped that through the interview I would be able to learn about his experiences, which like those of many other boys there had not been actively highlighted by Mukti Ashram. I present this here as an important anomaly, indicative of the plurality of perspectives that Mukti Ashram envelopes, which confronts the normative narrative structure and withstands that structure's supremacy.

Raj Kumar worries about cancer, even though he's only 15 years old. The risk lurks in his mind when he thinks about his father and sisters, who inhale tobacco dust and chemicals daily as they make by hand the Indian-style cigarette, called *bidi*. He too performed this work from a very young age. He hopes for something better now, as he assiduously commits his days to the study of motor repairing at Mukti Ashram and plans out his future entrepreneurial adventures.

It was no small feat to leave the business of *bidi* making. His family is terribly poor, and he felt the pressure to contribute his hands to the task of earning their subsistence pay. Indeed, many poor residents of the town of Sohagpur, Madhya Pradesh are engaged in this piece-rate labour. All of his friends do it, and he says that in poor families all children who are old enough are put to work. Between the two factories in this town of approximately 2000 people, 600 are working in the *bidi*-making industry. They pick up materials daily from the factories and bring them home to do the work. The rate of pay for making 1000 *bidis* is 18 rupees (around U.S. 45 cents).

Raj Kumar would work in the morning, run off to school, and then return home to complete the task of making the *bidis*. When he had to choose between homework and work for pay, he chose the latter. Being very bright, he scraped by and was able to study into the 10th standard, though he was achieving far less than his potential.

Mukti Ashram's programmes were made known to him by a local activist who works with the *dalit* (Scheduled Caste) community. He recounts that he felt badly -- upset and uncertain -- for the first two days away from home. He then was able to focus on the benefits that he could receive and settle into the tasks at hand. He hopes but is not optimistic that he can continue his studies, since his family cannot pay the tuition. Though ideally he would attend school through a high level, at least he sees an economically bright future in mechanics, since his community has a shortage of such skilled workers. Even the idea of having an option in life is a new concept for him, but now a better future is coming into view.

Parbati Devi

In some ways, the extent to which the internal structure of Mukti Ashram replicated power disparities in society at large does limit the organization's work. Its project of empowering people meets with uneven outcomes, and this unevenness depends in part on the arrangement of people within the ashram. In this way Parbati Devi, who came to work at the ashram, was marginalized, and though she knew that she was very lucky to receive their support, she also visibly resented the silent role she was, it seemed, implicitly expected to retain there. Privately, in front of Prakash the cook, myself, or several of the lower level staff members, she would occasionally be expressive. During the festivities of Holi, she and I climbed onto the roof of the kitchen and pointed and giggled at the mud-bath wrestling matches some of the men and women of the village were

engaging in. She was withdrawn, however, in front of the teachers, and especially with Suman. Suman's arrival would have Parbati Devi consistently meeting her as she stepped out the car door, and she would touch her feet in respect – the look on her face blank, expressionless, except on the occasion when it would reveal a glimmer of anger. Visitors' arrivals would cause her disappearance; she might be there physically but would glide by, stealthily glancing at the outsiders as if their presence caused her to be an outsider herself.

I was surprised to find out that she was only in her mid-30s; her lined and weathered face placed her two decades ahead. Her husband died seven years earlier, and she had remained with her young son Soshil (who was 2 at the time of his death) in the village near Lucknow, destitute and with no options, relying upon the beneficence of others. She explained to me that in the village she had no family, no home, and no money. Under Suman's direction, Rajnath took the train to her village and brought her and her son to the ashram to live. She would be expected to assist in cleaning the rooms, preparing food, and Suman brought her own saris to Parbati Devi in order that she wash them.

I'm unsure what determined her fondness for me – perhaps it was in my partly East Asian upbringing that caused me to be respectful of her as an elder. Perhaps it was the fact that I was (in American fashion) embarrassed that she would sweep the floor of my room and I profusely thanked her, or that I took her cooked potato/chili balls directly from her hand and ate them with such appreciation. But she began increasingly to appear at my doorstep and with heavy sighs would worry aloud – she did not know what she would do in the future, she worried for Soshil's health (for people discussed that he might have contracted tuberculosis), and she complained of the difficult physical work she had to do at the ashram. She

could not talk with anyone in charge out of fear. Toward the end of my stay, we visited and exchanged tears, and she sobbed that right now there were three women at the ashram – Laxmi's mother, her, and myself – but that when I would leave she would only have one woman to talk with. Suman the domineering leader was clearly a man in her view.

Implementing solidarity: national and global connections

Exploring the meaning of citizenship

Much importance is placed on generating in the boys the awareness that they are members of the nation of India, so that they can make full use of the horizontal solidarity this identity offers as well as agitate for the implementation of constitutional rights. This goal simultaneously involves two complementary methods: the teachers model and encourage the boys to generate their own rebukes of the practices of officials who represent the nation; they also encourage them to appropriate and take responsibility for the nation themselves. The activists underscored for me numerous times that the process of becoming cognizant of the significance of being a citizen is a difficult one for these children of disenfranchised families. A large map of India hangs in the classroom, with the names of the linguistically divided states spelled out in Hindi (*devanagari*) script; Subodh once pointed out to me that only after repeated introduction to the idea that a shape on a piece of paper can represent a land mass can they look at the map and think that they are looking at India itself.

The variety of nationalist consciousness that the activists teach is secular and thus consonant with the philosophical foundation of the modern independent state. Not that they referred to "secularism" itself to

the children – this esoteric idea does not even have an adequate equivalent in Hindi (Chatterjee 1995; Madan 1987). In India's history, secularism is fully linked to a western variety of modernity and rationality and has been the domain of the elite urban intelligentsia, as Srivastava aptly points out:

The national identity project in post-Independence India has largely been formulated and conducted by a relatively small group of political, social, and cultural functionaries. These may be characterised as the ideological heirs of the early nationalists who 'accepted as the basis for their thinking about the future of India many of the formulations of nineteenth century British liberalism.' [Srivastava 1998:6]

A criticism of religious nationalism and its often resultant violence, rejection or diminution of caste identity, and active selection of multifarious religious messages, comprise the organization's utilitarian approach to the Indian variety of secularism which "honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities" (Madan 1987:756).

It appears to me that secularism is a prevalent value in India, perhaps primarily among those who are exposed to such a cosmopolitan scene as New Delhi's, that one should express a magnanimous acceptance of all religions. Even Ramolah, a neighbor of the ashram and taxi driver who avidly supported the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for its glorious goal of restoring the dominance of Hinduism²², has made adamant statements of goodwill for people of all religions. Secularism is a useful value at Mukti Ashram, particularly since the group is critical of the normal societal state of partisan affairs and its consequences. Rather than being partisan themselves, they wish to emphasize that they simply seek out the truths of exploitation, and that their calls for justice are unbiased and unquestionable because their motives are pure.

The members who are at the core of the organization, such as Suman and Rajnath, would characterize themselves as being nonreligious. Similarly Govind, a boy who is one of the long term residents and a developing activist himself, explains that his family in Nepal is Hindu, but that he believes that no one religion is good or true, and that he himself does not practice any religion. Religious practices of other staff members and clients are passively tolerated. Suman strenuously insisted on more than one occasion that the population of Mukti Ashram is diverse in terms of religion, though the actual percentage of religious minorities is small at the ashram, reflecting the population of the country as a whole. Once, in a discussion about how the organization has been denounced by (unnamed) highly placed officials, she linked this enmity with the increased politicization of communal identities, particularly with the rise of the BJP.

The literal act of bringing boys from throughout north India together in an enclosed setting marks the beginning of the process of introducing them to the idea of being members of the nation of India. (Of course, with the exclusion of states of the south and east, this is an imperfect rendering. Perhaps this attests to some degree of chauvinism among north Indians – the idea that India is adequately represented by them – perhaps more so it is a pragmatic matter.) Hindi, the national language of the country, is the only language used with the boys, and this itself presents some difficulties for the boys whose exposure to Hindi has been minimal and whose mother tongue is quite different, such as the boys from Orissa. Those who come from remote areas of Bihar often speak a nonstandard form of Hindi, but they can more easily make themselves understood and can fully comprehend the words of the teachers.

Elections for ashram president are held for each new batch of trainees. This is the central activity for a period of around two weeks, when

candidates are nominated or volunteer, campaigning is done, and the final votes are cast and counted. The candidates each represent a real national-level party, and the symbols of these parties are replicated on the homemade ballots that the boys stamp. The lesson is quite pragmatic – to instruct them on the importance of being vigilant against local corrupt practices that impede the democratic process, to have them experience the excitement of civic involvement, and to show them that elected officials come from the people and should stand for the people.

A lesson in conscientization

One evening, Subodh, a young Marxist activist who periodically visits the ashram, offered to give a demonstration lesson for the other activists of his method in conscientization. He also aimed in this lesson to awaken in the children an understanding of issues of political economy influencing their own lives. He began by asking one boy, Kanheya, specific questions about his village -- such as population, *jati* or caste composition, number of families, occupations, income, land ownership. Kanheya himself offered a conceptual division he observed in his village, between entrepreneurs, farmers and laborers. Subodh continued to draw out more information from him while constructing the lesson. From this vantage point, immersed in the detailed, real, but idiosyncratic picture, he tried to draw a connection to a level of generalization, of a village X, that would be relevant for all boys. He outlined three categories on the board, of those who work in their own fields, those who work in their fields and also labor for others for wages, and those who labor only, and the relative plight of the landless in this scheme -- intimating the centrality of control of the means of production.

The boys sat and listened to him talk about such things as the impact of mechanization and the global economy, and how the traditional village craftsman finds that his market is disappearing. Subodh was in effect weaving the details he solicited from Kanheya into a narrative about the degradation of village life in a time of increasingly potent capitalist incursions. The other teachers sat quietly together, observing his session. The boys themselves were attentive and polite but not as animated as they often can be when the "social education" class is taught by these regular teachers, now on the sidelines.

Subodh then started to go into further detail on the plight of the craftsman, by constructing a hypothetical situation. In this, he said that we should suppose that a person who makes tables needs Rs. 200 in raw materials for one table -- in wood, nails, paint, etc. . . . One boy objected that it couldn't be the case -- that to make a table one would need at least Rs. 400 in materials, at which point another boy disagreed with him and stated another amount, and this continued in a lively state of uproar, laughter, and friendly argument, with Subodh trying to intervene and bring the conversation back to his plan. However, because he sensed their restlessness and became convinced that his hypothetical situation would not work for them -- indeed, that this detail might have dismantled the entire scheme -- he ended the class and the children wandered off to talk and wait for dinner.

Subodh and I discussed the session in its aftermath, and he assessed that the fundamental problem is in the inability of children who are not from well educated, literate backgrounds to understand abstractions. They can accept a hypothetical situation only if all details reflect reality accurately, and we can see that Subodh, an urban man with little knowledge of the details of the craft of carpentry, found a limit in the

degree to which he could relate to the boys. On the other hand, he began to tap into a detailed, complex and truly ethnographic knowledge base that the children as a whole possessed, being expert themselves in understanding their own communities and in a larger sense the dynamics of village life.

Subodh's lesson brings up further interesting issues and questions. The extent to which people are cognitively limited by their backgrounds, and the capacity of altering this during different periods of their lives, remain debatable. Subodh's impasse might be surmountable for another teacher, but still the matter of his difficulty leads to an important question: is the immersion in the details of one's own circumstances, a state which is fostered by the encouragement of narrative construction, also a tendency to end things at that individual level, without the incentive to draw connections with others of similar circumstances? Among this group of boys who have survived an enormous amount of deprivation and abuse, what is needed in order that narrative building be fostered as a true educational tool, so that it can draw them together rather than make them merely more self-aware isolates? Nevertheless, Subodh's use of down-to-earth details that relate back to the children's experiences is necessary to inspire their interest and to see the value of examining their lives.

Christmas

Still in the midst of a brutally deep freeze and with Christmas day approaching, I was surprised to find preparations underway for an improvised, somewhat syncretic celebration. The ground around one of the small, centrally planted trees was first artfully dressed with colored sand poured into patterns, which I was told was in the tradition of Diwali.

Looking to me as an American (and thus by their imperfect logic a Christian), several activists asked me at different times about what is done on Christmas, and whether the decorations were meeting the requirements. Masters of what my father, a retired army sergeant, would call "field expedience," they created tree hangings from strips of colored paper, and made a Santa Claus outfit for the gatekeeper Subhash out of a pillow, my red pullover jacket, and cotton stuffing.

Related activities commenced midday on Christmas. The children were first organized into three parallel lines, and with the teacher Ranvir standing before them took turns coming up and speaking about (what I could gather at the time) village life, the circumstances of injustice they had faced, and their thoughts on the future. (I thought in contrast of a scene I had recently seen in Connaught Place, where squeaky clean, commercial-fed, spoiled little ones, openly admired by their well-heeled parents, stood on a stage together and chirped out Christmas carols to the cue of a raspy recording, with too-powerful amplifiers all in the service of chasing down those fleeing to safety.)

Before the introduction of Santa, the distribution of the modest presents (pens and notepads, one or two pieces of hard candy) with the magical wave of a wand, and the eating of a magnificent vegetarian dinner finished by hot, sweet *halva*, the boys were gathered together for a final lesson of the day, on the meaning of Christmas. Subodh elaborated. His discourse centered upon Jesus' humble upbringing, and his work with the poor, and how he was against the wealthy and the rulers. He mentioned too that Jesus was not Indian, that he was Jewish and he lived thousands of years ago, and (Subodh emphasized) that the entire world honors him. I am uncertain about the significance of his tangent on Swami Vivekanand, except that this man's work was in some way linked with that of Jesus.

Then he explained how Gandhi similarly lived a life of rebellion against authorities and how he looked to the exemplary actions of Jesus.

Speaking with unified voices at The Global March Against Child Labo(u)r

Globalization has colored the project in two important ways: the interpersonal networks and alliances have strengthened the movement and enlarged the experiences of most everyone involved; extant ideas and values are challenged by the introduction of ones that spring from a different (in this case western) cultural tradition. These are the more hopeful aspects of what is a problematic political-economic situation of the north-south power disparity becoming manifest once again in the global networks of NGOs, as described in the introduction.

The International Secretariat for the Global March Against Child Labor was the SACCS office itself in New Delhi. This is where the master plan was generated and revised (time and again), where funding and international support was produced, where the webpage was maintained, documentation of the event amassed, and information collected and disbursed. Over 700 organizations worldwide had gotten involved in the effort. The March's stated mission was to "mobilize worldwide efforts to protect and promote the rights of all children, especially the right to receive a free, meaningful education and to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be damaging to the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development" (SACCS 1998). Its stated goal was to be a people's march, inviting involvement from anyone so inclined. Because of this inclusiveness and accepting attitude, the march had drawn in people from various professions and backgrounds and for various lengths of time.

Given the large distances to be covered, the march could not possibly be accomplished entirely by foot. Marchers generally traveled by auto-caravan, making larger leaps by boat and plane. The activities of the march itself were various, including public speeches and rallies, slogan shouting, festival and musical events, "teach-ins", press conferences, visits to sites of child labor and documentation of child labor, open appeals to government bodies, as well as actual Nikes-on-the-pavement marches themselves. The March began on January 17, in Manila, Philippines, and proceeded through Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and into Iran and Turkey, with a kickoff in western Europe taking over where the march left off in Istanbul. The march also had separate starting points in Africa (Cape Town) and South America (Sao Paulo).

In North America, it began on May 1, in Los Angeles, California.²³ The Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights and the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) were the coordinating organizations for North America. Anjali Kochar at the Kennedy Center was the liaison between the international movement and the events in North America, while Leah Nayman, a labor activist enlisted for the project and housed temporarily at the ILRF, created the city-by-city connections and events that made the North American march possible. Leah was also a core marcher, conducting the events on a daily basis as they unfolded in communities across the United States. U.S. border areas, especially in the agricultural sector, were highlighted for their concentrations of child workers, a population consisting of undocumented children as well as U.S. citizens.

It was hoped by the organizers that the Global March would be received actively by people, that individuals would feel empowered to take

action, and that governments would be pressured to improve the rights of children in response to international pressure. On a worldwide basis, the march apparently received varying degrees of publicity. Bianca Jagger attended the march in India and Pakistan (although she was scarcely known by the populace in those two countries). In Africa, Nelson Mandela turned down an offer to join the march, but sent a lengthy letter of support that was read at the launch in Cape Town. The height of all events and the venue at which they hoped to make their biggest impact was at the International Labor Organization convention in Geneva, Switzerland, in early June of 1998. All continental branches of the Global March symbolically joined there, to speak at that most prominent forum on labor issues.

The unfolding of the North American march points to occasional problems with the attempt to extend a single message across different countries. On the initial rally through the ritzy "Promenade" area of Santa Monica, the slogans that were used were directly from the international Global March itself; of these, some were derived and translated from SACCS' own slogans in Hindi that are used frequently by the activists and boys back at the ashram. They bore the mark of having been translated and being awkward in English. As one example, the slogan "Don't put tools into tiny hands! We need books! We need toys!" was used. This call to action doesn't really lead one into knowing how to take action, and so its intrinsic value is questionable. Furthermore, the last two sentences are unnaturally short and awkward sounding in English, though in Hindi their equivalent has a more graceful sound: *Kitaben do! Kilaunen do!* In Hindi, the repetition has more force to it, and there is the element of alliteration that lends itself well to slogan-shouting.

In many ways, however, the march productively brought people with different experiences together, so that they could come to a fuller understanding of child labor. For example, one of many press conferences for the march was held in Yuma, Arizona. That sunny morning there was a group of approximately 30 people in attendance, including members of the press. The audience was primarily comprised of Latino youth, high school dropouts now attending non-formal schools to get their diplomas, who came to fulfill their impromptu class assignment. Reporters both from local newspapers and those of other communities attended. The marchers slated to speak sat in front of a large Global March banner, at a long table. John, a local activist who runs the nonformal schools in the area, translated the speeches for the Spanish-speaking audience members. There were times when the translation process became ponderous, with words being translated from Hindi to English to Spanish, or in a South African marcher's case from his tribal language to English to Spanish. The presentations given by ex-child laborers, a significant portion of the press conference, all went smoothly, and the audience sat in rapt attention. Jessica spoke of her days spent scavenging at the garbage dump in Manila, a place which has been spontaneously combusting and smoldering for years now. Jerry spoke as a representative of children in South Africa who must work on someone's farm to help their families survive. And Mohan recounted his horror story of bonded labor and abuse at the carpet loom from the ages of 5 to 8 years.

As I followed the marchers around for four days, I stuck closely to Mohan, watching his reactions to all the new sights around him. Attempting to see through his eyes, and juxtaposing the world of Mukti Ashram with the high-tech weirdness of the United States, I thought that he might find the differences to be distressing. But he weathered the changes,

from Istanbul to LAX to a party on Hollywood's Sunset Boulevard. While seeing him flourish in this environment of postmodernity, this aspect of which Bruce Knaft (1994:119) has called "heightened experiential dislocation," I saw that in his case it did not mean trauma or disorientation, but instead it seemed to be experienced by Mohan as another step in realizing his liberation. I remember vividly a lighter moment during the march. Over dinner in San Diego, I interrupted the giggling fit he was sharing with Jessica to ask him what his *guruji* Rajnath would think about this whole scene, about the United States. A serious look briefly alighted on his face, and he answered that guruji would not like the United States very much – that women here don't wear saris, that people here are not traditional (*paramparaagat*). He resumed poking at Jessica, who was trying to swallow an entire beef meatball, and said in his new English words, "GOOD, champion chickee."



4. Global Marchers present their stories in Yuma, AZ



5. Mohan at Mukti Ashram February, 1998



6. Mohan in San Diego May, 1998

Discussion: appropriating values

Mukti Ashram confronts the explanatory system within the dominant culture that all too quickly relegates children from impoverished and low caste backgrounds to servitude. At its base the class and caste divisions are justified from the viewpoint that certain people in society are *inherently* meant to perform manual labor and to work for others. Weiner explains the implications of this prevalent belief:

There is thus a conception of "children's work" – or, more precisely, poor children's work – as both a phase in the education of a child and a distinctive niche in the economy. In this connection it should be noted that members of the Indian middle class conceptualize a distinction between the children of the poor and their own children. A distinction is made between children as "hands" and children as "minds". [Weiner 1991:188]

In the view presented above, children are categorized according to their relative value in the larger social scheme and differentially treated as a result of the assessment of that group. To *some* extent, as has been explained in Oscar Lewis' notion of the "culture of poverty," this viewpoint does influence the self-concepts of those in poor communities, (though many researchers have also seen important critiques within the "view from below"). In contrast, Mukti Ashram forwards the case of the individual child, whose childhood within a fundamentally common humanity denounces the idea of differentiation. In this way the emphasis on the individual, defended with the notions of "human rights" and "childhood," has become used by the activists as a strategy.

The problematic element here, of great concern to many anthropologists, is the western, liberal, humanist philosophical foundation

to these values, and their potentially damaging effects on other societies. Anthropology's deep historic connections to colonialism and that era's legacy which becomes manifest in such things as ideologies underlying development, makes the more current approach of being deeply critical of western intervention fully appropriate. Additionally and most importantly, the underlying stake of relativism informs researchers' opposition to universalist assumptions that such western intervention brings with it. This concern is echoed in the position of some Indian intellectuals, particularly those who have been devoted to understanding the current effects of the system of colonial domination as it plays out in the post-colonial state.

The recent work of Vincanne Adams (1998) presents an example of the prevailing disinclination within the field to acknowledge any positive effects of such influences. In writing about the Tibetan rights campaign for Chinese withdrawal of occupation, she explains that the activists there have been forced to adapt their self-representations of suffering to correspond with international human rights discourse. In her representation, the indigenous is pitted diametrically opposite the west. I detect some degree of reification of Tibetan culture as an undifferentiated whole occurring in her analysis, in that she characterizes them as a unitary group and fails to attend to the inevitable plurality within. On a more general level this has the danger of privileging dominant strains within cultures, by silencing the internal struggle to define the very direction of cultural change.

But what is the potential utility of the importation of different values, when a group *within* Indian society works to produce social change? I have presented a profile of the actors at the ashram, headed by middle-class educated Indians, whose own backgrounds stem from a composite of complex and variegated influences – western and Indian, traditional,

modern and postmodern. Their very work concerns the conscious effort to reframe certain meanings about Indian culture, to align with their agendas for social change. These are Indians speaking the supposedly western discourse. Shouldn't we view the value systems they express as not particularly the exclusive ownership of the west, but as something now intrinsically Indian? What is Indian, and what is culture? I contend that the tendency to characterize a group in a normative way has great potential to delegitimize strands of dissent – in favor of an encompassing model.

The importation of supposedly "new" values is often an attempt to alter the balance between the dominant value and its opposite, in this case for instance the balance between hierarchy and egalitarianism. Both these values have been ambivalently expressed within Indian society for centuries. Bradd Shore (1990) argues that individuals universally struggle with these ambivalent ideas. I wish to add here that the way these ambivalent inclinations are resolved differs depending upon the position of the individual within society, and that counter cultural ideologies are the expression of that opposite, submerged conclusion. Mukti Ashram's western emphasis on egalitarianism, then (for we certainly believe in hierarchies – we just don't admit to them), might reinforce what is already familiar, though latent; such values might be easy to adopt because of some level of commonality. To bolster this, the terms such as "equality", "justice", or "childhood" might be all the more potent in their vagueness, for they can be construed in multiple ways simultaneously by different actors.

Victor Turner once stated, "human social groups tend to find their openness to the future in the variety of their metaphors for what may be the good life and in the contest of their paradigms" (1974:14). Similarly, I argue here that the introduction of renewed or new challenging ideas is the

addition of another tool that the boys themselves can choose to put to use or reject, and they fully demonstrate that they are able to be so discerning. Perhaps our own trenchant critiques of western influence are issued in themselves from a place of privilege that prevents us from seeing the ways in which oppressed people are ready to be fully resourceful. The use of these critical tools in the environment of Mukti Ashram does not seem to create any cognitive damage or other negative effects in these ex-child laborers. Indeed, it could be argued that they will inevitably be exposed to influences that will alter their perception of their society. Perhaps a thoughtful one – emanating from people who wish deeply for their happiness – one that helps to reframe the meanings of rights, citizenship, Indian culture itself, can be a healthy experience. The formulation of a revolutionary value system such as that adhered to by Mukti Ashram can thus be a new way to shift the measure of power between the dominated and the dominant. Govind's story is a case in point.

Govind: The building of a transnational identity

Grinning and teasing, Rajnath pushed Mohan in front of me, telling me that someday Mohan wants to be a police inspector, and with a grin of acknowledgment from Mohan, Rajnath smartly saluted him. Then little Ashraf was brought forward, and Rajnath gently said, "And Ashraf wants to be Kailash Satyarthi in the future." Ashraf, hands shoved deeply into his pockets, shyly pulled away and strolled off. Govind, almost too old for this way of teasing, tolerantly became the next victim. "Govind wants to become Prime Minister of Nepal," Rajnath proclaimed. Govind laughed nervously, looking down, but his expression turned a shade serious, tellingly but only momentarily. This was at the very beginning of my stay

at Mukti Ashram, when I was introduced to these three photogenic, articulate boys. Their charm and speaking ability have led them into a qualitatively different relationship with the ashram's core activists, and into a closer identification with the movement in general. Govind Khanal, one of the most enthusiastic young activists in training, tells a remarkable story of how he came to live at Mukti Ashram.

He is from a village in Nepal, from a *very* poor family (this he strongly emphasizes), whose difficulties are compounded by the continuously bad health of his father. Govind says that he has two older brothers, one younger brother, and two older sisters. His mother was required to work, and he too began working after school, making incense sticks and being an attendant at an ISD phone booth. He earlier attended various political meetings in his village, but when he tried to speak up he was silenced by the elders at the meetings. In 1996, the SACCS-organized march, *Bal Shram Unmulan Yatra* (Child Labor Elimination March), which was passing from Calcutta towards Kathmandu, came through his village. Govind listened to the speeches of the marchers, and briefly met the dynamic Kailash, who gave Govind his card and invited him to come to Delhi and be part of the movement. Govind's family rejected the idea and forbade him to go, but he remained obsessed by the idea and desire to go. Lacking money for a train ticket, Govind explained his situation to the station master, who was strongly enough moved by it that he allowed Govind to travel for free to Delhi. From there the station master protectively had him directly escorted to the local police station, where Govind called Kailash, announcing his arrival. Govind lived with Kailash and his family for one month before going to Mukti Ashram. By the time I had arrived at the ashram, Govind had been a resident there for almost two

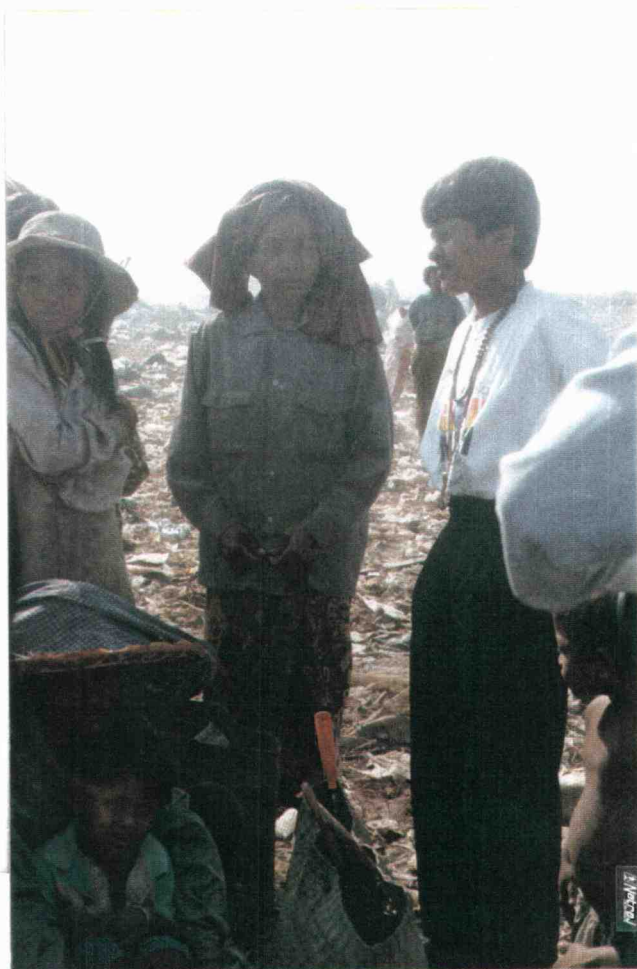
years. Though he learned Nepali in school and at home, he was rapidly learning Hindi and attending a nearby government-run school.

When Govind tells his story, he hastens to emphasize the “before and after” contrast of his life. He never even experienced listening to a radio until he was nine, and never saw the images on a television until he was twelve. He explains that Mukti Ashram has caused him to understand about his own background and his society. From this training, he actively distinguishes himself from his family, which he characterizes as traditional and involved in unjust practices such as caste endogamy. A highly intelligent and headstrong young man, his personality equips him for a future leadership role and Mukti Ashram has provided him with an avenue for it. He always seems ready to take advantage of any possible opportunity to expand his experiences. He designated himself my helper and companion during my stay there, using the access to me as a way to ask about the United States and practice his English skills.

He was also the first boy from the ashram to attend the Global March Against Child Labor, from the worldwide send-off in January, 1998 in Manila, being a “core marcher” as it passed through Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Malaysia. He seemed to wear a grave and worldly demeanor upon his return. His own understanding of child labor had been dramatically altered on the trip -- he interviewed scavengers in the garbage dump of Phnom Penh, and had told his own story and that of the organization to audiences in every country. He had formed passionately close ties with friends from around the world, the most important one being with a Filipina girl who wrote him heartwrenching letters of how she missed him. He would respond very maturely and calmly, wanting my help in writing so that every word would be correct. He said to me

repeatedly that “Kailash has changed my life. I’ll always want to work for Kailash.”

His incredible store of experiences, deep perceptions about social issues, and evident maturity were strangely incongruous to the way he would refer to himself. “And then I and the other children . . .” he would begin in faltering English. Though the events comprising his time at Mukti Ashram and with the Global March were leading him into being an adult, he was celebrated and formed connections with people by being a child.



7. Govind (far right) interviews scavengers in Phnom Penh

Chapter VI

Bargaining with power

Power is implicated in meaning through its role in upholding one version of significance as true, fruitful, or beautiful, against other possibilities that may threaten truth, fruitfulness, or beauty. All cultures, however conceived, carve out significance and try to stabilize it against possible alternatives.

-- Eric Wolf, *Facing Power: Old Insights, New Questions*

Discussion

A dominant narrative, and a vision of justice within it, has been created and replicated (with slight modifications) multiple times at Mukti Ashram. Diverse people and interests are incorporated, with imperfect results, to construct solidarity. People are enjoined to enlarge their identities through imagined national and international spiritual connectedness. Obstructive ideas are contested through the introduction of new ones asserted to be natural and universal. These are Mukti Ashram's methods; the methods themselves define the ideological contours of the organization.

There is a central contradiction in the realization of "liberation" through all of these methods: it seems that progress can only be made through *directing* people to the interest of the group, and this "group interest" is engineered by the leaders of the group. This disciplined vision does not incorporate everyone in a level way. Some are excluded from contributing their sense of self, their own narratives. Those who are encouraged to tell their "personal" narratives cannot be seen as simply telling their own stories, for they are socialized into casting them into the

normative structure, thus in a sense donating them to the ashram. Other narratives, perspectives, insights are appropriated for the central cause of the organization itself.

The effort to naturalize values, in this case those of childhood and individual rights within the institutional setting, is a hegemonic practice (Bourdieu 1977). Alonso observes that "veracity draws on a host of cultural ideals to establish its authority, from the purity of motherhood, to the primacy of direct experience, to the privileged access to truth of the 'I' who sees and articulates the 'insider's' point of view" (1988:36). Though the interest of Mukti Ashram is to work against power, its rebellion can only be sustained if it uses the same tools -- it is a concession, in a way, to the existence of the hegemony which is being contested. This might call into question whether their work really constitutes resistance, and as others have pointed out (for instance, Haynes and Prakash 1991) what ultimate purpose resistance serves.

Subodh's demonstration lesson in conscientization exemplifies a limitation of the ability to liberate others, even through the attempt to work from the basis of the students' perspectives. His lesson seems to capture what Freire himself had asked: "How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation?" (1992[1970]:33) Yet rather than finding successful Freirian resolution to this question, one might be left to question how one can avoid the teacher/student dichotomy and its resultant power disparity, especially when the teacher has the interest of forwarding a particular message (as is always the case in any purposeful lesson). It seems the quandary lies in the very nature of education. The message in Subodh's lesson is meant to be empowering, but still the students are being *led* to their own "empowerment", and at that quite problematically. As Ellsworth asks,

"What diversity do we silence in the name of 'liberatory' pedagogy?" (1989:299) As an individual, Subodh has modeled the heavy-handed expression of power of Mukti Ashram. His lesson also demonstrates, I believe, how this is to some extent inescapable.

In his essay on social movements, John Burdick looks optimistically at their internal heterogeneity: "Social movement ideologies might be understood as fields of meaning, which different sub-constituencies appropriate, interpret and reshape in their own ways" (1995:369). From my introduction to the social movement against child labor in India through the specific "sub-constituency" of BBA and Mukti Ashram, I add that this ideological malleability only exists because the movement itself is a construct -- a thing that enables observers, from both outside and inside the construct, to see their own work in the context of the work of others -- to define themselves accordingly (in contradistinction to their assessment of other groups) and to cross over into beneficial alliances. Organizations such as this one constantly attempt to strike a balance between augmenting their strength through a show of interorganizational unity (as in the Global March) and the desire to mark their own territory and define themselves as unique in a social field of competing programs.

Organizations, themselves constructed conglomerations of values and agendas whose existence depend upon the individuals that they incorporate, must attain their own resolution between the need to flexibly accommodate the varying needs of people and the need to fortify their ideological domains. Mukti Ashram is sustained by the vigor of its dominant narrative of exploitation, liberation, and empowerment. This justifies the existence of the group, defines its goals, and grounds the work of the activists. Though I have sought out evidence of the assertion of individual agentive revisions of the dominant message within the ashram's

walls, what I have seen repeatedly is that people are swept up in the power of the group.²⁴ People are reshaped, or if not reshaped, are largely left in silence, at least in the realm of ideas. They do continue to make the best possible use of the less ideological, material benefits, such as vocational and literacy skills, though these things are certainly not free from ideology (Kumar 1989). Thus the organization continuously re-exerts its dominance and a minority of its clients wholeheartedly join their ranks; the majority too keeps going. Individuals, navigating through complexes of new and unfamiliar ideas, attain what they can from them, all the while lending their temporary support in numbers to the continued existence of the group. A three-word question continues to follow me, however: is this all? Mukti Ashram is clearly powerful, and I have attempted through this analysis to make clear the nature of its power. It is one side of the picture.

Though through time its outward presentation is one of decisive unity, the group itself might implode at the level of the individual, whose even most adamant loyalty is marked by his/her own unique interpretation of the significance of the movement. The appearance of congruence is necessary at one level; its existence at another is impossible. The assertion of congruence has complex political implications. In the case of Mukti Ashram, the challenge to the societal dismissal of the poor, low caste, Indian child lies in the collective strength of the organization's participants; Indians and people worldwide are thus challenged at the level of their consciences. Mukti Ashram and its beneficiaries depend upon each other; the carefully crafted, homogenizing message creates a positive shift in power while simultaneously introducing new quandaries.

Hardiman (1995) writes the history of a tribal revitalization movement in 1920s Gujarat. The story of these *adivasi* (tribal) communities has been subsumed for decades under the dominant narrative of Indian

nationalist historiographers, who have asserted a top-down reading that attributes the reform initiatives to the work of Gandhian activists who had gone "into the field" at that time. Participants in the indigenous *devi* movement, though on the surface agreeing to several of the precepts of the Gandhian activists, were acting according to different interpretations. Hardiman's rereading has important critical implications concerning the factor of vested interest in the rendering of representations. Interest and accessibility exert their impact on what can be known. The process of representing always misses some degree of important difference and detail.

When we think of representations made of people in histories and ethnographies (this one included, of course), this underlying, difficult to discern facet of the cognitive realm of the individual should cause us to hesitate. I wish to recognize this problematic element here in order, in a sense, to work against my own tentative conclusions; I wish to leave open a space that I acknowledge could continue to be filled with the personal stories and thoughts of the people, past and present, who have journeyed through Mukti Ashram's program.

Recommendations

I have examined Mukti Ashram's work and vision with an aim of viewing movements for social change more generally. It would certainly not be appropriate to generalize too loosely from Mukti Ashram's example; yet I do believe that the case at hand brings up important questions for other activists and organizations, especially those whose ultimate goal is to facilitate the empowerment of subjugated people. The questions themselves are the basis for the recommendations that I give below.

For Mukti Ashram and other NGOs working on rehabilitation of ex-child laborers:

- ▶ I would urge a thorough investigation of the long-term effects of their rehabilitation program on the children. This is especially crucial considering Mukti Ashram's program of taking the boys out of their homes, for an extended stay in a counter cultural institution. They must re-enter a threatening environment after completion of the program, and likely face some failures if they attempt to be active in social causes. Such examination of the true impact of their work would enable them to assess what they do daily at the center.
- ▶ They should carefully examine the role of activists as agents in the rehabilitation process. This concerns the potentially disempowering consequences of the intervention of the activists, even if their intentions are to make their clients strong and independent. The desire to exert a formative influence, even in positive ways, may tend to place the priority away from the individual in the interest of the organization.

For those who formulate policies on rehabilitation of child laborers:

- ▶ Mukti Ashram's example demonstrates that true rehabilitation involves far more than a financial package and literacy or vocational training. Rather, the logical extension of taking them out of poverty and exploitation is to critique why they were placed in such a position in the first place. This nagging radical question may be the cause of the inertia to implement legal measures designed to assist

them. Of course, though, if child labor is to be eradicated, it must be dealt with in combination with the other issues that intersect with it. These issues span into international political economy, labor practices including intergenerational debt bondage, the ideology that places groups of people lower based on their caste, and a national development policy that has favored the amassment of wealth for the few. For these reasons child labor is frankly unlikely to end, and such a recommendation would not be heeded.

For northern funding agencies that oversee the work of southern NGOs:

- ▶ I would urge that such organizations develop an awareness of the continuing impact of colonial histories embedded in the relationship between themselves and their Third World funding recipients. Even as transnational alliances can exert pressure on state officials and business interests, the power disparity between north and south exemplified in the necessity of one to fund the other can disfigure what might otherwise be positive outcomes. It is important to consciously work towards the attainment of parity in this matter.
- ▶ Accept the fact of the necessary fluidity of how an issue such as child labor gets addressed by the southern NGOs. Child labor can, for instance, be well combated if some funds were diverted towards enabling women to become small scale entrepreneurs, thus better able to provide for their children. The social complexity that generates this problem of child labor, which is an issue that easily takes hold of people's hearts, is worth understanding. This

information can best be conveyed by the funding recipients who deal with the issues on a daily basis. Such frank discussion would enable funding agencies to better understand where their money is going as well.

NOTES

1. Lit. "voluntary contribution of labour for a public cause".
2. This issue is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, but I concur with Weiner (1991) in his critical assessment of some of the academic factors that have contributed to the stagnation of efforts to eradicate child labor. Significant work that has gone against the grain regarding child labor in India includes Burra (1995) and Chandrasekhar (1997); Scheper-Hughes (1995) has made an eloquent case for the researcher to reach a conscious political position.
3. I have decided to break with anthropological tradition in not using pseudonyms. The reasons for this are numerous. Firstly, I believe that the entire thesis, even those areas where I am critical, would not harm anyone involved. As was the convention at the ashram, I almost always only use first names. Suman, as the director who is accepted as the authoritarian decision maker, said that the use of pseudonyms would be unnecessary. The organization differs from many other communities studied by anthropologists because of its conscious effort to acquire publicity, and so an attempt to change the name of the organization would be an ineffective ruse; similarly, the group of activists is so small that changing personal names around would fool nobody to whom this information might matter.
4. See Amin (1995) and Hardiman (1995) for particularly stellar examples of carefully researched challenges to traditional Indian nationalist historiography, which they both contend has erased the vast majority of Indians from their own history. Their historical reconstructions have powerful consequences for people today: Amin noted that when doing research with the villagers whose ancestors were involved in the Chauri Chaura massacre of 1922, the word quickly spread, "*kitāb nikri! kitāb!*" (a book will come from this).
5. Another useful angle is taken by Roseberry (1996:15), who draws out the implications of the Geertzian distaste for those who "run on about the exploitation of the masses".
6. The implications of this project of counterhegemonic representation are optimistically laid out in Prakash (1990).
7. Madan (1987) explains the prevailing Nehruvian definition of secularism as an approach that honors and gives room for the practice of all faiths. He goes on to raise important questions about the adequacy of secularism in Indian society.
8. I should add here that I am in agreement with their opposition to such labor practices that leave some children at a severe disadvantage in adulthood. I would locate "child labor" as a problem whenever it takes from the child rather than giving to him/her. But I realize that this is a muddy topic when the welfare of the family includes the welfare of the individual. Thus I believe I am probably somewhat less critical of certain manifestations of child labor than Mukti Ashram, though I am in agreement that the worst forms deserve immediate elimination.

9. This is the area around the Inter State Bus Terminal (ISBT) in the northeastern part of the city. Butterflies is located in the ISBT terminal. Panniker's restaurant is widely noted for providing training in concrete skills related to restaurant management, service, and food preparation, to boys whose access to such avenues would be otherwise nonexistent. The boys are fully entrusted with the finances and have individually been able to save a portion of their wages.
10. The effects of Hindi-medium education are debatable as well, however, and exemplify the difficult, compromising decisions that must be made in this sort of wide-ranging movement. After all, Hindi-medium schooling is often resented by speakers of minority languages, and several of the boys from Orissa I met at Mukti Ashram were quite visibly having difficulty coping with classes at the ashram given this linguistic barrier.
11. This is likely highly variable throughout the diversity of rural settings of India. For example, when I questioned the activist Bhoj Raj about this issue, he replied that agricultural work was not looked down upon, but rather the landowners of this village in Orissa did not farm their own lands because they could afford not to.
12. This issue of the acceptance of the idea of karma is an interesting one that has been hotly debated among anthropologists for decades. Mencher, Berreman, Gough, Juergensmeyer, and others have contended that low caste people reject this element of the Hindu belief system. Dumont and people who follow in his wake, and Srinivas with his concept of Sanskritization, implicitly or explicitly see overwhelming compliance with the caste system. I believe that the fact of this debate indicates something to be expected – that people act inconsistently, trying to negotiate their way through contradictions and alternatives – and that in this case it is likely that even if at some level low caste people are able to denounce the implications of the caste system, it still exerts its presence on their world views.
13. This term, originally used in Marathi among the followers of the untouchable (Mahar) leader B. R. Ambedkar (who is also the "father of the Indian constitution") literally means "ground down". It is politically useful in uniting different low caste groups through the singular commonality of social oppression.
14. This term refers to the clothing articles (particularly cotton cloth) made by village craftspeople, the wearing of which both symbolically and materially supports rural self-sufficiency. The movement to uphold and increase the production of khadi was a project of Mahatma Gandhi, but continues today.
15. See Appendix B for a portion of the text as it was given by Bhoj Raj in Hindi.
16. I tape recorded this class session, which was held in Hindi. With the assistance of a native speaker I later transcribed and translated the dialogue. The portion quoted in this chapter is given in its original Hindi text in Appendix C.
17. It is unclear whether this is a local name for landowners or a proper name. I consulted with a native Hindi speaker who was not familiar with the term.

18. Though the Indian ideal is widely known to be the maintenance of women's honor partly through her seclusion in the home and refraining from wage labor, poor women in India often work alongside men, and for lower wages.

19. Like the other interviews, this one shows what is understood by the interviewee as good to be said, but perhaps it does not reflect equally as truly what are the true feelings or understandings of the interviewees.

20. Feeling quite ill with congestion problems after the long winter, and staggering under the heavy narcotic content in my cough medicine, I never did make it to Bihar with them, but instead I broke off with them half way, taking a night train back to Delhi from the city of Kanpur, UP.

21. Based on personal conversation with Subodh Boddhisatva.

22. He once explained to me with much pride that his ancestors were upper caste Kshatriyas from Rajasthan, who fled the Muslim invasion rather than give up their religion, finally settling in the Himalayan foothills in Himachal Pradesh.

23. My ability to elaborate upon the North American leg of the march is due to having attended it for several days as a class project. Mary McClure and I were partners on the project; except where noted, however, the words and thoughts presented here are wholly my own.

24. This is the best conclusion I could reach after ten weeks at the ashram, and I would accept the challenge that longer time with a stronger ability to communicate in Hindi could spell a different conclusion.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Government and press representations

Saving Child Labour From its 'Saviours'

By SHASTRI RAMACHANDARAN

THE growing global concern over child labour has given rise to many tracks of effort to eliminate the problem. But whether the problem is child labour or its causes have prevented international agreement on how to combat a situation where 250 million children worldwide are in health, safety, education, and pre-

ing board, felt that the elimination of child labour should not be side-tracked by trade issues. Mr. Rajiv Shahare, of India's Permanent Mission to the UN pre-vented developing countries (LDCs) from being targeted. As a drafting committee member he got the unacceptable clauses dropped and scuttled the ICFU plan to screen a film

Meet Jalil Ahmed Ansari.
Successful owner of a carpet manufacturing unit
And former "child labourer"



Jalil Ahmed Ansari

A true life success story

Child Labour - a socio-economic problem

No place for children here

Govt. of India - action against child labour

Giving them a future

Efforts of NGOs

Support Kaleen - support little lives

Child Labour - perception or reality?

So what can we do?

Appendix B
Selection from Bhoj Raj's testimony

और मेरा धीरे धीरे मन में हुआ कि क्या हमारे प्रति जो यहाँ बताये थे मुक्ति आश्रम में, क्या हम इस काम को कर सकते हैं कि नहीं? की नहीं कर सकते हैं, ऐसा सोचा, सोचते सोचते मैं अपने गाँव में एक दिन सोचा कि मैं भी अपने गाँव में कुछ करूँगा। मेरा मन भी ऐसा कहा कि मैं भी कुछ करूँगा। तो मैं अपने गाँव में ऐसा दो-चार ओदमी को पहले बताया, भाई, देखो। हम जो इतना दिन तक मज़दूर कर रहे थे। मज़दूर करते भी है। लेकिन ओज तक हमारे पेट क्यों नहीं भर रहा है? तो उन्होंने मेरे को सावाल भी किए कि उस सावाल आज कैसे कर रहा हो एकदम उठके। उनको बताया कि भाई, मैं वहाँ गया था, वहाँ जाके उनके ऐसा सावालों और जवाबों ढूँढता है, वहाँ सिगनल मिलता है, कि हमारा भी देश में, अपने गाँव में, अपने राज्यों में, ऐसा ऐसा अधिकार है, जो कि हम मज़दूर, हम लोग निम्नतम मज़दूरी से, गाँव की मज़दूरी से, हर चीज़ से वंचित है। तो हम लोगों को इतना मज़दूर में क्या जो पाँच तानी या पंद्र रुपया हमारे यहाँ मिलता है, इतना में क्या हमारा रोजी रोटी हो सकता है क्या? बाल-बच्चों का पेट भर सकता है क्या? ऐसा हर चीज़ चर्ची हुआ।

तो उन्होंने कुछ लोग समझे, कुछ लोग तो ऐसा तो हमारा भगवान कर लिखा हुआ भाग्य है, इसको कोई भिटाइगा -?- -सा सोचते थे। परंतु मैंने दो-तीन माह तक इस बात पे रहा और लोगों को बताता रहा

भाई, ये कोई परमात्मा का नहीं है, ये अपने भाग्य का नहीं है, ये हमारा हक है, लेकिन हम लोग जब तक इसके सामने नहीं आयेंगे, तब तक पूरा होनेवाला नहीं है। तो फिर हमने एक मीटिंग जैसे रखे पंद्र-बीस जने का, उस मीटिंग में चर्चा किए कि इसको कैसे किया जाएँ? तो हमने बताये गाँववाले जितना मज़दूर थे भाई हमारे तो ऐसे बारे में दिमाग नहीं है जो कुछ तू बता रहा है कहाँ तक सच है क्या है उसपर फिर चर्चा किए। तो हम लोग पूरी गरीब की मीटिंग करके, गाँव जितना मज़दूर थे, उनके साथ बैठे और नहीं इस साल हम लोग सोचे कि अगर हमको पाँच ताने की धान की जगह सात ताने नहीं मिल जाता है, तब तक हमि कोई काम पे नहीं जाएँगे।

Appendix C
Excerpt of Suman's class session

S: गलत बात हो गयी, लेकिन उन्होंने अख़बार में छपवा दी, अब ये अख़बार सारे पढ़े-लिखे लोग पढ़ेंगे, तो तुम्हारे बात तो कोई भी नहीं सुनेगा।

C: उही पर हमारे लिए कौन बोले, उही पर ले आया, और झूठ बोलता है दीदी के सामने।

S: दीदी के सामने नहीं ये बेटा तो अख़बार में लिखा है।

C: अख़बार में - - -

S: अख़बार में सारी दुनिया में छप गया है, अब सारी दुनिया पढ़ेगी इसको। अब तुम अपनी बात कैसे साबित करोगे? कैसे तुम्हारी बात कैसे कोई सुनेगा? जबकि सच्ची बात तो तुम जानते हो। सच्ची बात जानते हो, ना? और कैसे जानते हो सच्ची बात। क्योंकि तुम उसमें रहे हो काम किये हो। हे ना? और जो आदमी उस गलिये के बीच में नहीं रहा, क्या है।

C: (inaudible)

S: है?

C: दीदी, मैं - - -

S: मार के बुननवाता था, है ना?

C: (loud chorus of response -- several voices)

....ज़मीन के अन्दर...

जी, जी, मिट्टी के नीचे घर बनाके सी