

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Patti L. Duncan

Founded over fifty years ago by K. Viswanathan, the Mitraniketan educational facility in Kerala, India provides literacy and vocational education to socially marginalized women, men, and children through nursery, elementary, high school and an educational preparatory program for young adults. Viswanathan founded the school on several ideals including Neo-Marxist, Quaker, and Gandhian notions of community participation as well as ones that emphasize the social and personal agency of marginalized peoples. This study focuses largely on the Mitraniketan People's College (MPC) and seeks to identify: 1) that which has contributed to the longevity and success of Mitraniketan; 2) any structural inequities that may or may not exist between educational offerings for women and men learners enrolled at the Mitraniketan People's College; and 3) the extent to which learners (particularly women) contribute to the development of their programs. Study participants included a combination of seventeen current and graduated students, as well as teachers, school administrators and the schools' founder. Ethnographic and feminist methodological approaches including participant observation were employed in data collection and analysis. This work draws upon the theoretical frameworks of progressive pedagogy, as well as transnational and postcolonial feminisms. Research outcomes revealed that 1)

the school's longevity is grounded in the reciprocal relationship that the school's founder has established with various communities but that the strength of programming remains tenuous; 2) while female students at MPC are offered equal opportunities for learning, program offerings lack gender equity; and 3) while the ideals for liberatory education are in place, they are not consistently practiced; thus, students do not make holistic contributions to program development.

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Unpacking Success: Progressive Politics and Stalled Gender Equity at the
Mitraniketan People's College

by
Stephanie Nahima Glick

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Director of Interdisciplinary Studies Program

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand 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.

Stephanie Nahima Glick, Author

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Insisting that his work was effortless, an enraged patron once asked Pablo Picasso how he could charge her so much money for a portrait that took him so little time to draw. Picasso responded, “Madame, it took me my entire life.” While I regret framing the words of a notorious womanizer in the pretext pages of this thesis, in that statement Picasso conveyed that everything he encountered throughout the course of his years contributed to his art. I refer to this anecdote in acknowledgement of all of the teachers in my life that purposefully or accidentally aroused my curiosity, intrigue and passion around the processes of teaching and learning, as well as issues pertaining to experiences associated with gender. In this sense, it took “my entire life” to arrive at this research. I thank you—my teachers—for your life-long contributions.

To my other teachers: my encouraging family, warm friends, impassioned colleagues, and department angels (Leonora Rianda, Danielle Franklin, Karen Mills), thank you all for challenging me *and* for making me laugh!

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Broken Song

*The singer does not make a song, there has to be someone who hears;
One, man opens his throat to sing, the other sings his mind.
Only when waves fall on the shore do they make a harmonious sound,
Only when breezes shake the woods do we hear rustling in the leaves.
Only from a marriage of two forces does music arise in the world.
Where there is no love, where listeners are dumb, there can never be song.*

-Rabindranath Tagore

Unpacking Success: Progressive Politics and Stalled Gender Equity at the Mitraniketan People's College

Chapter 1: Introduction

Mitraniketan, which translates into “an abode of friends,” is an experimental educational project founded in the southern Indian state of Kerala in 1956 by Sri. K. Viswanathan,¹ a student of the philosophies of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Viswanathan subscribes to selected neo-Marxist ideals including notions of reciprocal community participation in an effort to create a more harmonious, interactive and productive society (Kellner 3-4) as well as an emphasis on the personal and social agency of marginalized peoples (Mitraniketan). The project, more frequently referred to as a school, exists specifically to provide a hands-on experimental pedagogical approach for its learners via “basic education.” Basic education places emphasis on vocational and experimental methods that focus on the incorporation of specific manual skills originating in India as opposed to those imposed by the developed world. While Mitraniketan seeks to educate a diverse population, it places special emphasis on offering instruction to members of socially and economically disadvantaged indigenous groups known as Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) so that they can improve their home communities. SC and ST members constitute some of the country's most “socially and economically

¹ Pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants with the exception of the K. Viswanathan, the school's founder; his wife Sethu, who is the headmistress of Mitraniketan proper; and Dr. Reghu Rama Das, principal of the Mitraniketan People's college. Each of these individuals plays a very public role at Mitraniketan. As such, concealing their identities while disclosing their specific positions would not be possible.

backward”² groups (Rao and Babu 12) and thus have lower literacy rates than the national average (Scheduled Tribes).

Courses at Mitraniketan are offered to girls and boys as well as women and men in a style reminiscent of the Indian Gurukula educational system, whereby students live alongside the teacher or “guru.” Mitraniketan has grown into a vast sixty-acre campus that educates over four hundred on-site students per year in addition to students who participate in community outreach courses. The campus, located in a medium size village known as Vellanad, houses a nursery school as well as standards I – X (such standards are comparable to first through tenth grade education in the U.S.), student dormitories, several production units, farming projects, and some private residences—both affiliated and unaffiliated with the school, as well as a college—the Mitraniketan People’s College (MPC). In founding Mitraniketan Viswanathan sought to:

experiment & develop an alternative education model to the formal system of education which is more degree & [d]iploma oriented. His concept is of providing an education which is life oriented and also to develop active citizenship useful to the family, community & the nation. The education gives more importance to outside classroom activities, practical[s] etc. (Rama Das, “Developing”)

Today, Mitraniketan offers a hybrid of educational experiences to students from nearby and far off villages alike, most of whom reside at the school, with the exception of tribal women. Courses are offered to students ranging in age from two and a half years up to adulthood and include everything from traditional education

² The term “backward” is commonly used in India. It is comparable with the word “marginalized,” both in definition and absence of disparaging inference.

(reading, mathematics, science), to agricultural and vocational education as well as courses aimed at empowering tribal women.

This study focuses largely on the Mitraniketan People's College, a "one-year vocational and educational preparatory program for young adults" (Glick and Gottschalk 2) which is located within the greater Mitraniketan campus. Because aspects of this study vacillate between Mitraniketan as an entire entity—including multiple schools, production units, dormitories, etc.—and segments of the academy, the term "Mitraniketan" shall refer to the nursery school, standards I – X, and when appropriate, the campus at large—including the college. For clarity, when addressing the college independently from the rest of the campus, I shall refer to it specifically as Mitraniketan People's College (MPC). Both schools (Mitraniketan proper, and MPC) hold the same mission, which is the "progress of society through the total development of individuals." Whereas Mitraniketan was developed for children in 1956, MPC was created in 1996 as a one-year vocational and educational preparatory program for adults who range in age between 18 and 35 years. (Glick and Gottschalk).

While much is written on literacy and education in the left-leaning state of Kerala, relatively little is written about Mitraniketan, a school which reflects the historical pedagogical ideals of the region: Mitraniketan caters to people of varying classes and castes, serves adults and children and exists in a region that places greater emphasis on educating women and girls than other states in India. Imaginably, even less is written about the roles and contributions of Mitraniketan's

female constituents—including its learners and educators. To date, that which has been published in English about Mitraniketan is written almost entirely by men and reflects the perspectives of men involved in the school. Such publications lack feminist pedagogical ideals that could assist in offering greater educational opportunities to students.

The significance of this research lies in its examination of 1) the longevity of Mitraniketan as a whole, 2) gender equity in educational offerings between female and male learners at the Mitraniketan People's College, and 3) the liberatory nature of the programming at MPC. More specifically, the questions developed for this study seek to:

1. Identify the factors that contribute to a successful, sustainable, experimental learning environment for low-income and otherwise societally marginalized learners.
2. Understand and explicate any structural inequities that may or may not exist between educational offerings to female and male learners.
3. Ascertain the extent to which learners (particularly women and girls) contribute to the development of their programs.

The aim of my research is threefold. The first is to contribute to the goals of Mitraniketan by offering research that emerged from my collaboration with students, staff and administrators so that the school can strengthen the breadth, depth and accessibility of the current programming for female students. The second goal is to stimulate more inquiry about the education of women while also making a significant contribution to the body of literature on Mitraniketan. And finally, I hope to offer sound results that will offer promising ideas and helpful suggestions to

practitioners in the fields of education, international studies, women's and gender studies, as well as researchers and volunteers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Envisioning Mitraniketan

[We] got whatever in the world we [wanted]. We were so occupied. Days started at 6 am and ended at 10pm. Days were very full and active. Going to vegetable garden and classes and dance and music. ... Teachers lived here and it was really like a community. - Sanjana, a former student

A native of a village just outside of Vellanad where Mitraniketan is established, Viswanathan was born into one of the lowest castes in India. Consequently, his family was not allowed to enter temples (Viswanathan). As such, Mitraniketan offers education to children from various castes ranging from low to high (Purcell 656). Viswanathan developed a vision of providing a holistic education to marginalized people including the cultivation of “personality—health, economic life, academic study, social life, and ethical and aesthetic values” (Purcell 648, 650). Viswanathan’s inspiration came from Mahatma Gandhi’s employment of basic education principles, Rabindranath Tagore’s belief in cultivating the whole student rather than disconnected segments of the individual, Quaker philosophies for their foci on community and service to others, Danish Folk Schools which emphasize personal development for marginalized sections, and Arthur Morgan—the former president of Antioch College who not only offered mentoring support to Viswanathan but raised funds within the U.S. to provide financial backing to Mitraniketan (Purcell 650; Biggers 138). With such influences, a community of local citizens, students and educators built Mitraniketan. During its formative years teachers volunteered their time, lived on campus and occupied multiple positions at

the school. For example, a math teacher might have taught gardening and a music teacher might have sat in on academic classes. Learners and educators lived together on the campus in the true gurukula tradition of education and worked side-by-side learning, cleaning the grounds and fostering relationships. Educators were warm and affectionate with their students and because learners lived away from their families, they quickly formed similar kinships at the school. Class sizes at Mitraniketan were small and students were versed in a variety of subjects which were interdisciplinary and interconnected. Students were noted for their creativity, friendliness, respect, and receptiveness in learning (Purcell 660). Viswanathan's departure from traditional measurements for capitalist success as well as his emphasis on holistic education is revealed when he states, "the good life is to be a good neighbor, to consider your neighbor as yourself" (McKibben).

The village roads leading to the Mitraniketan campus consist of a paradise of tapioca farms, rice fields, and coconut and banana trees. Walking along its palm-shaded dirt paths one can hardly imagine that it was once a dusty plot of barren land, intentionally cultivated into lush resources (Biggers 150 – 152). Today the grounds flourish not only with agricultural bounty, but also with the warm glances of toiling farmers, smiling women, playful dogs and curious students eager to practice their English. The university grounds are dotted with buildings which were constructed using local materials in a way that would allow air and light flow to permeate through the open structures. The campus also includes the Mitraniketan People's College, dormitories, both structurally open classrooms as well as more

traditional collegiate spaces for MPC students, a gymnasium and sports field, production units, workshops for vocational courses, a post office, a tea stall, administrator residences, a dormitory style guesthouse and a marketing centre which hosts a computer lab for visitors as well as Mitraniketan goods for sale. This is the fruit of a visionary thinker: a community embraced by nature, friends, educational progress and peace.

As the Mitraniketan People's College exists to serve indigenous and societally marginalized people, the goal is not to make students into academic scholars—in fact, less than 10 percent of learners go on to higher education. Rather, the aim of the program is threefold: 1) to expand upon vocational skills that are common and realistic to students' backgrounds, 2) to develop proficiency in general education, and perhaps most emphasized, 3) to cultivate the character, organizational and leadership skills of learners—a program in which MPC administrators and educators take great pride. In short, the focus of MPC is on “‘education for life’ which imparts need based life and livelihood skill development rather than education for degrees and diplomas” (Glick and Gottschalk 4). To further elaborate on the mission of the college, MPC principal J.R. Reghu Rama Das reflects:

MPC is one of the innovative education projects of Mitraniketan (NGO) which promotes people centered holistic rural development for improving the quality of life and living of village communities. It strives to promote rural development with a human face. (“Individualism” 5)

Our goal is to develop humanistically oriented citizen leaders, men and women who as activists will ensure the vitality and democratic nature of the village panchayats which are the basic building blocks of Indian democracy as envisaged in our constitution. (“Financial Sustainability” 88)

As such, the goal of MPC is not to simply train learners to become workers in their chosen fields, but to equip them with the interpersonal skills necessary to become contributors and leaders in their families and communities (Rama Das, *Financial Sustainability* 87).

While availability of classes varies per year according to financial resources, historically, for male students who attend MPC, vocational training can include auto mechanics, agriculture, carpentry, computer application, electrical engineering, plumbing and sanitation. Conversely, for women the vocational course offerings have historically been sparser consisting simply of agriculture, tailoring and garment making, as well as computer training. The outcome of attending and completing the program at Mitraniketan People's College is a Diploma in Vocational and Personality Development.

India, Kerala, and Women: The Establishment of a Nation and State

In 1947, India became an independent nation, freeing itself from the shackles of British colonialism. States were formed along linguistic and cultural lines (Raman 2) which sometimes meant the reallocation of villages into other states, as was the case for Vellanad. Kerala was formed in 1956 via the States Reorganization Act for the purpose of "uniting Malayalam speakers into one political unit" (Purcell 651). Accordingly, Kerala instantly became one of the most densely populated states despite occupying one of India's most diminutive geographical territories (Purcell 651).

Kerala is one of the only states in the world to democratically elect to become a communist municipality “initiat[ing] what has purportedly become the most successful social welfare programme in the developing world” (Shah). One of the greatest effects of communism in Kerala has been what Shah articulates as “universal literacy rates and life expectancy levels close to many western societies.” Though communism as a form of government and philosophical leadership vacillates per election, the state maintains strong roots even in off years. This knowledge helps pave an understanding of Kerala’s emphasis on pro-poor policies (Rammohan 26) and its consequent advancements. K. Ravi Raman suggests that:

the renaissance in Kerala began among both the ‘dominant’ and the ‘subaltern’ castes with a clear mission: a rejuvenation of the particular caste/community which cut across ideological boundaries to encompass all humanity. (2)

As such, Kerala is most noted for the Kerala model of development which emphasizes social development despite its low per capita income (UNDP Policy Centre). One of the components that the Kerala model is noted for is an emphasis on education. Despite the fact that more economically advanced states exist in the country, Kerala remains the most literate in all of India (Raman 3). The success associated with high literacy and progressive social development is often attributed to historical factors including: “Anglican missionaries, ‘progressive social movements,’ ‘enlightened princely governments’ and post-independent, welfare-oriented governments, both left-wing and right-wing” (Rammohan 26).

Scholarly publications pertaining to the Kerala Model often suggest correlations between its profound literacy rates and: 1) a decline in population growth, 2) lower infant mortality rates than in other areas of the country, 3) gender gap reductions in literacy, and 4) the greater educational and professional advancement of women (Sethi 9; Jayasree 434 – 436). Kerala is often referred to as an example for educational advancement and prosperity when considering other developing states and countries. In terms of education, Kerala is frequently compared with advanced states of the west, particularly those of Scandinavia (Raman 1, Ross 171, Mitraniketan).

Beyond this, many scholars eagerly attribute Kerala's literacy success with the emphasis placed on its inclusion of women, which dates back to the nineteenth century (Jeffrey 448 - 449). "As long as censuses have been taken, women in Kerala have been more literate than women in other parts of India" (Jeffrey 462).

Hypotheses for gender inclusion and the advancement of women in the Kerala educational system are attributed to 1) beliefs that the government of Kerala has created the foundation for the phenomenon to exist, 2) the culture of the Malayali people including an emphasis on "education for all" by 19th century local royalty and Christian missionaries, as well as 3) the consistently higher ratio of women to men in the region (Ross 173; Jeffrey 470, McKibben). Along these lines, the majority of teachers in Kerala are women which likely boosts the attendance of girls at school (Jeffrey 466), as opposed to other areas of the country where dropout rates increase for girls once they hit puberty (Dube 149). This theme corresponds with the state's

consistently slighter gap in male to female literacy rates than exists in other regions, and thus explains paralleled employment rates for Malayali women.

Kerala is also touted for its religious diversity, peace between religious constituents and very low subsequent crime (Meyer, Brysac). Historically, the dominant caste was matrilineal—a system in which descent and inheritance rights are passed down through women instead of men (Baird). Bill McKibben summarizes the distinction between Kerala and other states as a:

quartet of emancipations—from caste distinction, religious hatred, the powerlessness of illiteracy, and the worst forms of gender discrimination—[which] has left the state with a distinctive feel, a flavor of place that influences every aspect of its life. (McKibben)

Still, subversive literature belies assertions that Kerala is a safe, progressively matrilineal state with well-educated citizens. Leela Dube contends that “kinship systems” often serve as an obstruction to the advancement of women (1). Dube advises that many countries in South Asia, including India, “prefer to give higher education to sons rather than to daughters, mainly because boys are considered positive economic assets to the family” (146). As a result, girls are often confined to roles that will enhance their skills as wives and are thus denied a girth of academic opportunities (Dube 147 - 148). Other scholars offer that the notion of the regional oppression of women does not exclude Kerala. For example, as highlighted in the article “Respect and Respectability,” Vanessa Baird articulates:

Even matrilineage was not as good for women as it’s cracked up to be. Women might nominally own the land but the major decisions were still made by men. So it became easy for men to turn family land assets into cash which they then controlled.

In the same article, Ajitha, a feminist and former revolutionary Naxalite activist expounds upon the notion that the women of Kerala are not as privileged as popular literature depicts:

I think the situation of women in Kerala is really very bad. Men think they have the right to molest and rape. The atmosphere is very oppressive. Women in Kerala are generally very meek and do not protest – I believe they are actually *more* repressed than elsewhere in India.

Many self-identified feminists resist the notion that Kerala's history as a matrilineal state provided any real autonomy to women. Feminists insist that histories depicting women as sexually liberated and head decision makers regarding issues of familial property rights are erroneous (Baird). Rather, male family members controlled power in both of these instances. To support the contention that women obtain underprivileged positions in Kerala, Dr. Praveena Kodoth, scholar at the Centre for Development Studies in Kerala explains:

Women continue to be subjected to unequal treatment in a state which boasts the highest female literacy rate in the country; they are paid less and occupy a disadvantaged position within the power equation of the state in relation to men as also within the larger power relations in the state in terms of their access to resources such as land and employment. The scourge of dowry remains a highly competitive market practice that also forms part of a consumption-oriented cultural economy ... which in turn reveals the general devaluation of women. ... Women [have] remained invisible in the dominant narratives (qtd. in Raman 12-13).

As suggested by the previous statements, Kerala has its less publicized flaws, which continue to relegate women to the margins of society via distorted power relations

to men. Not only are women in contemporary times silenced, but according to these accounts, so too are the true histories of Malayali women's struggles.

Further echoing inconsistencies as they pertain to the people of Kerala, K. Ravi Raman reveals that independent research sources such as the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, also known as the "People's Science Movement [for] social revolution" (Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishath) found official statistics regarding poverty to be off by up to one-hundred percentage points—meaning poverty is twice as bad as reported by the state (11-12). He further elaborates that the touted low infant mortality rates reflect the "general population" as opposed to "indigenous infants" (11-12).

Perhaps it is in contrast to the aforementioned subversive reports about Kerala that the Mitraniketan educational facility seeks to level the playing field by offering programs that are specifically designed for women via their Women's Empowerment/Extension Programmes. Mitraniketan's website advertises support of women's groups ranging from micro-credit to soap making, from civic matters to health and nutrition training. Furthermore, the school acknowledges the disparity between Kerala's high literacy rate and the exclusion of rural women from such statistics. As such, Mitraniketan offers "functional literacy" training for marginalized women. Also, the school extends its services to a nearby village so as to reach that area's tribal female youth (Mitraniketan). Still, it is important to note that 1) male administrators oversee these programs and 2) these courses are different than what is offered at the Mitraniketan People's College where female students are primed for

futures in agricultural work and computers. Both of these points will be addressed in greater detail in the discussion section of this thesis.

Despite these services, there is currently no research that specifically addresses the equity and inclusiveness of female constituents, nor the role that learners (specifically women and girls) have in contributing to their program development at the Mitraniketan People's College.

“Free India” and the Discourse on Education

“It must be realized that the university or a higher institution of learning is not only an academic organization where certain courses are taught, but a fellowship of teachers and [sic] taught, having common purpose of seeking truths in order to be able to generate greater happiness for the greatest number.” - Shri Suraz Bhan (32)

Following independence from the British, the new Indian government placed special emphasis on university education. This was to expand upon exclusive educational offerings previously made accessible only to citizens of privilege. Spectacularly, the expansion also included efforts to educate women (Shridevi 205). While numbers vary according to source, in over ninety years of the British Raj, only about nineteen universities and 400 colleges existed in all of India (Sharma 251, Ramachandran 1). In an attempt to change the status quo, discourse on education addressed both the future needs of education in India, and the current passivity located in schools which existed simply to groom students for the passing of exams. Pre-independence higher educational offerings had been described as a “narrow outlook, self-centred, [and] innocent of any idealism in life. Education was stereotyped and did not develop many-sided interests” (Sohoni 225). The point of “many-

sided interests” would be made by several educationalists and suggested that education should be well-rounded, character rich, and experiential. It also proclaimed that a teacher ought to provide more than mere information; s/he must evoke within the student curiosity, love of knowledge and an ability to think critically, while also helping students cultivate an aptitude for applying notions learned from within a discipline to notions that exist outside of the discipline.

Understandably, in the wake of independence, much discourse on teaching and learning circled around fostering students’ critical thinking skills in ways that would positively impact the nation. As such, some concern grew about the importance of defining “quality education” in Free India. G.P. Sohoni articulates the following six items which encapsulate overlapping notions addressed by Gandhi and educationalists who called for new education in India: 1) the significance of speaking one’s mother language, 2) association with one’s “cultural heritage,” 3) personal independence, 4) ethics, love of country and humility, 5) well-rounded knowledge of various topics and 6) an ability to apply knowledge both functionally and critically (225). Not reported in this list, but cited as equally important by other educationalists, was an emphasis on “learn[ing the] dignity of labour”—this concept was tied to the notion that “hand-work” held as much value as “head-work” within the educational system (Vergese 188). Yet the view of hand-work goes beyond the idea that there are different learning styles for different individuals. Its symbolic contribution extends from the Khadi movement, which involved spinning fibers in a charkha, or “spinning wheel” with the intention of helping India gain economic

independence from British colonizers by decreasing Indians' dependence on British vendibles. Furthermore, Gandhi insisted that such work was good for clearing the mind—another testament to the importance of emphasizing the character development of Indian citizens. From this perspective, one can see the confluence between dignity and labor in higher education.

At the same time, the first educational commission to emerge after Independence known as the Radhakrishnan Commission “ushered in a new era in the realm of higher education” (Bhan 18). The Radhakrishnan Commission Report (1948 – 59) emphasized the importance of developing the individual:

The quality of a civilisation depends not on the material equipment or the political machinery but on the character of men. The major task of education is the improvement of character ...

Education aims at the development of the individual, the discovery, training and utilization of his special talents ...

We must train people not merely to be citizens but also to be individuals. The aim of education should be to break ground for new values and make them possible. (Insights Into Education)

Moreover, the Radhakrishnan Commission Report emphasized the importance of a teacher's character:

The tutor has to bear in mind that he is not merely teaching a subject, but is educating men and women to take their places as intelligent citizens of the nation. ... [The teacher's] success will be measured not in terms of percentage of passes alone ... but equally through the quality of life and character of men and women whom he has taught. (“Insights Into Education”)

In accordance with this sentiment, the University Education Commission of 1949 emphasized the importance of attracting the best and the brightest women

and men to teach in colleges and universities (Bhan 24). It recognized that the success of universities hinged on the excellence of the educators, and called attention to the many hats a good educator wears (Bhan 24). Such reflections elucidate the premium that the country placed on offering higher education as a means for personal and intellectual development of its citizens so as to nurture the healthy growth of a nation. It mirrored the new Indian government's cognizance to yield a nation intellectually enriched and functional, rather than one newly emancipated but floundering in the shadows of freedom's celebration.

Other post-independence literature that emerged in India in the 1950s and 60s suggests that there was a push for student welfare as a means of securing student success. The University Grants Commission allotted funding to colleges and universities for everything from student financial assistance, to residence hall living, to healthcare centers for university students, as well as funding to colleges and universities for student personality development programs (Bhan 26 – 27).

As previously stated, the notion of educating women after Independence was of noted significance. The education of women in India has been credited with the country's emergence of the feminist movement (Shridevi 206). Yet education and feminism played reciprocal roles in the advancement of each practice. As such, the education of women and women's rights ultimately led to the emancipation of women in India (Shridevi 206). With schooling on the rise, progressive educationalists feared that an emergence of the "feminine mystique" would grip educated women who opted to stay at home to raise their children (Shridevi 208 -

209). The feminine mystique refers to the boredom and frustration that learned women might experience if confined to domestic duties in the home rather than working outside of the home (Freidan 15 - 16). In an effort to combat such effects before they took flight, and in an attempt to help women enjoy their work in the home, less progressive educationalists suggested a division of curricula that would relegate women to subjects such as “home science” (Shridevi 209). Despite this, progressive calls suggested that a division in education would ultimately impede the advancement of women. Dr. S. Shridevi predicted that under divided curricula, “the nation will lose half of its human resources by restricting women’s education to a limited field” (209).

Even before Independence was achieved, there was another presence that strongly influenced Indian educationalists as well as Mitraniketan’s founder.

Rabindranath Tagore, the poet, artist, writer, educational philosopher and anti-nationalist (during the Raj) founded Shantiniketan, an ashram and school based on principles of nature and of critical thinking. He states:

in education, the most important factor must be the inspiring atmosphere of creative activity. And therefore, the primary function of our University should be the constructive work of knowledge The great use of education is not merely to collect facts, but to know man and to make oneself known to man. It is the duty of every human being to master, at least to some extent, not only the language of intellect, but also that personality which is the language of Art [O]ur education should be in full touch with our complete life, economical, intellectual aesthetic, social and spiritual; and our educational institutions should be in the very heart of our society, connected with it by the living bonds of varied co-operations. For true education is to realize at every step how our training and knowledge have organic connection with our surroundings (515 – 516).

As such, Tagore proposed schools that were connected to nature. What we now refer to as “biophilic design,” Tagore employed to create an atmosphere that incorporated nature’s elements into the classroom so as to avoid interactions with spaces and furniture that were “stiff, cramping and dead”—elements that intruded on the mind (Tagore qtd. in Mani 124). Experiences of stiffness in the school and home led Tagore to his emphasis on “freedom” in education in which students could explore nature, integrate their senses with the process of learning, develop their sensitivity, humanity, and work in cooperation with others (Mani 124 – 130). This would come to have a profound influence on the design philosophy incorporated into the architecture at Mitraniketan.

That India was especially receptive to education as a means for healing itself from the damages imposed by colonialism indicates that this was an advantageous time for the emergence of Mitraniketan – a school founded upon principles that valued the symbiotic relationship between education, teachers, students, community, the natural world, hand work, and basic education. Mitraniketan was created to blend experience-oriented education with the needs of the community. Though the Mitraniketan People’s College would not open for another forty years, establishment of the first school, along with its holistic ideals was able to pave the way for the would-be college.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

In this research, I draw upon progressive pedagogy, along with transnational and postcolonial feminist theories for their emphases on social justice, and inquiries into power relations and marginalized sectors.

Progressive pedagogy summons the reciprocity of knowledge and authority between teacher and learner in the classroom. In doing so, it calls upon all participants—both learners and educators—to be participatory in the creation of education (Gardner). In this classroom traditional hierarchies dissolve, as the educator becomes both teacher and learner while students transition between being learners and educators (Freire 53). As such, progressive pedagogy honors critical thinking and liberatory experiences rather than ones constructed by the more common “banking” model of education. Banking education assigns the student to be the meek “receptacle” of information while the educator is assigned to be the provider of “knowledge” (Freire 53). Furthermore, the tenets of liberatory education espouse social democracy in that liberation is a “mutual process” between the oppressor (read: a teacher of the banking method) and the oppressed (read: student subjected to banking methods). It espouses that for education to be liberatory, both oppressor and oppressed must notice their social locations and rise together. This does not leave room for the teacher to “lift” or “save” the student but to work with her/him in solidarity (Freire 31). In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* educationalist Paulo Freire espouses that liberation must start from within the marginalized community as opposed to outside of it. Freire also stresses

the importance of liberation as a “mutual process” between the oppressed and the oppressor (table of contents; 30). According to Freire, revolutions started from the “outside” deplete the oppressed of their “humanity” and any liberation that could result from “their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization” (30). Freire’s contention points to the fact that living within the margins where advocacy is desired is imperative in achieving and sustaining liberation. Pairing this line of thought with a similar philosophy on Indian education, Dr. Reghu Rama Das writes:

[i]n the Indian context there is a need to include vocationalisation of education as one of the components of non-formal education programme. MPC prepares the learners to earn a living with dignity, to support themselves and their families and the learner gradually realized [*sic*] that life is much more than earning a living. The course helps the learner to develop self respect, confidence, initiative and awareness in addition to developing a social commitment. (90)

These comments indicate the reciprocity that MPC aims to establish between the school’s founding mission and its students. Here we see a school originated by an “outsider” with the intention of aiding fellow outsiders in the quest for personal development. Yet the means for instituting progress remain grounded in dignity and consideration for the greater community rather than the sole advancement of the individual. These notions of participatory education and revolution from within are the axioms upon which Mitraniketan was founded.

Transnational feminism offers a locus whereby issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, and national belonging, can intersect—all in the face of global capitalism, exploitation, and military conquest (Tong 226-7). Transnational feminism exceeds

geographical boundaries of the global South and includes women of color, poor women, LGBTQ folk and those who are otherwise “marginalized” and living in the western industrialized nations (Narayan 4, Tong 226-7, Mohanty 47). More specifically, postcolonial feminist theory deconstructs epistemologies constructed by western, hegemonic, colonizing factions in an effort to release “suppressed authentic knowledge” (Lee) and recognizes western attempts to speak on behalf of the “subaltern” (Spivak 78, 84). Furthermore, when addressing the similar global feminism, Amrita Basu explains the importance of “resisting ... the tendency [to] narrowly equate women’s movements with autonomous urban, middle-class feminist groups” associated with western feminist concerns (68). Basu’s statement acknowledges the threat of applying broad strokes to all forms of feminist theory and activism. Quite specifically, these feminisms address the common western notion of (mis)representing and even *saving* women and children of the global South from forms of violence associated with the men of their communities, their cultures, and religious backgrounds (Spivak 78, 84, Abu-Lughod 783). The theoretical application to this research is particularly relevant as it considers the effects of British colonial conquest on India and its subsequent decimation of Indian culture. Expansion of these theoretical contexts will continue to be addressed in greater detail in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 4: Feminist Methodology and Methods

Identifying the Research Approach

Research was conducted at Mitraniketan during the drought-riddled monsoon season of 2012, while school was in session. During this time, I had the opportunity to work and socialize with students and graduates, as well as educators, administrators and the school's founder, K. Viswanathan. The internship that the Mitraniketan administrators and I co-developed was multifaceted. I taught English classes to students at MPC, portraiture to standard III-X students, co-wrote the annual report for the organization, recorded digital images for the school brochure, and conducted research for the Mitraniketan cultural center, located in the state's capital.

Administrators at Mitraniketan were enthusiastic for me to actualize this study and made accommodations that would enable me to develop relationships with prospective participants. As such, they anticipated that my role as a volunteer instructor as well as a long-term guest would allow for easy access as a participant observer for this qualitative research. In conducting research, I applied a critical feminist ethnographic methodology for its ability to "uncover how gender operates within different societies" (Aune) and for its "[examination of] phenomena as perceived by participants" (Berg 172). I further utilized this method to better understand epistemologies that inform educational practices as they pertain to Malayali culture and more specifically, the culture within Mitraniketan. Additionally, I employed a feminist methodological approach for its critiques of biased,

androcentric, positivist epistemologies and its commitments to valuing participants' knowledge, representing the diversity of individuals, researcher reflexivity and acknowledgement of her/his social location, and forging pathways for social change and social justice (Bird 2011). A critical theory approach was utilized for its understanding of the impact of research on participants and emphasis on researcher/participant dialogue (Allison and Pomeroy 93 - 94).

Regarding research, it is important to note that there is often a lack of congruency between experiential teaching approaches and the research methods employed to analyze those teaching techniques (Allison and Pomeroy 97). In their examination of experiential education, authors Allison and Pomeroy note that this is because the former is about the learner, while the latter tends to focus greatly on "objective" results (97). To illustrate this point, they explain: "[w]e pride ourselves on learner-centered practice and then engage in research that treats the learner as a 'subject for study' and [this] ignores their accounts of their experiences" (97).

Allison and Pomeroy suggest constructivist epistemology as a solution to maintaining student-centered research. In this method, it is expected that the researcher will rearticulate participant responses so as to confirm interpretation (94). This is a method I employed during interviews. Conversations were conducted in English and though I had a Malayali/English interpreter available during student interviews, I found it imperative to rearticulate participant responses as ideas are not only communicated with words but also with body language and gestures that are culturally specific. The rearticulation of participant messages allowed me to

confirm or correct my own interpretation of information while also providing a foundation for participants to expand upon and further express their observations.

Participant Recruitment

Student participants were recruited via public announcements I made during student lunch hours. At these times, I explained the purpose of the study, its guidelines, the informed consent form, and the fact that prospective participants should not feel pressured to participate in the study. Because I announced eligibility criteria, participants were able to self-select based on age, gender and language requirements; all student participants needed to identify as women, be at or over the age of eighteen and speak English. In addition to my announcement, I provided student recruitment letters for prospective students to take with them. Following my recruitment request, I made myself available to answer questions about the research.

I utilized the same method in my recruitment of staff as I did students, however, my recruitment efforts took place in staff common areas and there were no gender or age restrictions for this sample. As English is the official language of Mitraniketan, no non-English speakers were recruited for any part of this study. Furthermore, all interviews were conducted in English.

Once individuals elected to participate in the study, I again reviewed the informed consent paperwork with them but in a private setting which would allow us to further discuss the research and provide another opportunity for participants

to ask questions. All interviews were conducted during break times so as to avoid impacting academic and professional schedules.

Interviews

Research participants consisted of seventeen individuals (n=17): four female Mitraniketan People's College students ages eighteen and over; four former students, including three females and one male; and nine staff members consisting of teaching faculty or school administrators, of which, three are female and six are male. All of the former students interviewed are currently employed at Mitraniketan but were not counted as members of the faculty or administration. Current male students—despite being over the age of eighteen—were not interviewed for this work due to constraints by my home university's Institutional Review Board.

In this study, I utilized focus groups to materialize student voices. The benefit of interviewing students in this manner was to provide a more comfortable atmosphere in which outgoing students would encourage the participation of shy students while also generating a collaborative environment that would allow for 1) participants to speak collectively about their experiences, 2) the circulation and expansion of ideas, and 3) the emergence of resourceful problem solving and student suggestions for program improvements. My interview guide (Appendix A) was based on observations I garnered as a participant observer at MPC, as well as that which I cultivated through the examination of literature and publications. While students and I did not co-construct interview questions, the benefit of semi-structured interviews is that questions could be modified according to participant

responses. Furthermore, I employed knowledge constructed by students to form questions that were asked of faculty and staff (Appendix B). In order to prevent any repercussions to students, I was certain that my questions would not disclose student responses to faculty and staff.

I utilized semi-structured in-person, one-hour interviews with all non-student participants (n=13) so as to allow for the expansion of input from participants while leaving room to later code and identify potentially overlapping themes. These interviews were conducted privately without the presence of other participants.

Limitations:

As I outline my research limitations, I begin by noting that the internship I was originally granted at Mitraniketan was to take place at their own Center for Education Research Innovation and Development (CERID). This program “aims at coordinating the education programmes, conducting action research studies, developing teaching materials and engaging in documentation & publication” (Mitraniketan). Though Mitraniketan was originally founded as a volunteer institution, I did not realize the extent to which it relies on what the school refers to as “educational tourism.” In this context, the use of the term differs from western concepts that convey foreign exchange programs. Administrators at Mitraniketan define educational tourism as an opportunity for educators and students from industrialized countries to study development and education at institutions located within developing countries. Mitraniketan offers tourists the opportunity to “learn

about how a rural community functions in its natural setting and experience realistic Indian life and local customs” (Mitraniketan). To participate in such tourism, groups and individuals who volunteer at Mitraniketan pay—by western standards—a modest daily fee, which is competitive with hotel costs in the capital city. Understandably, the fee covers more than food and lodging. Nevertheless, I believe that the degree to which tourism supports the functions of the school impacted the information I was given upon organization of my internship. For when I arrived, I learned that CERID had closed (depending on the source) somewhere between several months and almost two decades prior to my visit. As such, I scrambled to learn about and meet the needs of Mitraniketan while also trying to figure out what I could do to meet the requirements of my own institution. As my work was to be completed in the course of one summer, the westerner in me wanted to expedite the process of finding a new assignment, yet the administrators at Mitraniketan were content with me taking my time and learning the physical and social terrain of the community—both of which are invaluable to solid research.

Despite having developed relationships with many of my study participants, this research endured some setbacks which: 1) impacted the number of students I interviewed and 2) hindered my ability to conduct interviews sooner in my stay at Mitraniketan which would have provided me with more time to arrange for follow up interviews if necessary. This was especially true regarding my focus group with female students at MPC. Aside from the fact that the pool of students I was engaging was limited to females over the age of 18, I also had to contend with multiple

absences that occurred on the days of the group interviews. Consequently, I do not feel that the experiences and opinions of female students are portrayed evidently enough in this work—a true setback as a feminist researcher with a goal to amplify the voices of female learners.

While at Mitraniketan, I lived in a single room of a dormitory style guesthouse located on the campus. I expected that this level of exposure to students would help me cultivate more intimate and communal relationships with them. But because the guesthouse is segregated from other dormitories, living on campus in this manner did not necessarily contribute to overtly deeper connections. However, being on campus did; had I not lived on campus, I believe my status as an “outsider” would have been perpetuated to a greater degree, and I would have also missed out on meals that volunteers and guests share with the founder and his wife—the school’s headmistress. It was during mealtime discussions that I learned the most about the school’s founder as well as the history and struggles of Mitraniketan. Additionally, with the frequent protests, government imposed curfews, bus strikes and power outages in Kerala at that time, living off campus would have been counterproductive to the consistency in my attendance at the school, as in fact, it was to many teachers on days when transportation to Mitraniketan was less than favorable. In this way, living on campus, closer to students and without a commute, contributed to a more seamless existence at the school.

And finally, one summer is a relatively short amount of time to conduct this research as comprehensively as this topic deserves. A focus of feminist research is

the emphasis it places on relationship development before conducting field research. While I feel fortunate to have been embraced by a welcoming community that not only fostered connections, but also wanted to see this research succeed, I longed for an extended duration of time during which I could stay at Mitraniketan and continue to nurture the rapport that I had co-created with members of the Mitraniketan community. As my time at Mitraniketan unfolded, I could feel my dynamic as a guest shift into an ease in which genuine friendships with staff and students began to emerge. I also found ease in the environment I took shelter in and recall where I was when I had the “aha” moment that helped me understand what Viswanathan means when he says that the first step to offering a liberatory education is in creating a learning environment that encompasses openness and “congenial[ity] [with] nature.” I could have only arrived at this wisdom by living and learning at Mitraniketan. Still, I wonder about the many deep connections one might make during a stay longer than my own.

Chapter 5: Results

In analyzing data, I employed the triangulation method to represent three bodies of collection: 1) current female MPC students at or over the age of 18, 2) Mitraniketan and MPC staff including teachers, administrators and the school's founder and 3) my field notes as a participant observer, which involved descriptive and reflexive note taking. I then cross-referenced data for themes that overlapped. Grounded theory allowed information to emerge organically without the influence of a hypothesis, while the triangulation of data enabled me to cross-reference themes for accuracy.

Three overarching themes emerged consistently in this study. They include conceptions pertaining to resources, educational options available to female students, and the notion of community orientation and reciprocity. Each theme provides insight into both positive and negative characteristic that affect the Mitraniketan People's College, its female students, and the methods of teaching that are currently employed. In the pages that follow, chapters are divided according to specific research questions.

Measuring Success

The Buddha spelled out this idea of the interconnectedness of all beings and nature in his teaching called Paticca Samuppada, or Dependent Origination. This doctrine teaches that all things and persons are dependent on the largest web of being for their existence. All of life is interconnected and interdependent. No matter how much we wish to assert our independence as individuals, we cannot deny that we did not bring ourselves into being and that at every stage of our lives we are dependent on others and they on us. - A.T. Ariyaratne (23)

The vast majority of those I spoke with attributed Mitraniketan's success via longevity and social capital to perceptions of community. In one of our frequent after dinner discussions, Viswanathan explained that education becomes community centered if initiated from within the community. He sees the concept of service *with* learners to be "part and parcel with education." Along similar lines, the founder views the notion of education *for* learners as a misstep in leadership and contends that working together creates understanding which can nurture greater community to follow. Yet Viswanathan's ideas about community are further illuminated when he explains his belief that someone from outside of the local community—and in fact, outside of India—can direct Mitraniketan so long as they are committed to the founding vision of the school. To Viswanathan, community is more than a geographical location; it is a collective of like minds that brings a fresh perspective to the school. He further maintains that a community school should be kept somewhat small so as to recreate a nuclear family system. Regarding the re-creation of family in the face of student relocation to dormitory style living, Viswanathan explains, "in a natural way, they are coming together [to re-create family] again."

Viswanathan's ideals pertaining to community have been ever present during the inception and expansion of Mitraniketan. The incorporation of agriculture was introduced to the school as a means of helping the greater community sustain itself (Purcell 655). The acquisition of nearby land allowed for the formation of an agricultural communality which became part of the

Mitraniketan experiment. Not only did this service the community who would farm the land and reap some of its economic benefits, the addition of an agricultural experiment expanded the financial security of Mitraniketan during its formative years. Author and historian Aaron D. Purcell shares Viswanathan's perspective of the project in relation to community in his effort to obtain state licensure for Mitraniketan as "a full-time private school":

he explained ... to the governor and education minister of Kerala ... that Mitraniketan was more than just a school, it was a rural community center offering facilities for agricultural, industrial, and educational activities. Viswan reviewed the history of the community and emphasized his strong devotion to the project. He stated that his school was designed to instruct from infancy to adulthood through "effective liberal education suited to enrich rural life. (655-656)

Though the process of accreditation would take some years, in 1961, Viswanathan's commitment to the abovementioned endeavors, along with other cooperative initiatives was rewarded when the Indian government "recognize[ed] Mitraniketan as a Service Cooperative Multipurpose Society" (Purcell 656).

The notion of community is as present today as it was when Sanjana—a Mitraniketan administrator—was a student at the school. She cites "community living" as an advantage for current students and states: "it makes a person very brave. Even children from troubled families feel free. Once they understand the philosophy [of the school], they will be very free and work very sincerely." Sanjana described to me the fear and separation anxiety that some students experience when they first arrive to live at Mitraniketan. Once students become entrenched in the community, they no longer feel scared; rather, their comfort and bravery expand.

Sanjana maintains that loyalty is created when this kind of community is established. The dozen or so employees who are former students of the school embody some of that loyalty. Sanjana attributes Mitraniketan's success to the aforementioned devotion, the sincerity of the mission and the work that is accomplished.

To provide context for how community is engrained into everyday life, Mitraniketan begins each morning with an assembly in which the school community including students, educators, and volunteers attend the shaded outdoor amphitheater to pledge loyalty to India and commit to the tenets of Mitraniketan, listen to announcements, present and observe student readings, and sing songs. Rajata, a former student, and current music teacher for both schools, is at once robust, commanding the attention of her students, and gentle in her engagement with others. Rajata reflects on her time at Mitraniketan, noting that when she was a student the school was made up of "lots of brothers and sisters. ... Even the administration used to work together like community." She further articulates, "[t]he assembly has been continuously the best part of my Mitraniketan experience because all people come together and share prayer and morning thought and devotionals." Rajata elaborates that this sense of community contributed to Mitraniketan's longevity as it bestowed upon its students pride in "teamwork and hard work." She describes a very natural and genuine working relationship for students who grew up and became educators and administrators at Mitraniketan, when she explains her relationship with fellow students turned employees: "all the people work [together] very sincerely."

Daya, an artist, is also a former student of Mitraniketan. As the necessary art supplies are difficult to acquire in Kerala, Daya now cooks more than she teaches art at Mitraniketan. She attributes Mitraniketan's success to the founder's honesty, involvement of the greater community, and the strength of the Mitraniketan commonality. She explains:

[Viswanathan] is working in a very true way and not lying. He gets no salary. However he can help the community, he does. Also, the strength of the community has helped keep [Mitraniketan] going. Such people don't think about why they are not getting paid, instead they think how they can contribute money to Mitraniketan. We [attract] good people here.

Daya's explanation highlights the selflessness of many former students turned employees. Several such employees grew up together, consider each other either an extension of family—or the only family they know—and have been employed at the school for a majority of their adult lives. Despite low pay, it is evident that this is one reason that Mitraniketan keeps some of its staff for a seemingly interminable length of time.

Community service is another element attributed to Mitraniketan's longevity. Niranjana, a former student and current employee in his mid twenties, graduated from Mitraniketan and worked for some years as a financial advisor at a life insurance agency. Aside from his employment as an advisor, Niranjana has spent over twenty years at Mitraniketan either as a student, or in various positions of employment. Niranjana is currently the bakery manager. He explains:

[Mitraniketan] serves a lot of poor people. Lots of people here are studying I - X standard. [The school] give[s] food and accommodation and their clothes, uniforms, books, studying materials. They are always free here.

Like Sanjana, Naranjan expounded upon the belief that generosity is reciprocated by the loyalty of the students and community, which can be seen in the many services provided to the school ranging from medical care for learners to the nearly free instruction provided by some of the long-term educators.

But the assessment on longevity exceeds understanding the creation of a social and familial community. Activism and hard work are also paramount in working to create a sustainable alternative learning environment for disadvantaged youth. Viswanathan states:

[We attribute our longevity to] grace of God, and we enjoy doing it ... and of course we had to push. The drive should be there otherwise you become very passive and you [might] not be active. You should be an activist all through."

Viswanathan's comment attests to the strength of his persistence despite many slow or challenging outcomes along the path of establishment: from raising funds, to navigating through governmental bureaucracy, to building the school from the ground up, Mitraniketan has forged its presence, with focus and determination, in an unlikely environment.

In talking about the success and longevity of Mitraniketan, many participants elaborated on notions of communitarianism and the collective actions that were taken to make Mitraniketan strong. The concept of community extends beyond the students at Mitraniketan as it thrives on reciprocal support with local villagers. Frequently, the school hosts events for community members that include cooking and coconut tree climbing contests, festivals and performances, presentations on

agricultural experiments, as well as honors bestowed upon venerable individuals—such as medical doctors—who serve the community. Similarly, throughout the history of the organization, Mitraniketan could rely on villagers and visitors to volunteer their time to help the school progress. Such volunteerism could be seen from brick and mortar expansion to health services, teaching, and fundraising (Godwin Platt 124).

Support has come from all corners of the organization and community. Daya—the former student and current employee who is previously quoted—spoke about how she has assisted tribal students by raising money from western visitors and culling funds from her own meager salary to “pay the expenses of poor children.” She has been working in different capacities at the school for decades. Daya feels most alive when school is in session and the campus is brimming with a bounty of students. She reflects on Mitraniketan during holiday breaks stating that “if kids [are] not here, Mitraniketan is sleeping. We are suffering because nothing is happening.”

In addition to the social capital that has assisted in the perseverance of Mitraniketan, it is important to note the economic capital that has sustained it. Mitraniketan has been able to count on the assistance of European and American funding sources in addition to tuition garnered from the People’s College as well as some of its production units such as the German bakery—a structure recently built through a subsidy provided by the German government—food processing, and latex units.

Before founding Mitraniketan, Viswanathan found mentorship in Arthur Morgan, president of Antioch College, USA. Both educationalists shared a similar teaching philosophy that espoused “the belief that community and practical education were vital to the development of the individual” (Purcell 648).

Viswanathan fondly recalled his relationship with Morgan as one that spanned over twenty years until Morgan’s death. During their relationship, Morgan solicited North American friends and philanthropists for donations to Mitraniketan (Purcell 652).

The goal of the two men was that donations would initially help Mitraniketan get off the ground, but that the school would become financially self-sufficient (Purcell 652). Additionally, from 1996 - 2006 the Danish government provided support to Mitraniketan so that it could continue to serve tribal youth. While this funding source might seem unsystematic, it comes from a relationship cultivated by

Viswanathan during his years of volunteering at Danish Folk Schools in Denmark.

The folk schools similarly seek to provide “life experience ... and promote cultural heritage, tolerance and the value of the vernacular or colloquial” to rural high school citizens for the development of the individual and thus, a greater society (Purcell

651). Though the Danish government funding has ceased, students from the Danish Folk High Schools as well as other groups from Sweden, Finland, and Germany visit Mitraniketan annually supporting the school’s educational tourism (Mitraniketan).

In addition, the “teachers from Danish Folk High Schools support Mitraniketan as short-term advisors to strengthen the People’s College Education Programme” (Mitraniketan).

Despite these efforts to maintain a steadfast presence, Mitraniketan has had its troubled days. The school closed or reduced programming on more than one occasion. One school strike reportedly lasted nearly a decade, during which time teachers—who wanted Mitraniketan to convert to a government school so that they could earn better wages and a pension—upheld the strike while minimal educational programs continued to run.

There are perils to consider when looking into the future as well. Perhaps for every notion of longevity and success mentioned in interviews, there was a simultaneous call for concern regarding the endurance of Mitraniketan. While there were no voiced fears of permanent closure, some respondents expressed trepidation about direction, and strength of course in the face of imperiled resources. The lack of resources includes everything from funding to faculty commitment, as well as competition from the greater number of schools that students may choose to attend in the area.

Despite the fact that there were several observations about the commitment and loyalty of educators, there were likewise several comments about the difficulty in maintaining staff on such low salaries. At the time of this research, Mitraniketan People's College had just one full-time educator who was with the students for a majority of their days, while other specialty instructors train students in courses like music and agriculture. Most specialty educators split their time performing various duties between the schools, while others work only part-time. Similarly,

there was a report that one of two previous full-time educators left due to burnout.

Niranjan explains:

Lots of people have left to get new jobs because one of the problems is salary. In India we have lots of expense[s]. That is one of the problems ... [We] need more service minded people here otherwise people go to other jobs. ... Government jobs get more salary. Here people get between three and five thousand rupees per month, and government jobs start lowest salaries at twelve thousand rupees per month.

Because MPC is an alternative school it does not receive government funding for school programs though it has received funding for small projects. This lack of funding puts the school at a great financial disadvantage and requires Reghu, the MPC principal, to spend most of his time raising funds rather than enhancing the school's founding vision. Reghu describes his time at the school as being given to "day-to-day activities" such as looking for financial support and services for various programs. He also searches for funding to support needed architectural improvements for Mitraniketan's cultural arts building located in the state capital. Reghu explained that his responsibilities require that he tend to current fires rather than addressing future concerns, "and thus I cannot contribute technically or professionally to these [educational] institutions." Perhaps most revealing is Reghu's concept that he attends business from a "practical side" while Viswanathan holds an idealistic vision for Mitraniketan. Though this combination of practicality and idealism may seem like the best possible strategy for fostering the Mitraniketan vision, Reghu described the opposing approaches as a gap that remains to be bridged.

The aforementioned cultural center and the production units have been acquired or created to enhance the financial self-sufficiency of Mitraniketan. Furthermore, the production units were simultaneously used to provide vocational educational opportunities for students. At their peak moments of production, such units have proven to be self-sustaining initiatives, yet in some ways it appears that the intent to educate students has become secondary to the prospect of earning income, and now provide fewer means for instructing students. Sanjana explains:

[f]ormerly the sections [carpentry, pottery, metal fabrication and tailoring were] here to teach the students, but now for sustainability, we have to keep up the staff. We made each center production centers instead of education based.

Contrary to Sanjana's beliefs about the use of production units as a tool for educating students, Sethu believes that the units are Mitraniketan's least successful undertaking. She states:

[there are] lots of sections but some we couldn't do much [with], for example, the leather section. [This] could be because the trainer passed away and there was no successor. [The] printing press is not successful because it cannot compete and [there is] a lack of personnel. Carpentry is not producing much. But it is all here for the training of the children, more than for production. ... Money is one of the biggest problems and so is the personnel. In the 1990's, production programs were a little more successful but not much. [The] bakery is more productive, thus profits can come back to the school for the children. The school needs investment.

To corroborate Sanjana's reflection, my own observation is that while the pottery section still appeared to serve as an educational outlet for tribal women, it was not functioning to its greatest capability. Also, many of the other units were maintained by only a few employees and production seemed slow or nil. In fact, on

more than one visit to some of the units, I found no staff persons available, nor did I find the units being utilized as instructional resources for students.

Sanjana also highlights the difficulty that Mitraniketan has in maintaining a sound budget when she describes “payment” to educators and the reallocation of funds:

we fail to do it properly—even monthly-wise, and it is also a very meager amount. Thus, teachers get new jobs for more payment. ... We are unable to do projects. [Mitraniketan’s] [s]cience and technology [receive a] grant from the ministry. They charge an administration fee [to participants] and that money sometimes gets reallocated to the [students].

Sanjana’s statements illustrate the energy that is expended on fund apportionment that might otherwise be directed toward the expansion and advancement of the schools’ goals. Her statement highlights the precariousness and tenuousness on which Mitraniketan currently operates.

Jaya, a male administrator and former educator at MPC who holds a master’s degree in the social sciences, feels that efforts which reach beyond educational endeavors for sustaining Mitraniketan have been counterproductive:

I personally think that during the course of its development they went for a lot of projects that were funded by the government instead of figuring out what the people needed and then going for that. Food processing unit is an example. The recurring expenses of the food processing unit are not managed and thus it suffers. Same goes for the coconut fiber industry [program] and Khadi.

Jaya’s sentiment encapsulates the many initiatives that Mitraniketan endeavored for the sake of expanding its security rather than responding to and building upon the school’s strengths. We similarly observe that Mitraniketan has invested *out* instead

of *up*. That is, more energy and resources have been vested in projects not directly related to education but with the aspiration of advancing a sound economic state for the school. Unfortunately, such endeavors have created more distractions from the school's mission than it has successfully provided answers to its woeful financial state. In addition to citing the aforementioned undertakings as a distraction from educational services, Jaya also proposes that government funding cuts have had deleterious effects on NGOs in the state. Such cuts have impacted everything from literacy campaigns to empowerment programs for tribal women. Still, he describes the responsibility of funding as one that should be figured out by Mitraniketan:

"[f]ifty years and the school hasn't figured out sustainability. You are solving the problems of greater society but not the people [and teachers] who are very close to them How can anyone stay?" Jaya's comment emphasizes his belief in MPC's mission to educate students in a way that will promote their contributions to the "greater society." Likewise, it reveals his frustration that the very demand for critical thinking which Mitraniketan espouses is not successfully applied to solve issues of teacher salary and agency sustainability. One reason that Jaya wonders how long educators will stay is because they are paid so poorly. He compares one program coordinator's salary of two thousand rupees per month with that of most plumbers who earn seven hundred rupees per day.

Naresh, a somewhat new administrator who favors the advancement of modern development and the progress of youth, shares his own observations which reflect both the low morale of educators and his optimism for the future. He explains

that Mitraniketan is trying to create numerous courses for students in agriculture, and states, “it will just take a little more time.” He describes the current system in both Mitraniketan proper, and MPC as being hindered because the schools maintain the employment of low-paid persons who have served at the project for a long time—despite their mediocre work ethic: “nobody tries to take a risk because they are trying to keep their jobs easy” he explained. Naresh assesses that, “it is so hard to keep [good] teachers here on small salary, so essentially, Mitraniketan takes what it can get” at the expense of leading students to greater motivation. Naresh feels that tribal students “lack vision and goals” but he does not blame them for not working hard because teachers are not working in a way that inspires students. Naresh contends that good educators are creative, challenge their learners, and invest in education, but he also concedes that the low salaries don’t attract many good teachers for long, thus loyalty suffers and so does the direction of the school. Despite this, Naresh’s optimism convinces him that “within two years time, [Mitraniketan] should be at peak level,” which he attributes to the aforementioned agriculture courses being developed.

To conclude this chapter, Mitraniketan seems to be in a holding pattern that separates the past from the present. Commitments to ideals vs. expansion for the sake of financial prosperity seem to be difficult notions and practices to bridge. Historically, a sense of community—both local and international—was able to link the needs of Mitraniketan with the needs of the local community and produce outcomes that were favorable to both. However, the security of this history fails to

usher in confidence about Mitraniketan's present state and the future. Furthermore, the specter of economic instability is pervasive in the psyches of its employees. Former students who now work at the project are nostalgic in their recollections of the Mitraniketan of yore. They try to envision a future in which education thrives and students flourish, but like other employees, their visions are obstructed by the nearsighted challenge of solving the overwhelming burden of economic stability so as to secure the future of Mitraniketan.

Problematizing "Equality" in Education

The world of humanity is possessed of two wings: the male and the female. So long as these two wings are not equivalent in strength, the bird will not fly. Until womankind reaches the same degree as man, until she enjoys the same arena of activity, extraordinary attainment for humanity will not be realized; humanity cannot wing its way to heights of real attainment. - Bahá'í proverb (qtd in Vahedi 82)

In this section, I outline my framework for understanding feminist notions of equity in educational offerings. As a westerner, it is imperative not to impart associated capitalist perspectives on Malayali culture. Though it reflects socialist values, the Kerala Model of development is often scrutinized through the lens of capitalism; that is, economists go from assessing its social development indicators such as education and human welfare, to then trying to assess why this formula has not yielded greater economic returns. While I am not an economist and do not doubt the importance of looking at the Kerala Model through various lenses, I do believe such discussions should extend beyond the limited topic of capital gains.

Furthermore, when addressing issues of development, it is important to problematize the epistemological lenses through which capitalism, security, and

equity are formed and subsequently viewed and adhered to by the public. Quite often, the means for understanding such notions are heavily filtered through patriarchal perspectives that negate women's ways of experiencing their environments. Strategies of development often impose a "top down" approach that favors male labor and renders women invisible in planning and production (John 140-141). Such models fail to recognize women as producers and contributors to the "household economy" and thus politicize "and separate gender planning methodology for meeting the survival-related as well as the strategic needs of women" (Moser, qtd. in John 142).

Mohanty articulates her critique of neoliberal "free-market" feminism in *Feminism Without Borders* when she states:

the increasing corporatization of U.S. culture and naturalization of capitalist values has had its own profound influence in engendering a neoliberal, consumerist (protocapitalist) feminism concerned with "women's advancement" up the corporate and nation-state ladder. This is a feminism that focuses on financial "equality" between men and women and is grounded in the capitalist values of profit, competition, and accumulation. A protocapitalist or "free-market" feminism is symptomatic of the "Americanization" of definitions of feminism—the unstated assumption that U.S. corporate culture is the norm and ideal that feminists around the world strive for. Another characteristic of protocapitalist feminism is in its unstated and profoundly individualist character. (6)

In accordance with Mohanty's contention, I seek to employ a more holistic view of feminist equality, one that reflects Indian contexts and values, such as the role of community over individualism, and one that envisions education not as a hierarchical right, but as a basic human right—a civil right. As such, feminist

theories that focus on financial equality as the goal and decree of the advancement of women will be included but will not be the finite goal employed in this work.

When unpacking notions of gender equality in education it is important to note that perspectives are socially constructed and have shifted over time. That is, viewpoints on what is deemed “equal” have changed throughout history in accordance with geographical location or the indistinct boundaries blurred by globalization, and depending on the epistemological lens from which equality is being assessed (Unterhalter 19).

To expand upon the aforementioned, while I utilize the terms “equality” and “equity” in this work, it is imperative to note that they are not used interchangeably. As a reminder, I offer that equality is a state of being alike in quantity and value, whereas equity promotes fairness and impartiality. I see any attempt to reduce the assessment of educational opportunities to simplified terms of “equality” as emblematic of capitalism. Therefore, I consciously choose to represent this study in terms of *equity* because this stresses the importance of *consideration* and *accessibility* in assessing the educational needs of female learners at Mitraniketan. To expound upon the greater significance of equity in education, scholars of education and international development, Sheila Aikman and Elaine Unterhalter argue that equity in the classroom “is a key to connecting schooling and citizenship with human rights” (4) and contend that gender equity can be defined as an “institutional and social process” that seeks to ensure gender equality (3). From the standpoint of this work, equity has value over equality which—in theory—could

provide equal numbers of opportunities to women even though such offerings may be irrelevant to the needs of female learners. In her work on gender equality in education, Unterhalter borrows from Pnina Werbner and Nira Yuval Davis, when she analyzes the shortsightedness that results from the historically oversimplified pursuit of equality in education:

The most powerful demand in relation to gender equality was for the equal recognition of all citizens. Thus gender equality in education entailed equal recognition of girls and boys in access to school, progression and completion. All those who fell outside the boundaries of citizenship, either because their state had no official standing, or they had no standing within it, were considered ‘problems’ generally addressed in an ad hoc way. Part of the partial and often neglectful treatment of those without citizenship entailed inadequate concern with education and gender issues. (21)

Though Unterhalter does not problematize the blanket term of “equality” as distinguished from “equity” she uses distinctive vocabulary to elaborate on “framings of needs, rights and capabilities” within notions of equality in education (19) and conveys that “[e]quality is no longer a matter of equal amounts, but a more substantive idea associated with solidarities and confronting justice” (30). As such, her statement likens equality to a commodity that is offered to those within the privileged realms of perceived or absolute citizenship. In this instance, it negates the intended outcomes of offering educational opportunities to those who remain least represented within the context of citizenship, a status most often relegated to girls and women.

Similarly, in her background paper for the UNESCO Global Monitoring Report of 2003 entitled “Gender Equality in Education: Definitions and Measurements,”

Ramya Subrahmanian utilizes subcategories of the terms “gender parity” and “gender equality” in an attempt to address issues of what I have defined as equity in education as noted below. In reflecting on the Dakar Framework for Action, a UNESCO initiative that aims to provide education for all children and adults by 2015, Subrahmanian writes:

nowhere in the Dakar Framework for Action is the concept of gender equality defined. The lack of a universally accepted definition of gender equality in relation to education goals makes measuring progress towards its achievement hard if not impossible to achieve. Without clarity about what gender equality in education means the goal of 2015 will be at best subject to contestation and dispute that is likely to cloud global consensus, and at worst leave the important goal unfulfilled for lack of clarity about what it is that constitutes progress on this front. (397)

Subrahmanian’s observation notes the complexity of issues surrounding not only the construction of terms and conditions as they relate to the progress of girls and women in education, but also the means for measuring such outcomes. To mend this discrepancy between the starting points of male versus female students, Subrahmanian calls for “substantive equality” as defined by Naila Kabeer:

substantive equality requires the recognition of the ways in which women are different from men in terms of their biological capacities and in terms of the socially constructed disadvantages women face relative to men. (Subrahmanian 397, Kabeer 37)

Along similar lines, I offer that to contrast equality within the field of education, equity reflects the notion that, like male learners, female learners must be provided with what they need to succeed. As such, it may indeed take more effort, resources, teaching and learning to advance female students to the level of rights and privileges that their male counterparts from similar classes and castes are likely

to obtain. Such an approach bypasses the minimized criterion that defines equality, and one that holistically progresses *necessity*.

When asked about the equity of educational offerings between female and male students, all but one interview respondent suggested that offerings were equitable. The outlying source was Indira, MPC's only instructor who works with students on a full-time basis. Despite having been overlooked for another position at the organization because she is a woman, Indira explains that the school "concentrate[s] more heavily on youth and women [than on men]. She elaborates, "the People's College is mainly for youth development, then women's empowerment." Despite Indira's contention, the categories of "youth development" and "women's empowerment" do not address the specific needs of female learners at MPC. As youth development encompasses both male and female learners, the women's empowerment programs are separate from the courses offered at MPC, and are explicitly for tribal women—not MPC students.

Indeed, women are highly visible on the Mitraniketan campus and shortly after my arrival, the school was distributing bags of rice to tribal women in honor of Kerala's most highly celebrated, ten-day long festival—Onam. That the distribution was done in an orderly and social atmosphere rather than one built on demeaning notions of "charity" indicated to me that women are regarded with respect in the Mitraniketan community. Despite the impressive presence of tribal women, the numbers of female students at MPC has plummeted in the last twelve months. Whereas the attendance rate between males and females at the college was

previously in equal numbers, at the time of this research the student body consisted of less than one-third women and more than two-thirds men. Yet this severe attrition rate that occurred in the last twelve months did not seem to capture the attention of administrators or instructors at MPC or Mitraniketan at large. In all of my days of conversing with leaders about the state of the school, not once did anyone mention the widening gap between female and male student enrollment. In fact, without my questioning of this imbalance in matriculation, it seemed possible that the shift in student body might have remained overlooked. This was curious to me because many school leaders spoke so openly about other concerns such as the lack of funding, drought, and the future of Mitraniketan. I wondered what this decline in female students might signify.

One of the most significant indicators of gender inequity at MPC is in fact evident in the lack of coursework offered to women. While the students interviewed stated that men and women are given the same educational opportunities—that is women can take the same courses that are offered to men—they simultaneously felt that discrepant course offerings—ones which reflect the gendered interests of male students—are a major reason for the decline in female student enrollment at the school. Though women are welcome to take all of the same courses that are offered to men (an example of *equality*), such courses do not always meet the interests or professional goals of female students (an example of a lack of *equity*). During the time of this study, whereas men were offered sometimes up to six class options that catered to their specific interests, the school's principal did come to acknowledge

that attrition rates may have been due to the fact that female students had only two courses that catered to their interests: computer training and agriculture. Again, Sanjana, a former student and current administrator at Mitraniketan comments:

[the] People's College has some differences because they have auto section which [girls do not prefer]. They have agricultural section and computer section with both girls and boys. In workshops (automotive, metal fabrication, etc.) they are not [attracting] girls, only boys are doing this.

Though the students interviewed are satisfied with their majors, they believe it is important to incorporate courses that are specific to women's interests such as beautician classes, craft lessons, and hospital housekeeping. Indeed, this reveals that many professional—and thus academic—interests of female students are gendered.

Likewise, Naresh commented that the opportunities for study between female and male students were equal but that “girls don't have the same interests [as boys].” Along similar lines, Jaya stated, “classes are open to all but the women do not usually prefer [male oriented classes].” These particular responses—similar to those of other interviewees—offer an opportunity to explore the issue macroscopically; rather than looking into a paradigm that could reveal shifting patterns, male dominated course offerings are perceived to be the norm, while “girls” are singled out as *lacking* in the specific interests of their male counterparts. Thus, the subtle, perhaps unconscious assumption is that any deficiency in advancement or enrollment by women is due to their faulty desire for female oriented coursework.

In pursuit of the expansion of their own educational goals, when female students asked if they could partake in extension courses that are offered to tribal women, they were reportedly turned down. Another halted effort into the expansion of educational offerings that could be provided to women can be seen in a comment from Jaya, an MPC administrator:

[t]hey asked for an update on business process outsourcing, beautician and nursing/nursing assistant positions, but now we are concentrating on traits that we currently have facilities for. ... It is the easiest way to deal with things—more safe and secure; the other one involves experiment.

Jaya's remark pertaining to security was stated not as a reflection of his own thinking, but to underscore the impassive attitude of the administration in addressing this issue. He explained that the impediment to the progression of such programs was in campus resources. Still, he simultaneously felt that the funds are attainable through grants and student contributions. Jaya's statement conveys that courses which are considered accessible and cost effective typically reflect the interests of male students, signifying that historically, the school may have been built with male students in mind rather than both male and female students. Despite reasons that may have existed for such exclusive focus, the fact that female attrition is so high indicates the necessity for exploring women focused courses for the sake of increasing gender equity, economic sustenance, and growth of MPC.

Regardless of the aforementioned, another statement by Jaya reveals that at least some infrastructure is indeed in place at Mitraniketan which could advance women's programs just like men's. He explains:

We are giving more stress to technical courses [such as] auto, carpentry, plumbing, etcetera, and only two trainings for girls—agriculture and computers. We used to have fruit processing, tailoring, and offset printing [for female learners]. These aren't offered anymore. ... For offset we advertised but didn't get any students. The student crisis is everywhere in Kerala. The crisis is because engineering has become more appealing. People with money and good marks go onto engineering. School drop-outs and very poor students come here.

But “very poor” students have always attended MPC as the school was in fact created for tribal youth as well as students who were oriented toward more vocational programs than mainstream education has to offer. Rather, what Jaya's statement reveals is the invisibility of women's educational needs. This can be seen through the oversight of previously existing programs and brick and mortar structures such as the fruit processing unit, tailoring program, and offset printing. Jaya suggests that there is simply a focus on courses that meet the needs of male students rather than investigating means for expanding upon current resources to incorporate the needs of a greater population of students.

As described in the literature review, there was a concerted effort to educate women in India after the attainment of independence. Still, sociologist Maria Mies cites a shift in cultural thinking about women's education that occurred about a decade and a half after Independence. She writes:

education was not seen any more mainly as a human right, as something to be made accessible to all as quickly as possible, education was now viewed as an instrument for accelerating economic development as “investment in the man.” (132)

I quote Mies because she supports discussions that emerged from interviews about Mitraniketan—though not to the same dire extent, and probably unconsciously—there seems to be a proclivity toward investment “in the man.”

India has a history of developing national calls at the expense or erasure of its female citizens. Even Gandhi, a vocal proponent for the advancement of women commodified them when he claimed “women had great ability to endure suffering and could therefore play a key part in the movement [for Independence]” (Jayawardena 97). In this statement, we see Gandhi’s call for women to participate in the movement—a seemingly positive goal. Yet this also reflects the failure of male leaders to engage women’s rights activists in sculpting the direction of Independence. The engagement of women’s rights activists would have not only advanced national causes, but also proven the value of women in the quest for liberation, while advancing their roles in society and sending the message that their future political engagement is not only respected but indispensable in the advancement of Free India. Similarly, other progressive male leaders who touted the importance of women’s non-violent activism also allowed the welfare of women to be superseded by male interests:

[T]he real issues that concerned them as women were regarded by the men as of secondary importance. The agitation of the early social reformers about the social evils that affected women in the family were supplanted by nationalist issues, resulting in the neglect of women’s unequal social and economic position. What’s more, the few women’s issues that were taken up were those that interested the middle-class women’s organizations such as suffrage questions. (Jayawardena 99)

I quote Kumari Jayawardena because she provides two of many examples that reveal ways in which women—particularly working-class and lower-caste women—were neglected in the shaping of an independent India while also being showered with platitudes to demonstrate their importance in the movement. This mentality is particularly important when considering the role of women at Mitraniketan because history is replicated within the walls of the People's College. At MPC, women are acknowledged to an extent: classes are offered for tribal women, bags of rice are given to community members so that they can feed their families, but when it comes to the advancement of the school, female students are not at the forefront of concern.

Historic reports by the University Development in India have revealed a consistent pattern of the advancement of female students in education over that of their male counterparts, which could be seen both in increasing enrollment numbers and the passing of examinations (Mies 135). Mies attributes the greater scholarship of female students to cultural messaging. She states:

[t]he better results of female students have often been explained by their ability to do hard and systematic work and their talent for passive memorizing. A more plausible explanation could be found in the different patterns of socialization of Indian boys and girls. The Indian boy is very much pampered and is hardly compelled to do discipline work. But the Indian girl learns from her childhood to submit to the wishes of others and accept unknown situations.

Despite the strong history that supports women's advancements in education, Mitraniketan still falls short of investing properly in its female students at the People's College. Also, Mies' words support my own observation in the classroom, where I noted that women students were calmer, and easier to engage in lessons,

while men were more rambunctious and unruly. Women took direction, asked questions, and worked in collaboration to figure out answers, whereas the men in the classroom were more distractible. Additionally, Mies' discussion of passivity helps explain a delicate notion. That is, while the students interviewed (all women) informed me about structural changes they wish to see at Mitraniketan, they had only voiced a portion of these concerns to administrators—I suspect because of a fear of speaking up to authority. Mies's comment sheds light on the social constructs that impede Indian female students from attempting to advocate for advancements in their own educations.

My contention for the importance of educating women can similarly be explained by Judith Lorber's description of a postcolonial feminist view on women and economy. Lorber makes a connection between women's economic worth and their consequent familial and social value. I contend that replacing Lorber's concept of economy with notions about educating women would convey an equally important message. Lorber summarizes sociologist Rae Lesser Blumberg's position on economy and women's status:

Postcolonial feminism links women's status to their contribution to their family's economy and their control of economic resources. To be equal with her husband, it is not enough for a married woman to earn money; she has to provide a needed portion of her family's income and also have control over the source of that income and over its distribution as well. (97)

Lorber continues:

In a rural community, that means owning a piece of land, being able to market the harvest from that land, and deciding how the profit from the sale will be spent. In an urban economy, it may mean owning a store or small

business, retaining the profit, and deciding what to spend it on or whether to put it back into the business. ... Postcolonial feminism's theory is that in any society, if the food or income women produce is the main way the family is fed, and women also control the distribution of any surplus they produce, women have power and prestige. If men provide most of the food and distribute the surplus, women's status is low. (97)

Again, when replacing Lorber's notion of economy with one that is cognizant of education, one can understand that the advancement, wellness, and safety of women and children can be accelerated through education, and in fact, it has. Indeed, while the Indian Constitution prohibits sex discrimination, the advancement of women in India has been tied to the progress made by educated women, rather than the enforcement of laws created and reflected within the Constitution (Mies 130).

Returning once again to Lorber's argument, if food and distribution symbolically represent education and knowledge formation, then the argument for educating women is that they will not only satiate themselves, but also future generations of learners. Quite simply, educating women has the power to shift epistemologies that rely on male narratives and replace such narratives with the "nutrients" necessary to advance women in the home and in society. Educating women has the potential to enhance women's senses of self-agency that could lead to the ability and trust in making autonomous decisions about life options that positively impact the family. I do not mean to naively suggest that uneducated women lack agency, or that what has been reported about women and income—that some women who contribute financially to the family achieve a higher status and safety than before they made such contributions (Lesser Blumberg 98-99)—is invalid. Nor do I suggest that the

responsibility in claiming an education (Rich 25 – 27) rests solely on women and girls; it is imperative to note the necessity for the reallocation of power within social and institutional systems that maintain “gender ideologies...masked as ‘culture’ ” (Subrahmanian 398). However, I do suggest that education has its own currency in the promotion and advancement of women’s abilities to read and make connections perhaps not otherwise gleaned intuitively. In their essay, “Development of Gender Equality and Social Responsibility in Literacy,” P. Adinarayana Reddy, Uma Devi, and M.C. Obulesu expound upon both the advantages of literacy education and the absence of gender equality in education:

[w]omen become aware of their social and legal rights, learn and improve income-generating skills, acquire voice in the affairs of the family, and the community and move towards equal participation in the process of development and social change with the efficacy of social responsibility. (128)

Gender inequality in education, depriving women the right to education, makes them unaware about their social responsibilities and duties. Equal enjoyment of rights by women and men thus bring women into the mainstream of economic and social development is what is meant by equality of women. (128)

Thus, women’s abilities to navigate an ever-changing world that speeds up in the face of globalization could be enhanced not only by literacy, but also by the expansion of educational opportunities offered to them. Education is credited with the advancement of civilization and development of the individual so as to achieve a “higher state of life” (Varghese “Education” 271). Furthermore, educated women stand to cultivate greater critical thinking skills and an aptitude for diplomacy and self-advocacy. Social networks could be advanced, and for mothers who become

educated, the next generation of children will have a path to education that is at least partly cleared for them. To summarize, I contend that education has the ability to bring about the same changes that Rae Lesser Blumberg describes as the result of economic freedoms obtained by women in development: “[these are] basic aspects of one’s destiny...such as freedom vis-à-vis marriage, divorce, sexuality, fertility, freedom of movement...and household power” (99). To further reiterate this message, “the spread of women’s education...provide[s] them with the chance to free themselves from being economically dependent on a man” (Mies 130).

Shifting Pedagogies

The full potential of development can be realized only by social commitment. Every individual should be an asset to society and none a liability. No one should be excluded from full participation in discharging responsibilities. Each should belong to all. And be a part of a democratic decision making process. Only by being ‘included’, it is possible to create active citizens ... we believe that every individual has to constantly solve the equation between himself/herself and the humanity of which he/she is a part, because that alone gives meaning, purpose and potential for himself/herself and the society in which he/she lives. Formal systems of education have not gone far enough. The challenge can be met only by non-formal alternate systems of education which will synthesize the objectives of individual success with social responsibilities and human welfare. - J.R. Reghu Rama Das (Individualism 4-5)

In order to address the extent to which female learners contribute to the development of their programs via a liberatory and reciprocal educational experience, it is important to understand both Mitraniketan’s pedagogical vision and the theoretical frameworks that support such pedagogical praxis. Mitraniketan is described as “an experimental non-profit social and educational project” (Mitraniketan). The term “experimental” can be likened to various educational philosophies that promote scientific method based on empirical evidence. For

example, progressive education considers and treats students as whole entities, rather than compartmentalized learners and thinkers (Kohn). Progressive educational methods thereby promote an intersecting of disciplines as a means to learning. Likewise, the philosophy espouses experimentation as an approach for cultivating knowledge. During such trial, it is expected that students' curiosities will be aroused based on their experiences and observations, both inside and outside of the classroom. The anticipated outcome of this method is that learners will seek to solve problems based on information garnered through their observations. Quite simply, in progressive education, the student is ideally an active participant in her/his education and shares democratically in both decision-making and in co-creation of the curriculum (Henderson and Glidden Henderson 136 - 138).

Similarly, the psychological orientation of humanism utilizes the senses in learning and espouses the natural timeline of each individual in her or his own learning process (Cohen). Like progressive education, we see notions of democracy in humanism:

[h]umanists believe that the learner should be in control of his or her own destiny. Since the learner should become a fully autonomous person, personal freedom, choice, and responsibility are the focus. The learner is self-motivated to achieve towards the highest level possible. Motivation to learn is intrinsic in humanism. (Cohen)

I refer to the abovementioned methods and philosophies because of the parallel commitments made by Mitraniketan as conveyed through its website, and scholarly publications on the project, and the way in which Mitraniketan's founder defines

experimental education. In my personal communication with him, Viswanathan defined experimental education as:

[b]oth educational and vocational. Not just following a syllabus provided by the government [but making it] development oriented [meaning it is] productive, creative, and more meaningful. Teaching life in a meaningful manner ... we are free to explore new ways and means to make education more development oriented. It is not just mere literacy [but also], agriculture, handicrafts, animal husbandry, music and dance. It is humanistic, [and] at the same time scientific.

To complement this outlook, education at Mitraniketan is also considered holistic because the classrooms and campus are built in a way that that is open to nature. Unlike traditional western educational dwellings that isolate students from the elements, many of Mitraniketan's classrooms consist of open walls and thatched roofs that integrate the greenery of the surrounding environment. This is important for learners because as Viswanathan states:

[a] change in topography is a pre-requisite in liberatory education for children to learn ... it is congenial [with] nature. ... We have created a very congenial and natural environment with openness. I consider this [openness] as part of [the] education.

In fact, the students respond to this. Along with learning "good behavior," they cite the "very quiet and beautiful" environment found at Mitraniketan to be one of the primary reasons for their attendance. This is a notion that becomes harmonized at a school that focuses largely on agricultural educational pursuits. Still, agricultural pursuits are not the only reason for providing such an experience for learners. One teacher cites the silence found on the Mitraniketan campus which greatly contrasts with student's alternative option for attending college: government schools are loud

and overcrowded. Mitraniketan's biophilic design, congenial nature, and small class sizes allow for more organic interactions between learners and educators. As such, Indira explains, "classes are informal [which] makes for better connection between teacher and student, and student to student." The informal nature of the school allows for the co-creation of relationships between students and educators, rather than one that is formal and hierarchical.

Like the section in which I addressed longevity and success, questions pertaining to the educational methods practiced at Mitraniketan solicited both hopeful and concerned feedback from those interviewed. Also, while educators and administrators were more likely to discuss topics pertaining to educational approaches and their impediments, students were more likely to elaborate on the lack of material items which they felt obstructed the progress of their education. Questions regarding the reciprocal nature of the programming at MPC were answered simplistically and without great detail: female students do not assist in the co-creation of program offerings but they do assist with the implementation of disciplinary action. In my observation, this meant that female students assisted in garnering the attention of male students when the instructor sought the engagement of the class.

Though female students did not feel that they contributed to the development of their programs, I offer evidence that further educator/student support does exist. For example, despite the fact that requests for dormitory fans and permission to use personal mobile phones to call families were not granted,

student voices were heard in requests for an increase in library hours to one hour per day, a change in uniform apparel, and the request for student identification cards, which would allow students' public transportation fares to decrease dramatically, from 50 rupees down to 2 rupees (in U.S. currency this is comparable to paying \$1 versus 4 cents for transportation). In spite of these victories, it should be noted that the library hours and identification cards serve as examples that reflect an endeavor that would (and should) assist *all* students rather than intentionally aiming to even out the differences in offerings to female and male learners. Conversely, administrators did not grant requests to move agriculture classes to the morning block which would allow students to spend more time on practicals. Students contend that the lack of requested restructuring prohibits their utmost progress in this course, as other school commitments interrupt the time they would otherwise dedicate to practicals.

What is problematic about the current structure, in which students ask for changes and administrators either grant them or do not, is that rather than building on the school's mission to enhance an egalitarian environment in which students are (as quoted above) "part of a democratic decision making process" in which active citizenship is contingent upon inclusion (Rama Das, *Individualism* 4-5), the system perpetuates a relationship in which the administrator is the authoritarian and the learner is the obedient recipient of authority. This lacks democracy, reciprocity, and liberation while further perpetuating what Paolo Freire refers to as treating students as meek "receptacles" to be filled by educator input (53).

It seems that liberatory practices have mostly escaped Mitraniketan and female students do not participate in the development of their own programs. Still, some contend that the possibility for progressive education exists within the organization. Jaya asserts that progressive educational methods such as teacher/learner reciprocity can be initiated but that it requires “teacher competence... or the student will doubt you.” It is also contingent upon the nature of the teacher:

It depends on people mostly. If you are a person who wants to follow that [liberatory] philosophy then you can. But if you want to stay “clean” and you don’t want to experiment or make noise [then it won’t work]. It’s up to the teacher. If liberatory, then students gain power and question authority... . We used to teach that way and had wonderful results.

Jaya explained the years of trial and error that went into this previously practiced teaching method. The method garnered criticism from more traditional educators who felt students’ behaviors were “out of control.” What also complicates the practice of progressive education at MPC is that there is no educator training. Thus, teaching philosophies are not streamlined with the school’s mission and any attempt to teach in a progressive, liberatory fashion requires intense teacher commitment, bountiful energy, and an ability to work independently since collaboration is not currently an option. Jaya reflects on a past attempt to teach in this way and states, “the first year was chaos.”

Despite the fact that the conversation on learner/educator reciprocity did not advance notably, it did engage another school of thought. Sethu, the headmistress of Mitraniketan proper, who is in her mid to late seventies, speaks

openly and pointedly about Mitraniketan. Having taught at the school for several generations, Sethu does not feel that Mitraniketan practices liberatory or progressive educational approaches but focuses more on “development education” or “basic education” which highlights vocational and experimental education.

Gandhi, an advocate and practitioner of this pedagogical approach believed that basic education:

- a. ... should be imparted through the medium of the mother-tongue.
- b. ... should be related to the physical and social environment of the scholar.
- c. ... should be work centered. Intellectual development and development of aptitudes should proceed simultaneously. One is complementary to the other. (Roy 265)

Gandhi further contended that basic education should offer more than a pedagogical approach; it should adhere to specific means for running the school that would enhance the school’s educational ideals. As such, he suggested that:

- d. [a] basic school should be an economically self-sufficient unit. The school should pay its way through the earnings from its profits.
- e. [a]dministration ... should be conducted through co-operative and self-governing methods. Discipline should not be imposed from above, but discipline should grow from within. (Roy 265)

In some ways the employment of basic education at Mitraniketan is apparent through the many programs that focus on agriculture and animal husbandry; however, some of these programs take place very sporadically, if at all. By Sethu’s account, basic education at Mitraniketan would ideally include:

spinning developed by Gandhi, soap making and weaving, etc. and abandoning everything introduced by foreign countries. Doing things that originate in India as opposed to outside countries.

A stroll on the Mitraniketan campus reveals how the school once committed to the ideals of basic education which can be seen through its weaving center, and the fine batik prints created by Daya. Yet the shift in generations, along with the increase in globalization has distracted administrators and educators from maintaining their obligations to the educational practice. Despite this, Sethu's description could be problematized not only because the school does not fully offer basic education programming, but because both Mitraniketan proper and the People's College offer English language classes to learners. While some may believe that teaching English is necessary for the advancement of students in an increasingly globalized world, Gandhi conveyed that English was/is the language of the oppressors: "it is our mental slavery that makes us feel that we cannot do without English. I can never subscribe to that defeatist creed" (Gandhi, Kumarappa 74).

Naresh believes that the educational outlets at MPC need strengthening. When responding to a question about how the educational needs of students are determined he stated, "here we give technical support for practical work. We need to improve this by introducing a lot of courses." Naresh contends that the responsibility for student motivation lies with educators. He believes that, "kids here have a lot of knowledge that teachers could learn from" but the extraction of that knowledge depends on the dedication of educators as well as the cultivation of teacher and student relationships. Naresh's point on teacher dedication will be elaborated on in greater detail in the coming chapter.

As might be expected, the current lackluster state of educational praxis at Miraniketan is linked to poor funding and the trouble with maintaining teachers on a permanent basis. Viswanathan reflects on one of the educational effects of the overwhelming funding challenges he observes at Mitraniketan:

[t]he only problem is to get creative teachers on a lasting manner, not just a temporary stop-gap. That cannot help develop a program of permanency ... we have to find [funding] sources. ... The school is not liberatory because teachers are transient and [we] can't keep permanent teachers because we don't pay enough. Unless [there is] a residence of permanency ... you cannot do anything. Government jobs are the competition because they offer better salaries and pensions.

As Viswanathan's statement highlights, it is difficult to put lofty goals into practice without the significant contribution of committed educators. The act of teaching requires not only mental preparation but also physical exertion and spiritual energy. As such, sound teaching at MPC requires more than one full-time educator. The collaboration between multiple educators at MPC could deeply enhance educational praxis and increase the amount of creative endeavors that emerge from the student body. Furthermore, it would offer support to teachers through time off for personal days which would allow teachers to restore energy and hopefully, increase their tenures.

Despite the aforementioned shortcomings of the agency's funding issues, there is another more optimistic advantage that students have at Mitraniketan. One of the most refreshing aspects of the school at-large is one that comes not from philanthropic donations or well-allocated funds. Rather, Mitraniketan's excellence resides in the freedom that students are given to cultivate relationships and co-exist

within their natural environments. In between classes and after school, one can frequently find MPC students roaming the campus arm-in-arm, conversing over tea, or engaging with their younger counterparts at the standard school. After school, students who remain on campus are free to roam the vast acreage lush with rice fields and greenery. It is peaceful and soothing. This act of freedom allows for the exploration and cultivation of relationships and challenges western notions of efficiency in education because it makes time available for reflection and synchronization with nature and learned activities. As such, this “free time” allows for both the intuitive, and the practiced in education to come together harmoniously in a way that promotes natural exploration and curiosity within the student. Thus, I find myself in accordance with Viswanathan’s contention that curiosity and motivation can be found in the hills of Vellanad which indeed foster holistic student growth via personal reflection and introspection. While this does not reflect teacher student reciprocity, per se, it does promote reciprocity between learners, as well as their environments. There is indeed something very liberatory about experiencing the natural world within a learning environment.

Chapter 6: Discussion

In this section, I provide a conceptual framework related to the three questions that guided this research. The discussion centers assessments from participant interviews with the history of Mitraniketan, the political positionality of Kerala, and my own observations so as to provide analysis for: 1) securing the future of Mitraniketan, 2) creating greater equity in educational offerings while increasing female student citizenship and 3) enhancing student involvement so as to further the development of Mitraniketan from a grassroots approach, in lieu of the current top down model.

Decentralization and the Cooperative Community

Since its early days, Mitraniketan has shifted in response to globalization, recessions, and migration. No longer is the focus on liberatory teaching practices but on surviving as a school and an organization. Competition for higher paying jobs has stiffened with the worsening economy. Whereas teachers used to live willingly on Mitraniketan's campus, and receive free housing and meals to help supplement their low pay, they now seek better paying jobs through government funded institutions, a common goal that makes for a transient environment at Mitraniketan. Today, teachers' tenures are so truncated at Mitraniketan that they sometimes only work a matter of months before resigning. As previously mentioned, this has a profound effect on the pedagogical approach that teachers can afford to employ in their short terms.

The once energetic spirit of Mitraniketan and its leaders are fatigued. Mitraniketan's vision and mission—which once prevailed on the solid ground of promise, lie buried beneath a rubble of hope. The school operates in a shadow of its mission as poor resources dictate functionality. Resultantly, the students of MPC are without the direction that they might have under more favorable circumstances. While it is important to meet students where they are and impart to them the skills they are likely to utilize, several interviews revealed the discouraged mindset that some staff maintain about Mitraniketan's students. This can negatively impact the level of effort that teachers invest in their students. Specifically, some veteran staff feel that the work ethic of Malayali students has shifted for the worse. As Niranjan explains, “kids aren't motivated and [they] come from troubled [alcoholic] families.” Sanjana is more sympathetic in her assessment “Tribal students ... have inborn talents. They have beautiful handwriting, they draw very well, they have some type of [talent], but in studies they are very poor. ... [Tribal students] don't go for higher studies.” She further elaborates:

After standard 10, they are not going for other [educational training such as plus one and plus two standards]. We tell them to stay here [and commute because] once they are back home they find it difficult to adjust with their parents. Most of the kids are from very, very problem families. Even if students go to [plus one and plus two schools], we hear that they dropped. They prefer to get some money and then they think, “Why should I study? I can get some money and then go and help my parents.” They are just repeating their fathers' habits.

It is conceivable that this observation is not one that pertains only to Malayali culture, but one that more accurately reflects the ubiquitous results of the

perpetuation of globalization and greater access to the immediate gratifications that accompany the digital age. In short, perhaps the reported shift in work ethic is not cultural, but generational. As such, it may be possible to integrate this observation into new learning outcomes that synthesize the schools' founding vision with contemporary goals for educating youth. All of this could be determined should the school decide to embark upon its own People's Planning Campaign addressed below.

A consideration that Mitraniketan might make for the advancement of the school is to consider decentralizing a percentage of the primary administrative power in favor of a more cooperative educational facility. Doing so would require a call out to the Kerala community for the recruitment of committed individuals who are interested in reshaping the goals and mission of the school in an effort to revolutionize its organizational and pedagogical structure. The prospect of Mitraniketan's progress lies within the circulation of a new vision, one that inspires students, staff, community members, and volunteers to draw up and commit to the best possible outcomes for the school. As such, a committee of educationalists, former and current students, community members including ST and SC tribals, as well as accountants and economists could assemble to assess the current state and future prospects of Mitraniketan. As staff resources at Mitraniketan are already stressed, and as this undertaking will require fresh input, this analysis considers the value of newcomers in making the transformation successful. Thus, to better secure the transition it may be necessary to assemble a committee that consists of approximately forty to fifty percent newcomers, and/or the return of interested

individuals who were once committed to the mission of Mitraniketan and have taken a long break. Also, the committee must consist of fifty percent women so as to assist in the creation of goals that will reflect the needs and progress of female learners and staff. This would be an optimal time for the increased representation of women at Mitraniketan as their influence can be part of the grassroots organizing. Furthermore, the engagement of youth may prove to be imperative in establishing the security of this progress: diversifying the ages of committee members—while including MPC students specifically—could at once merge modern day calls for skills training with a commitment that reflects the history of Free India's goals of advancing progressive education, all while representing a bottom-up model for development (Subramanian 273).

Though this particular research focuses specifically on the needs of MPC, the purpose of this committee would be to define the pedagogical and financial organizational direction of both Mitraniketan proper and the Mitraniketan People's College. To initiate change, this analysis draws upon the tenets constructed within the Peoples' Planning Campaign (PPC) which commenced in 1996 in Kerala. The PPC was inaugurated as means of democratically decentralizing state level government so that power could be shifted to local governments or *panchayats* in an effort to engage greater participatory democracy. Exploring similar lines of thinking about power relations, Kim Hjerrild, Secretary General of the Association of Danish Folk High Schools states:

[p]ower should be given to local communities where such decentralization will add to peoples [*sic*] empowerment and influence over their immediate living conditions. Empowerment is also a question of transparency and of sharing leadership, not the least with the younger generation. The young are often well educated and they should have more influence. The future after all belongs to them and their children ... (33)

In addition to Hjerrild's position on the importance of decentralizing power in favor of increasing the autonomy of local communities, this research centers the PPC initiative as it was specifically created to meet the needs of citizens living in rural areas (like Mitraiketan) but also because some of the gains include "ensuring representation to women and other disadvantaged groups" (Sebastian).

Furthermore, the opportunity for the engagement of students is inestimable. The PPC's means for redistributing power from a central location to the local panchayats in 1996 as provided by action researcher Madhu Subramanian include:

1. Convening of Gram Sabhas (adult citizens): for the purpose of "identifying the...needs of the people" (269). This was done in a way that maximized participation of the masses. Goals were "identified, prioritized and presented" (269) at a later plenary session.
2. Organizing Development Seminars: in which data was gathered for an assessment of resources (human and natural) per panchayat. Reports detailed problems and strengths while providing short and long-term suggestions. From this, task forces within panchayats were elected as appropriate so as to pursue recommended projects. (269)
3. Constituting Task Force: prioritized issues became grassroots level projects in which local level projects sprouted up all over Kerala. (269)
4. Finalization of the Annual Plan: funds were allocated according to population along with guidelines for balancing between "productive, infrastructure and service sectors." (270)
5. Preparation of Annual Plans of the Higher Tiers: higher level panchayats known as "block and district" moved forward with their annual plans only after lower level panchayats had integrated theirs. This would ensure the integration of various tiers while also complementing the lowest level tier. (270)

6. Plan Appraisal: review and modification of projects according to the recommendations of the District Planning Committees. (270)

By creating a program of action similar to Kerala's PPC, Mitraniketan People's College could implement means for advancing the school in a fashion similar to the above noted outline. Also, this plan would promote community engagement and activism that is reminiscent of the volunteerism that helped construct Mitraniketan in its beginnings. Once MPC goals are identified and data on resources is collected, appropriate committees would issue reports that itemize challenges and recommendations for action. Initial steps may include forming larger committees and subcommittees to see new tasks to fruition. Utilization of the People's Planning Campaign as a means for developing and advancing the mission of Mitraniketan will require more volunteer resources than the school already has. While the allocation of funds to appropriate projects may be problematic due to economic stress, I suggest—based on the responses of research participants—enhanced calls for short and long-term volunteers to help fill the need for human resources. Such resources could assist in projects ranging from fundraising to donation of in-kind services to volunteering.

The complementary use of "tiers" as suggested in phase five of the PPC is a necessity in the advancement of the educational project at hand. Its enactment is both symbolic and practical: it signals that all projects regardless of clout are important while simultaneously securing the advancement of even the smallest project by interconnecting it with larger projects. Furthermore, it ensures that no

project advances at the risk of another project failing. The process maintains balance and perspective of larger goals. For example, where the temptation to fundraise for fiscal security already distracts from current educational offerings at MPC, under the PPC initiative, fundraising efforts would not progress without first developing and advancing educational goals.

Finally, it will be imperative that MPC reviews and modifies successes and failures resulting from their version of the PPC at several stages within a given timeframe. Commitment to the project and assigned deadlines will be imperative to its success.

(Un)Gendering Citizenship and the Democratization of Education

Feminists contend that gender is ranked by hierarchical powers that favor masculinity over femininity and thus forms the basis for sexism and exploitation (Mohan and Vaughn 182). Power, then, is commonly held by middle-class heterosexual men and equates to male control over females both in private and public spheres. In India, both historically and contemporarily, women have too often been consigned to silent spaces that lack engaged and equal citizenship (Mohan and Vaughn 182). I define the concept of citizenship as “being vested with the rights, privileges and duties of a citizen” (“Citizenship”) both from the macroscopic perspective of society and in the most local sense, such as within the home or the campus of a school. Historically, a lack of equal citizenship could be seen as women’s work in the home (read: *reproduction*) while in the face of globalization, women are relegated to spaces of production. The fact that men run Mitraniketan suggests that

masculine perspectives pervade the organizational direction of MPC. What is missing from the advancement of Mitraniketan People's College is the influence of female administrators, educators, and the collective voices of female students.

Greater female influence is important because:

the concept of cooperation as understood by men does not recognize the importance of values that many women and men may cherish, such as honesty, equalization of outcomes, fairness, mutual consultation and listening to others. (John 143)

With the above in mind, structural changes must not only include, but also lead with the aforementioned social expectations of women if equity is to be achieved at MPC. When women are not represented in schools it reinforces their status as non-citizens. Encouraging the engaged citizenship of women within the microcosm of an educational system could lead to their occupation, participation, and influence in the macrocosm of public spheres. Despite this, simply hiring more women to represent Mitraniketan would not improve the status of the school if it did not do so with political intention.

When addressing a project on community-based educators in Mumbai, Anju Saigal explains that the role of women in that community are so commonly seen as service providers—such as mothers and caretakers—that when they enter roles of public service such as teaching, they are still seen as “cultivating citizenship rather than claiming citizenship themselves” (132); thus, they remain contributors to citizenship but not holders or occupiers of citizenship. The act of hiring more female administrators and educators at Mitraniketan would be a political one if in doing so

there were a commitment to interrupting the current imbalance of power in favor of proportioning the scales to engage female citizenry (Saigal 132). This type of leadership would provide positive modeling to students by offering both spoken and unspoken permission for female learners to claim their citizenship both within the school's walls and outside of it, while also sending positive messages to male learners about the importance of female participation in all forms of society. Aikman and Unterhalter expound upon this point when they suggest:

transformational education needs transformed teachers. It is important therefore that the training of teachers and adult educators not only raises their status and self-esteem but is empowering for them and, through their teaching, for their students. (247)

This statement raises the importance of teacher to student empowerment. Should MPC consciously enlist females to help democratize education, the type of persons they recruit for leadership will be equally important to the fact that they are women. From this perspective, new recruits must be on a personal path toward leadership that can be conveyed to students. Likewise, the recruitment of female students must promise both educative guidance and personal autonomy in a way that encourages female youth to participate in the building of their own citizenship. With the future in focus, the voice of excitement must come from female leaders or the voices of women at MPC will continue to be muted by the dominance of male influence and the future of the school will continue to run with question instead of certainty. Again, Aikman and Unterhalter explain that the “participation of women and girls in

decision making about their own education is a fundamental aspect of developing an education which transforms women's lives in a way that they desire" (247).

With this in mind, this research explores the organization of a cooperative student union consisting of equal numbers of male and female students. The objective of the union would be for students to assist in defining the goals and achieving the mission of MPC. Having female administrators and educators is but one step forward in providing favorable opportunities for women at the school, while putting female students in positions of influence is yet another. A student union could provide the weight necessary to balance the scales of opportunity. Female perspectives are needed to challenge androcentric norms found within the institution. Scholar Ramya Subrahmanian contends that "considerations of progress towards gender equality in education [will] strengthen [women's] abilit[ies] to advocate on their own behalf" (399). The formation of a student group in which female students practice self and group representation could assist them in bypassing habits of passivity in favor of being heard. The notion of advancing a student political presence at MPC is well aligned with the goals of personality development at the school for it helps students prepare for the very Malayali culture from which they come. Organizing expands upon the passionate principles of political rallying and protesting seen just outside the campus of Mitraniketan, on the streets of Kerala. Students can easily look to their own culture to guide them in their quest for representation at Mitraniketan and beyond. This enthusiasm and commitment to social justice has guided Malayali culture over the last several

decades and has secured Kerala with a reputation for social progress and political agency that other developing states look to for guidance. As addressed in the literature review and witnessed through my own observation in various cities, women are not seen taking to the streets in Kerala. As such, organizing within the walls of Mitraniketan would provide female students a safe place to explore their personal and collective agency in a way that could possibly prepare them to lead outside of the campus walls. The entire Mitraniketan community as well as the citizens of Vellanad, the village in which Mitraniketan resides, could be motivated and thus strengthened by such a shift.

I suspect that the addition of intentional hires and student recruitment will invigorate ambition and motivation for the Mitraniketan People's College community. As it currently stands, a fifty plus year-old vision is being held together from a top-down approach rather than the strong internal infrastructure upon which the school was initially founded. While MPC's principal is tied to fiscal responsibilities, the addition of intentional hires and a student union could help float ambition, organization, excitement and commitment because it will ideally decrease hierarchical relationships in favor of cooperative ones. Furthermore, it offers students greater autonomy and self-agency which may enable them to think more macroscopically. This excitement, organic and fresh, could sustain the organization's energy while re-adhering to the founding goals. Furthermore, it has the potential to contribute to the longevity of the school by increasing the application of practical programmatic attunements.

Bridging the Generations: Building *Up* not *Out*

As previously mentioned, basic education espouses that such schools should be self-sustaining via profits from the sale of products (Roy 266). Students and staff for the purpose of resisting investment into the British economy should create such products by subsisting on Indian made wares instead of British made commodities. However, it has also been acknowledged that sustainability from such earnings is often not “feasible” (Roy 266). In the past, Mitraniketan employed means for bypassing this problem through its employment of funds provided by friends from abroad—that is, through donations from foreign, western governments. One of the most intriguing aspects of Mitraniketan is how the school’s leaders have defined community and friendship. Some might argue that in a capitalist society, notions of community have finite borders and transcending such borders is indeed a notable endeavor. However, Mitraniketan’s definition of community is more poststructural in that community is encompassing of both people and ideas and thus, is defined as both a local and global encounter (Biggers 115). While the school exists to serve its local community in a way that honors an Indian educational experience, Viswanathan calls upon a more holistic community—one that exceeds geographical and cultural boundaries—to come together in support of Mitraniketan’s mission. As mentioned in the literature review, the financial and planning assistance of western entities has been utilized in seeing the school’s mission to fruition. While in many ways funds garnered from such support have helped Mitraniketan acquire production units that helped float the school during lean times, this analysis asserts

that the running of several businesses and the expansion of Mitraniketan via its cultural center in the capital may require energy and effort that could otherwise be invested in the educational components of Mitraniketan. As previously addressed, while production is supposed to support the school, study participants have noted that the focus has shifted to maintaining the production centers. I recognize that this is not a simple act to balance: without funds, the school struggles to keep its doors open and employ teachers; yet with business prospects, the administrators become somewhat distracted from the schools' mission and expend energy on commercial prospects in hopes of financially securing the future of Mitraniketan. In this way, it appears that the struggle to unite post-Independence ideals with means for survival in a new millennium remains stalled. Furthermore, despite having many resources within its acreage, administrators at Mitraniketan tend to build *out* instead of *up* when assessing the needs of the organization.

While I contend that any ideas that a prospective Mitraniketan People's Planning Campaign or student union proposes is likely to proffer greater suggestions for the growth and security of Mitraniketan than my own assessment as an outsider, I also acknowledge that it sometimes takes the fresh perspective of an optimistic outsider to arouse possibility. Thus, I offer this analysis to supplement any ideas that come from within the organization, not in lieu of them.

During one of my many nights of talking with Viswanathan, he asked me what I thought Mitraniketan should do to secure the next leg of its journey. I suggested expanding a segment of the school to be a crafting community—much like

that of Shantiniketan, the school founded by Tagore and attended by Viswanathan as well as Daya, the former student and art instructor who now cooks for Mitraniketan. While Shantiniketan was made for the people of India, I propose that a similar vision created for the security of Mitraniketan would attract people from other parts of India and all over the world to attend and learn the art of Indian craft making such as: spinning cotton, wool, or silk thread from a charkha, and the creation of Khadi which is not only spun cloth but a “philosophy and way of life” (Myer “Khadi”) that was utilized as a means for reducing economic dependence on the British during the Indian quest for independence. Mitraniketan also possesses the provisions for offering courses on weaving, dying, batiking, soap making, pottery, printing, and bookmaking. Furthermore, the school could offer agricultural workshops as well as courses on cooking Malayali cuisine, which is known for its lavish use of spices grown in the region. The proposed crafting community mirrors basic education’s call for economic self-sufficiency through the earnings from the school’s profits. As previously stated, what makes this idea so accessible is the fact that most of the proposed crafting classes already exist or have existed in the past, and thus, the infrastructure, skills, and connection to resources are already established at Mitraniketan. Master instructors from the region, and advanced MPC students could teach courses. Artists and apprentices from all over the world could attend workshops, and live temporarily at the Mitraniketan guesthouse. Profits raised from tuition, room, board and supplies, could go back into the schools. Furthermore, the expansion of arts-based programming would likely increase

Mitraniketan's likelihood of receiving grant subsidies from arts based philanthropic entities.

While this proposal might elevate feminist, sociological, or anthropological concerns about the possible dilution of Malayali (or even Mitraniketan's microcosm of) culture by the prospective influence of western guests, I offer this analysis not from a position that values capitalism over transnational or postcolonial feminist critique, but one that prioritizes the expressed concerns and experiences of the people of Mitraniketan. Though this analysis may seem to contradict much of my earlier discussion on theoretical approach, in reflecting on participant conversations and interviews, what has emerged as one of the most critical issues is the split between Mitraniketan's founding vision and the means for sustaining its security and ensuring its longevity. The proposal of a crafting community is not about "capitalist values of profit, competition, and accumulation" as previously quoted (Mohanty 6). Rather, it is suggested in response to Mitraniketan's goals of achieving security and prosperity for the various communities it aims to serve. In this sense, it is important to assess the needs of the organization not strictly from a theoretical perspective, but from a practical one as well. Theory is a necessity in problematizing notions that go overlooked in society—such as the value of monetary gain over human life. Yet, in the instance of Mitraniketan, it is critical to view the potential for financial security if it can better a community—if it can be an act of social justice. Thus, theory does not necessarily need to be abandoned, but its limitations should be assessed particularly if they impede goals for survival and human concern. Even

transnational feminist theory interpreted through a western lens may inadvertently embrace a capitalist twist: assuming that all endeavors for security are unavoidably capitalistic, could hinder organic relationships that occur in other areas of the world sans preconceived notions of exploitation between parties. Such communities may indeed encounter the convergence of relationships and their consequent exchanges as social responsibility. To support this with an anecdote, I was especially grateful to some Malayali friends who entertained me one day in the capital city. I would thank my hosts for large and small gestures ranging from paying for my bus fare to holding the door open for me as we entered a building. Eventually, one friend said to me, "Stephanie, you do not have to be so grateful, it is our responsibility to be kind. It is an expectation here." Though I was on the receiving end of charity in the instances described, my hosts felt that the exchange of relationship was as valuable as their good will and financial provisions. Additionally, I will remind those who remain skeptical, that as is, Mitraniketan and the People's College has been built in large part by contributions from German, Danish and American funders and already subsists on the income it garners from its own promotion of educational tourism which includes annual visits by Danish high school students as well as other western groups. In addition to creating a broader base of financial support for Mitraniketan, I believe my analysis of a crafting community could be built in a way that would put the Gurukula system of education into practice while also advancing the talents and experiences of Mitraniketan teachers and students who would instruct the courses. A crafting community has the potential to re-popularize the critical and still valid

goals created during the Free India era—goals in alignment with the founding vision of Mitraniketan. By doing this, the school can secure not only the prospect of sustenance for itself and the surrounding village, but the continued positive and intentional influence of post-colonial thinking that puts at center the holistic development of Indian student learners while also extending Viswanathan’s goal for Mitraniketan to “promote a casteless, classless society.”

The physical space at Mitraniketan is in place for the crafting community but the landscaping needs some improvements to accommodate visitors on this scale: the fire pit could be moved further from the guesthouse for aesthetic, health and safety purposes, and some paved roads on campus could be improved in order to prevent injuries—particularly to any elders or persons with disabilities who might attend the school. I do not recommend too many immediate changes, however, as they could become costly and current funds need to be invested into attracting and maintaining strong faculty members. Rather, I suggest that the website and all marketing materials reflect that guests will live in semi-western conditions that incorporate the traditions of Malayali living. Marketing materials could also emphasize the proximity of Mitraniketan to nearby travel destinations such as Kerala’s capital, Thiruvananthapuram, and various beach towns, all of which offer rich cultural experiences such as kathakali performances, festivals, temples, and museums. The fact that one’s experiences of learning at Mitraniketan could be enhanced by weekend trips would be an added draw to study at the facility.

There is yet another avenue to pursue in the prospect of promoting the suggested crafting community. That is, MPC students could be trained in skills such as marketing and development. This would not only add to their list of skills as individuals who wish to seek professional employment upon graduation, but it will also provide Mitraniketan with creative input from its talented youth, thus creating greater reciprocity, solidarity and pride between students and the school.

Furthermore, the promise of enhanced personal agency has the potential to emerge in the promotion of a student-centered living and learning educational facility while also extending power to students as members of a local, decentralized community.

As stated by Hjerrild “most societies need younger peoples’ dynamism and innovative thinking” (33).

Chapter 7: Conclusions

Since 1956, the Mitraniketan educational facility has offered thousands of students from marginalized sectors an opportunity to participate in an experimental education project that fosters “learn[ing] in a holistic spirit ... [via] an alternative education mode” (Mitraniketan). At the helm of pedagogical practice at Mitraniketan is the belief that learners should experience education in an environment that promotes community interaction and that nature should be incorporated into scholarship for the experience to be truly liberatory.

Both Mitraniketan proper and the Mitraniketan People’s College espouse the “progress of society through the total development of individuals.” Though the founder and administrators have had the most socially responsible intentions for educating learners, material expansion, globalization, and financial insecurity have threatened the stability of the schools and distracted from their mission. Most participants interviewed feel that the longevity of the schools can be attributed to the long-term commitment to community. Still, many observe that the current state of Mitraniketan is threatened by inadequate funding and the consequent low salaries influence staff commitment and loyalty which create a culture of impermanence. Furthermore, participants acknowledge that MPC offers equal

educational offerings because women can take any classes that men take. However, equity is another issue. This research revealed that course offerings reflect masculine perspectives on what is deemed valuable in education. Thus, while several MPC courses reflect the gendered interests of men, only two captivate the interests of women learners. Resultantly, a correlation has been drawn between the massive attrition rates of women students in the last twelve months and the limited course offerings to women learners.

And finally, in various publications, MPC stresses the significance of providing a progressive and liberatory learning experience in which students have democratic influence over their educations. However, this is not practiced. Once again, instructors and administrators contend that the low operating budget of Mitraniketan and the consequent low salaries offered to teachers impedes both schools from retaining dedicated educators who are committed to alternative pedagogical practices. As such, teachers' tenures are truncated and students are left without the direction that they might have under more certain times.

To alleviate the stresses and responsibilities of administrators and staff at Mitraniketan People's College, and to enhance the future security of the school, I offer a descriptive analysis that assesses: 1) decentralizing a percentage of administrative power in favor of a cooperative educational community, 2) replacing patriarchal powers with an emphasis on the citizenship and inclusion of the female learner via the establishment of a student union group that is made up of fifty percent women learners, and 3) the creation of a crafting community on the

Mitraniketan campus that would attract people from India and all over the world to attend and learn the art of Indian craft making while allowing Mitraniketan to develop its existing resources instead of expanding beyond its means in pursuit of financial security. In addition, the income garnered from the crafting community would allow Mitraniketan to build upon some of the tenets of basic education—most notably that such institutions should be self-sustaining via sales from vendibles produced at the school.

In reflecting on future research inquiries, I suggest the investigation of what I have come to call the “Kerala Model Dis-ease.” During my time in Kerala, I observed the expectation of a co-existence between that of social mobility and the discomforts of striving to survive. Again, I do not mean to imply that poverty is inherently “bad,” rather, I offer insight to the struggles and concerns shared with me by study participants. At Mitraniketan, there is at once a desire by administrators to be financially liberated and a request for “more service-minded people.” Indeed, the request for service may foster community, or, it could maintain the current state of affairs in which teachers are so poorly paid that they remain uncommitted and students go without the best possible instruction to which they are entitled. Participants’ concerns suggest a reciprocal relationship between hope and defeat. It is the psyche of hope and defeat that I believe could be further explored within Mitraniketan so as to reveal the school’s potential contribution to its own instability as well as mend any wounds in the collective consciousness of the community.

Regarding Mitraniketan's longevity, I note that community activism—both local and global—has fluctuated throughout the generations. As the founding of Mitraniketan followed great political unrest and eventual liberation, I ponder the effects of revolution on sustaining progressive missions. Is a social justice project more likely to succeed when initiated during or in the wake of a revolution? Does a mission inevitably lose momentum in generations of comfort and complacency? How much political unrest must be present for a community to unite over issues of social justice? These are questions that I hope will be answered in future research.

To conclude, Mitraniketan has the history and community support to pursue the excellence of its pedagogical vision. What is missing is the momentum to move forward in a sustainable way. The enlistment of students to progress the mission could offer the vitality and energy necessary to drive the school's future, while the recruitment of women can steer the perspective into a new and meaningful direction.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide for Students

1. Why have you decided to attend Mitraniketan?
2. What do you want to do after you complete school?
3. Are classes being offered at Mitraniketan to help you attain your professional goals?
 - a. If so, what are they?
 - b. If not, what does the school need to do to change this?
4. Do you feel you can voice your opinions to teachers and administrators? Do you feel that they listen to your needs? How?
5. What would you change about school?
6. What has been the biggest surprise in your education?
7. In what ways are your educational goals being met? In what ways aren't they being met?
8. How are women and men provided with the same educational opportunities at MPC?
 - a. Do men take classes/attend field trips that women are not allowed to take?
 - b. Do women take classes/attend field trips that men are not allowed to take?
9. What obligations do you have outside of your classes?

- a. Are classes offered at times that accommodate your obligations outside of school? What examples can you provide?
 - b. If not, what needs to change in order to better accommodate you?
10. How do you help create or contribute to the programs that are offered to you?
11. What program changes would you like to see at Mitraniketan?
12. I've noticed that fewer female students attend the People's College? Why might that be?
13. What else would you like to share about your experiences of being a student at MPC?

Appendix B: Interview Guide for Administrators and Educators

1. What is your position at the school?
2. How long have you been at the school?
3. What aspects of Mitraniketan's do you consider to be most successful? Why?
4. What aspects of Mitraniketan's do you consider to be least successful? Why?
5. What factors have contributed to Mitraniketan's longevity?
6. What have been the greatest hindrances to Mitraniketan's success?
7. I've noticed that a lot of programs listed on your website are no longer running. Why might this be?
8. I read that throughout Mitraniketan's 56-year history, it sometimes had to scale back on program offerings. It seems that this is another period of scaling back. Why?
9. What differences do you think exist between opening/running a school for low-income and societally marginalized learners vs. opening a school for children who have more privilege?
10. What advice would you give to someone who wants to open a school for low-income and societally marginalized students?
11. Educationalist Paolo Freire wrote about liberatory education as being a reciprocal process of liberation between student and learner. In many cases, the student is also the teacher and the teacher is also the learner. Literature about Mitraniketan suggests that it was founded upon a similar philosophy.

In what ways do you think liberatory education at Mitraniketan is being enacted today?

12. As a whole, I noticed that more girls than boys attend Mitraniketan but fewer women attend the People's College than men. Specifically, how many women and men attend? Why do you think this might be?

13. Are all classes offered equally to females and males at Mitraniketan? How?

14. Can women of all different backgrounds attend the People's College regardless of:

- a. Age?
- b. Marital/widow/child status?
- c. Religion?
- d. Caste?

15. I noticed that young men from the People's College are required to do agricultural work in the afternoon while the young women are to clean the grounds at this time. Why is this?

- a. Some of your female students at the People's College might aspire to do agricultural work for the government. In what ways are educational preparations for students with such desires (and others) being met?
- b. If they are not being met, would the school consider meeting these needs? How?

- c. Would you be willing to incorporate the opinions of the students—including women—at the People's College to help strengthen programming? Please explain.

16. In what ways are female graduates of Mitraniketan using learned skills outside of the school?

17. How are the educational needs of participants determined?

18. Do students help sculpt their programs? How?

Appendix C: Interview Guide for Former Students

1. How long ago were you a student here?
2. What is your position now?
3. How long have you worked here?
4. What was your experience like being a student at Mitraniketan?
5. How has Mitraniketan changed over the years?
6. What aspects of Mitraniketan's do you consider to be most successful? Why?
7. What aspects of Mitraniketan's do you consider to be least successful? Why?
8. What factors have contributed to Mitraniketan's longevity?
9. What have been the greatest hindrances to Mitraniketan's success?
10. I've noticed that a lot of programs listed on your website are no longer running. Why might this be?
11. I read that throughout Mitraniketan's 56-year history, it sometimes had to scale back on program offerings. It seems that this is another period of scaling back. Why?
12. What differences do you think exist between opening/running a school for low-income and societally marginalized learners vs. opening a school for children who have more privilege?
13. What advice would you give to someone who wants to open a school for low-income and societally marginalized students?
14. Educationalist Paolo Freire wrote about liberatory education as being a reciprocal process of liberation between student and learner. In many cases,

the student is also the teacher and the teacher is also the learner. Literature about Mitraniketan suggests that it was founded upon a similar philosophy. In what ways do you think liberatory education at Mitraniketan is being enacted today?

15. As a student, did you assist in developing your curriculum? How?

16. As a whole, I noticed that more girls than boys attend Mitraniketan but fewer women attend the People's College than men. Specifically, how many women and men attend? Why do you think this might be?

17. Are all classes offered equally to females and males at Mitraniketan? How?

18. Can women of all different backgrounds attend the People's College regardless of:

- a. Age?
- b. Marital/widow/child status?
- c. Religion?
- d. Caste?

19. I noticed that young men from the People's College are required to do agricultural work in the afternoon while the young women are to clean the grounds at this time. Why is this?

- a. Some of the female students at the People's College might aspire to do agricultural work for the government. In what ways are educational preparations for students with such desires (and others) being met?

- b. If they are not being met, do you think that the school would consider meeting these needs? How?
- c. Do you think that the school would be willing to incorporate the opinions of the students—including females—at the People's College to help strengthen programming? If not, why?

20. In what ways are female graduates of Mitraniketan using learned skills outside of the school?

21. How are the educational needs of participants determined?

22. Do students help sculpt their programs? How?