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Introduction: How do some schools become "alternative" to the "mainstream"?

Much of the scholarship on "alternative schools" in India tends to view them favourably in contrast to "mainstream" schooling. The objective of these writings is often to find out what it is that these schools are doing "differently," with the implication that unlike others they are doing it "right." Such a view of alternative schools is fuelled by an imagined consensus about the shortcomings of both government-aided and privately-funded schools in India. However, the discourse about alternative schools is particularly interesting for its potential to club together the problems of both government and private schools, notwithstanding the seemingly unbridgeable qualitative and ideological differences that may be found between the two kinds of schools.

Alternative schooling then positions itself against all other forms of schooling in terms of its views on education in both theory and in practice. Underlying the generally positive and/or isolating appraisal of alternative schools is the view that within the wide spectrum of educational options available for schooling children, alternative schools emerge to cater to limited sections of society— people whose views are in sync with the philosophy of the school, who are perceptive of the damaging shortcomings of mainstream schooling, and who seek to protect and bring up their children in the unique environment that is supposedly found only in such alternative schools.

Moreover, studies on alternative schools, while positively appraising the experience of learning and working in these institutions, typically do not undertake a systematic comparative analysis that might examine processes at work in different schooling contexts. At the same time, however, it is also important to note that alternative schools do not form a homogenous category that may easily be studied in a comparative context, which perhaps explains the dearth of scholarship that addresses these issues. Through this study, I do not aim to undertake such a systematic comparative analysis myself but hope to suggest possible directions for such an inquiry.

To clarify, "alternative schools"—the way the term is employed in research, educational literature and in common parlance—do not include schools that are different from the rest by the fact of them being (religious) minority institutions, residential schools, military schools etc. Whether an institution

is identified as an alternative school is a function of the rarity of the experience that it offers on the broader spectrum of options for school education and for how much it is perceived to break away from conventional ideas about education. Factors such as unique courses offered by the school, innovative teaching methods, specialising in extracurricular activities and sports, or markers of a certain class, caste, religion and ethnicity that the school might be associated with, by themselves do not qualify a school to be recognised as an alternative school. Rather, it is a narrow range of highly heterogenous institutions that are able to fashion themselves as "alternative schools," which are then acknowledged as desirable substitutes for the more commonly sought-after options for educating one's children.

I am interested in understanding some of the processes by which this fashioning of itself is achieved by an alternative school. I argue that the awareness of being different from other schools and of deviating from the ways of learning found "elsewhere" is essential for sustaining the school community's commitment to the larger social, political and ideological project that it itself is a product of. I propose that this acute awareness of doing something "different," of enjoying "a rare opportunity" is reinforced through particular kinds of everyday rituals along with the discourse about these rituals. At Rishi Valley School (RVS) in Andhra Pradesh (India), where I did fieldwork over a course of six weeks, inculcating such an awareness is achieved through a repetition of and reflection on the school's history and the life and philosophy of its founder Jiddu Krishnamurti.[1]

Started in 1931, RVS is a school built on a 360 acre campus which is today a lush green valley. It is a residential school where 350-400 students study at a time. Unlike other schools with a centralised curriculum, teachers at RVS make their own curriculum and teach according to the interests and abilities of the students. There are no tests and examinations before Class 9 and hands-on learning is emphasised. At the same time, the school is affiliated to the Council for Indian School Certificate Examinations and follows its curriculum for classes 9 to 12. The school places emphasis on self-study, self-awareness, reading for leisure, a non-competitive spirit in sports, cultivating empathy,

1. Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) was a prominent philosopher and thinker of the 20th Century. As a boy, he was adopted by Annie Besant of the Theosophical Society and groomed to become the prophesied World Teacher. However, in 1929 he renounced the The Order of the Star—a large world-wide organisation built around his coming and devoted his life to the mission of unconditional freedom for humanity.

passion in arts and music, community service, waste management, working to enhance rural health and education, respect for nature, bird-watching, meditation sessions, eating organic and vegetarian food, no use of personal devices and gadgets, simplicity in one's lifestyle and a parent-child relationship between teachers and students.

My specific interest is in the school's practices of narrating the history of RVS and how it might serve to streamline the culture and alternative identity of the school. This history includes the ideas that come from a large body of writings by Krishnamurti and scholarly reflections on them, the audio-visual archives of Krishnamurti's conversations with students and educators, the written and visual records of the school, and the personal experiences shared by teachers, guests and old students.

Krishnamurti's ideas and his motivation for establishing Rishi Valley School serves to provide continuity and cohesion to this project of alternative education by the transmission of its own narrative in the everyday life of the school. While an alternative school need not always be established with a definable philosophy and set objectives in mind, what also imparts a special ethos to life at RVS is the metacultural activity of periodically engaging with the intent of the school and its progress, thereby affirming the school's unique character. This metaculture also allows the school to read its current practices in light of the narratives about what it has stood for over the past many decades. I call these activities which are loosely structured yet routinely performed in certain designated spaces in RVS part of its "metaculture" because of the role they play in transmitting a particular version of the history of this school among current students and teachers, thus facilitating the futurity (Urban 2001) of what is presently interpreted as the culture of RVS. Furthermore, as Urban writes, moments in culture that are related to each other in a metacultural relationship display the culture's "ability to generate self-interpretations or self-understandings that help to define what change and sameness is" (2001, 3). Further, I use the term "rituals" for these exercises of narrativising the school's history and culture because of the pattern of regularity of such discussions and the repeated use of certain symbols in these rituals that acquire meaning in the context of the school. I argue that these metacultural rituals of giving an account of RVS's origins and the ways in which the school has developed give meaning and cohesion to other routine and periodic rituals in the school. Thus, my field data shows evidence that some of the school's metacultural activities — diffuse and

unstructured as they are and pushing against the ways in which ritual has conventionally been defined—play a ritualistic role in accumulating and reinforcing meaning through and around themselves about a certain experience of alternative education.

Through the course of my fieldwork I observed that

a) The institution's founding intent and philosophy is something carefully offered to students through rituals of reminiscing about the school's history and rituals that cultivate self- reflection, thereby facilitating a sense of community and continuity in the culture of the school. These rituals are thus crucial sites in the production of a metaculture in the school.

b) At the same time, this metaculture operates as a framing discourse in the articulation of conflicts and contestations over the school's practices and culture.

The tools used for my fieldwork were limited to my own observations as well as interviews with teachers, students between classes 6 to 12, and members of the administrative body. The sites important for my study were the Culture Classes, Class Teacher's Periods, Faculty Discussion Meetings, and the weekly discussions called The Sunday Dialogues which are open to all faculty members and senior students.

A brief overview of Krishnamurti's philosophy

For the purposes of this paper, I will briefly cover some of the relevant themes from Krishnamurti's writings.

On the self and knowing: Krishnamurti says that self-knowledge is very important for creating a free individual. Education can be seen as a lifelong process because "[s]elf-knowledge has no end—you don't come to an achievement, you don't come to a conclusion" (Krishnamurti 1970, 13). Self-knowledge cannot be arrived at by someone else, that is, any organisation or any leader. The knowledge of the outside is possible only after complete knowledge of the self. Krishnamurti writes that "[t]he world is a projection of ourselves and to understand the world we must understand ourselves" because we are responsible for the problems we find around us. It is not someone else's task to resolve them.

On the role of a school: Education is about learning how to look. In Krishnamurti's writings the site of the school (i.e., the school as a concept) is crucial for the process of learning to watch, to listen, to be independent and empathetic. It is important to pay attention to everything that one does. He writes that being by oneself is a way "to understand the workings of one's own mind, and that is as important as going to class"(Krishnamurti 2003, 33).

On the relationship between teachers and students: Krishnamurti wrote that respect emerging from fear is a form of ill-will. Between equals there would be no ill-will and no respect. The teacher and the student are partners in the process of learning. There is no hierarchy that makes the teacher superior to the student. Furthermore, it is important to be "critical and not accept anything which you yourself do not see clearly" (Krishnamurti 2003, 11). The function of the teacher is to "educate the totality of the mind" and enable these critical faculties (36).

On transforming society: Revolution in society must begin with the inner, psychological transformation of the individual because "[o]ur education, our social structure, our so-called religious life are all based on imitation, that is, I fit into a particular social or religious formula." He writes that "real education means that one cannot, under any circumstances, be drawn into the stream of society" (Krishnamurti 2003, 10). Society doesn't want to see the new generation being different and so "most of us learn through fear," authority and obedience (40).

Rishi Valley School, was an experiment in such an approach to education. After establishing it, Krishnamurti continued his involvement with the school through his annual visits to RVS and his conversations with teachers and students. Eighty-five years on, the school aims to continue to embody Krishnamurti's thought and work while also articulating its role in the rapidly changing context of education in society. Many aspects of Krishnamurti's philosophy and RVS's objectives as a school are manifest in the various rituals that the school observes.

Thinking about rituals in schools

The role of rituals has been analysed by scholars using a wide variety of approaches. However, given the ambiguity in how "ritual" is defined (McLaren 1986), it is important to think about which practices can be deemed as rituals as we move from one context to another. For McLaren, under both the "strict" and "weak" definitions as he calls them, rituals have a specific

performative aspect to them—they are identified by patterns of bodily gestures employed in their performance (1986, 42-48). McLaren, citing Panikkar (1977, 9), states that rituals are not limited to the domain of logos but are manifested more corporeally. As symbolic bodily performances, rituals oscillate between the qualities of randomness and formality even though the performers are seldom aware of its "structuring effects on [their] perception and behaviour" (McLaren 1986, 39). For McLaren, the performance of ritual is imbued with meaning because of its ability to evoke bodily conformity and that is an identifying marker of a ritual in a schooling situation.

However, in a school that explicitly positions itself against dogma and the rigidity of many schooling processes including overt bodily conformity, such conventional markers of ritual are unlikely to be found. The teachings of Krishnamurti emphasise that teachers and students equally partake in the learning process and any form of disciplining of the child has to come only from within. It must not be enforced but must be an expression of the individual's "natural" desire for order in his/her life. In RVS, rules and structures are meant to exist only to facilitate individual freedom. For instance, many teachers encourage their students to meditate for a few minutes before commencing the class. However, I noticed that each student felt free to meditate in their own way. They could face whichever direction, sit or stand, choose to keep their eyes open and assume whatever pose they found comfortable. This flexibility in their practice of classroom rituals shows that the school culture of RVS guards itself against the artificiality of those rituals that stifle individual creativity to manufacture forms of uniformity. An important element of Krishnamurti's philosophy is the cautious scrutiny of one's own actions and attitude — of questioning whether one's beliefs and conduct stem from individual reason or from blind conformity to social expectations. Thus, the philosophy undercuts the traditional authority of the "school" as an institution which makes claims to know what is good for students better than the students themselves. There is, in a certain sense, a rejection of the oppressive rigidity associated with certain kinds of rituals and an embracing of spontaneity and consensual participation in the "liberating" rituals that constitute the culture of RVS. If not identifiable by specific gestures and/or posturings, how then are rituals in RVS to be defined?

The other role of ritualisation, according to McLaren, is that it allows the accumulation and communication of meaning in a particular context through the "incarnation of symbols, symbol clusters, metaphors, and root paradigms

through formative bodily gestures" (1986, 48) which may be found not just in "prototypical classroom rituals (e.g. morning prayer, opening exercises, school assemblies)" but in "daily lessons" and "resistances to instruction" as well (1986, 3). Thus when McLaren studies schooling as a ritual performance, he looks not just at "special occasions" in people's lives in school but also "the practical and mundane and how these domains become sanctified inside schools" (35), for these everyday processes are as pregnant with meaning and structuring capabilities as are the relatively infrequent events that are seemingly "more ritualistic" and symbolic in nature. Thus, McLaren has sought to extend the role of ritual to ordinary classroom situations which have their own functions in social life at school.

Extending such an analysis of ritual to classroom processes is significant in the case of RVS because here, "classroom teaching" is structured in a way that resists any understanding of a rigid predictable structure. For instance, I found that the indoor classroom arrangement is apparently not very different from what is found in many schools. To be sure, there is a large blackboard on one wall, a teacher's table and chair, and seating for students in rows facing the teacher. Yet, the engagement of the teacher and students with this spatial arrangement is quite unlike what one expects to find in other schools. I found that there is no particular privilege of the teacher to speak before the students to commence a lesson. Students did not feel compelled to raise their hand or wait their turn to ask a question, make a comment, answer the teacher's question or talk about whatever they felt was relevant. Students, by and large, did not fear teachers and readily engaged with what was being discussed. Even more diversity in the forms of classroom experience can be found when we look at RVS's use of outdoor "classrooms." In the outdoor classes that I observed, I often found the teachers sitting among the students and students comfortably sitting on what is notionally "the teacher's bench." Whether these choices to not enforce a structure of seating in the teaching space stem from indifference to the teacher-student hierarchy (as it is conventionally understood in spatial terms), or from a conscious decision to not let such a structure manifest in their lectures is not as revealing as is the broader pattern of similar choices and discussions in the everyday culture of the school. It is thus possible to argue that RVS is an institution which disregards those classroom rituals that normalise such bodily gestures which are taken to indicate efficiency in teaching and learning, respect for authority, discipline and order, etc.

Notwithstanding the apparent lack of definitive rituals that pervades classroom processes in RVS, understanding them for their loose structure and

flexible content is important precisely to understand the uniqueness of the kind of rituals that may be found in such alternative schools. How is it that such an open-ended and radical view of schooling sustains itself as a cohesive and formal whole over time? How is the everyday culture of the school tuned to express this sense of being part of an alternative venture that assimilates without contradiction the heterogeneity and individuality that it seeks to foster?

In the context of mainstream schools, Judith L. Kapferer notes that private schools in Australia are able to commit their clientele's individual goals and educational expectations to the socialisation goals of the school through the use of ritual and ceremonial practices that are missing from the school culture of state schools. She writes that "in ritual, the project of the school is formally spelled out, articulated and elaborated within a bounded, noneveryday context, a 'special occasion' constituting a finite province of meaning set apart from the paramount reality of everyday life" (Kapferer 1981, 261). Thus, she argues, the difference between schools, whether their philosophy is merely limited to abstract statements in the form of a charter, or effectively reified through regular performances and school events – might just be the difference in how much the school is able to commit its clientele to the culture of the school and to the advancement of the school project. Unlike McLaren, Kapferer locates these rituals only outside the ordinary classroom routines of the school.

In this respect, I consider the case of rituals at Rishi Valley School as one that takes off from both Kapferer and McLaren's conceptualisations of rituals in the school setting, while also presenting exceptions to these.

The importance of Rishi Valley School's chosen socialisation goals and methods emerges in a large part from its self-image as an alternative school, that is, the discourse about RVS within RVS is shot through with the awareness of what it does which other schools do not, and of what other schools do which RVS does not. This may certainly be true of mainstream schools as well and this presents an avenue for further comparative work in the anthropology of education.

Further, informed by a philosophy that discourages structural impositions and coerced conformity, school rituals at RVS are of the form that might serve to broaden previously documented characteristics of school rituals as here they manifest primarily in the realm of discourse, debate and dialogue much more than in the realm of bodily practice.

Thus, it is possible to argue that in RVS there is a different kind of socialisation practice at work when certain spaces in the school are regularly used for providing a narrative of its history and the significance of its culture, thereby imparting a ritual role to these activities of the school. This narrative is important for grounding the school as an alternative institution in a social context that has changed significantly since the time when the school was established and since the days when Jiddu Krishnamurti was still involved with the school. In the past, when Krishnamurti would make annual visits to the school, the contradictions between the rituals that made RVS an alternative school, and the rituals that are a product of the functional necessities of any educational institution, not excluding RVS, were starkly visible. As Meenakshi Thapan points out in her 1991 ethnography of Rishi Valley School (2006), there are different orders of rituals at work in RVS. She defines rituals as "an expression and affirmation of the school's ultimate values" (Thapan 2006, 54). For Thapan, these rituals may belong to the "transcendental order" or the "local order," or both. The transcendental order is constituted of those values that are expounded by Krishnamurti and represent the most revered values of the school. The local order comprises of those rituals that are features of the social order that the school displays by virtue of it being an institution that is for all its difference, still a part of a centralised board of examinations and curriculum, and that caters to a variety of parental and student expectations. Thapan then distinguishes between "routine rituals" and "dramatizations of the routine" to read together the importance of both ordinary everyday activities and the unique periodic events of the school routine. The primary examples of the dramatisation of the routine were Krishnamurti's annual visit to the school, and the yearly academic examinations, both of which are anticipated and prepared for in advance such that they tend to overshadow other activities during the rest of the school year. According to Thapan, these rituals play a significant role in imparting an ethos that is special to the school.

My interest in the rituals of the school takes off from Thapan's analysis of what constitutes the school's special ethos to understand how this unique character of the institution is interpreted and articulated within the school twenty five years on. It is my argument that some of the newer rituals of repetitive narrativisations of how the school came about, what it has done so far, and what it does now might not be readily perceived as separable rituals belonging to different orders by looking at their frequency, their formal qualities or their perceived "specialness" or "ordinariness." Yet, their function is arguably ritualistic. It is possible to read these rituals of reiterating the history and philosophy of the school as bearing such a

relationship to other aspects of the school as, according to Urban (2001), metaculture bears to culture. Together, the culture and metaculture of the school, as observable in multiple spaces and activities, enable RVS to fashion itself as an alternative school.

Relationship between cultural and metacultural rituals observed at RVS

Cultural Rituals	Metacultural Rituals
Spaces: classrooms, school assemblies, nature walks, tests and examinations, observing holidays, sports activities and inter-school matches, movie screenings, reading time, department meetings.	Spaces: Culture Classes, Class Teacher Periods, Faculty Discussion meetings, Sunday Dialogues.
Classroom teaching and assessment of students	Discussions on "why do you think you are being educated?," "What should be one's attitude towards academics and examinations in a Krishnamurti school?"
Watching videos of Krishnamurti's talks Reading the works of Krishnamurti	Telling students the story of Krishnamurti's life; Faculty discussion meetings to analyse his talks and books
School assemblies	Telling students about how and where assemblies were conducted in the past; Asking students about what they think about school assemblies, whether they enjoy them etc.
Disciplinary measures against students when required.	Discussion on the ethical aspects of disciplinary action against students; Krishnamurti's thoughts about self-discipline etc.
Movie screenings and sports telecast for students	Discussions on why a particular movie was chosen for screening; Reflecting on what we feel when we watch sports and why we support a particular team
Nature walks; tree-plantation days	Narrating the story of landmark trees; Discussing the significance of the landscape of RVS
Asthachal (ritual in which students view the sunset together)	Students told about the time when Asthachal was started in the school, how frequently it was observed; Krishnamurti's teachings about observing the natural world
Department meetings for designing the curriculum	Faculty discussion groups to formulate "how to teach sciences/ humanities in a Krishnamurti school"

As the above table shows, the relationship between the cultural and metacultural rituals can be seen in the content of these sessions. In my study, I shall focus on the following spaces:

1. Culture Class and Class Teacher's Period
2. Faculty Meetings, Faculty Discussion Groups and The Sunday Dialogues
3. Discourse on the policies of the school

At RVS, all classes have one Culture Class and two Class Teacher's Periods every week. The Class Teacher's Period can be used by the Class Teacher (the individual teacher who takes primary charge of the class group for the year) to discuss functional issues with the students, address students' concerns,

conduct group activities, have discussions or take the students out to play (which is more common in the junior classes). Culture Classes on the other hand are rather difficult to describe in terms of their agenda. It is one slot in the week taken by any one of the faculty members who is assigned as the "Culture Class teacher" for the group for the entire school year. There is no fixed curriculum for these classes. In a certain sense, the topic of discussion in these classes is entirely up to the teacher and whatever the students are interested in. There are no modules or textbooks, no supervision of what the teachers choose to do, there may or may not be written work given to students, and there is no evaluation of students on any aspect of these classes. At the same time, these designated classes are not the same as "free period" or the "zero hour" found in the timetable in many mainstream schools. Despite their unspecified and flexible agenda, these are properly scheduled slots, interspersed with academic classes in the timetable. They are not a substitute for other functions of the school since assemblies at RVS are held everyday, educational films are screened after school once a week, and any other issues are discussed after classes as and when required.

Classroom discussions on Krishnamurti's early life

I became interested in the significance of these classes and what they might add to the schooling experience in RVS. Functionally speaking, Culture Classes stand outside of other needs of the school but their content often overlaps with some routine features of schooling. I found that among other opportunities for miscellaneous discussions, Culture Class and some Class Teacher's Periods are important spaces for telling students about the early life of Krishnamurti, and what is more, students seem to read their experiences at RVS into the founder's personal history that informs their school.

Take for instance a Culture Class session for students of Class 6 (A).[2] Students are being told about the life of young Krishnamurti. The students seem to be enjoying the teacher's dramatic storytelling.

> Teacher: I told you last time, that there was a twist in the life of Krishnamurti. And today we will know about the next twist. Which was the first twist?
>
> Students (all at once): That the TS [Theosophical Society] finds him.

2. Students of Class 6, belonging to section "A." Most classes at RVS are divided into two sections — "A" and "B."

Teacher: Yes, he is discovered as a god by the TS. So look at his story, he rose from a boy of middle class to become a great world teacher. Everything was different for him. Everything was new. He was introduced to the European way of living. Like? Eating with a spoon and fork, wearing socks and shoes. Brahmins did not do that.

Student: Sir, but we wear shoes in India.

Teacher: No, but you know, in the olden days, some Brahmins were very orthodox, they did not wear shoes. They were so austere and they did not touch leather.

Student: Sir, Krishnamurti was Brahmin?[3]

Teacher: Yes.

Student: Sir, he was vegetarian?

Teacher: Yes.

Student: Sir, is that why we don't have non-veg. in this school?
[Laughter from the class, some sounds of "yes, that's why."]

Teacher: No, no. No relation to that. And we have eggs in the school. Brahmins are very traditional, they did not even eat eggs. So this is not like that. So, what was the next twist?

Student: Sir, his name was changed. The spelling was changed. From G to J, by Annie Besant.

Teacher: Who was Annie Besant?

Students (in chorus): The head of TS.

Teacher: Yes. She changed the name so that people would be able to pronounce it. You see, with "G" people read it as Giddu ["g" as in "game"]. So she changed it to "J."
But that is not a big twist.
We will have a quiz to see how much you know. Only whose name is called out will answer.

[Students are excited and restless. They answer anyway when someone else's name is called out.]

Teacher: What was Krishnamurti's year of birth?
Students [many speaking at once]: 1895.
Teacher: Year of death?
Students: 1986.
Teacher: What was the name of the other brother adopted by TS?
Students: Nithyananda.
Teacher: What were his mother and father's names?
Students: Narayaniah, Sanjeevamma.

Teacher: You see, in a way there is nothing much that you gain from these small details but they are also important.

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3. Brahmin : a class of the varna/caste system in India. Brahmin communities in many parts of the country were known to be strict vegetarians, believing animal products (even in the use of leather for shoes) to be polluting to their ritual purity.

During the course of my fieldwork, ten of the fifteen culture classes that I observed for middle and senior school were similar to the above example in their content. The topic of the discussion was the early life of Krishnamurti and his relationship to the Theosophical Society (TS). In these sessions, students are made aware of the details of the founder's life because it is considered as something important for them to know by virtue of their studying in a Krishnamurti school. The students, as can be seen from this instance, not only have biographical facts about Krishnamurti on their fingertips, but also read the rationale for school policies (such as not serving meat in the Dining Hall) in the light of his life and beliefs.

At the same time, there is something quite unique in the way these "rituals" of history are observed for they are rooted in the present concerns of the students and invite them to challenge what they hear. Later in the same class when the teacher described the privileged education that Krishnamurti received in England after he was adopted by the TS, students asked a number of questions about the education system of that time. This generated a discussion about what education is for, and what do the students of Class 6 (A) think about why they are being educated. I found that encouraging the students to contemplate on what they are doing here at RVS and what RVS does for them was a recurring theme in Culture Classes and Class Teacher's Periods moderated by different faculty members in senior and middle school.

What is interesting to me is how the importance of the legacy of the school's founder is open to interpretation by students and not always expected to be a matter of reverence. In the Class Teacher's Period for Class 7 (B), the teacher reads out the early life story of Krishnamurti written by Krishnamurti himself in the third person. The narrative is in a mythological style, describing Krishnamurti as a "boy of great aura," "born in the puja room" at his mother's insistence and fated to become a great world teacher as predicted by an astrologer.[4] When students ask the teacher whether Madame Blavatsky, one of the founders of the TS, really had the powers to see the future and predict Krishnamurti's arrival (as was mentioned earlier by the teacher), the teacher shrugs and says, "Look, we don't know." The teacher does not take the position to either affirm or reject the claims made in the story. It is something that both he and the students are free to question. This is in marked contrast to Kapferer's definition of a ritual as "unquestionable and unquestioning" ideas embodied in action (1981, 264). Furthermore, the story walks a tightrope between history and myth and continues to be discussed afresh in a class where students have heard this story many times before, and where they complete the teacher's sentences. It is both something they already know and yet reflect upon anew. The ritual repetition of such exercises allows meaning and interpretation to congeal around the idea of growing up in a Krishnamurti school.

Later in the lesson, the teacher reads out how a certain Mr. Woods saw Krishnamurti for the first time and was struck by his great aura because, the text reads, "there was no selfishness in the boy."

4. "Puja room" - prayer room.

Teacher: Do you think that is possible?…to not be selfish at all?
[Mixed responses from the students]
Student: No, Sir. Everyone is selfish.
Teacher: Do you think there is a possibility that someone can be completely selfless?
Students (after some contemplation): Yes. It is possible.
Teacher: You think so?

Here, the teacher is not asking the students to take the story at face value. Nor were the students reverent of the story in the way rituals seem to demand. Some of them were quite vocal about their doubts about the claims of supernatural powers of the many seers and mystics that feature in these biographies of Krishnamurti. But more importantly, the students say that they can imagine an individual who is completely selfless and different from others. The possibility of extreme selflessness is a value that they can think about irrespective of whether or not they believe the story to be true. Thirty years after Krishnamurti's demise, it is these rituals of reminiscing and critical reflection that allow the students to continue to engage with the transcendental order of life at RVS.

Classroom discussions on the history of the physical space of the school

While the previous examples dealt with teachers and students tracing their understanding of the school back to the specific details of Krishnamurti's early life, I observed that students are also made aware of the transformations in the school since the time of its establishment. This trajectory of the school also facilitates reflections upon RVS as it is in the present. The geographical location of the school and its natural beauty are constants in the narratives of the school's history such that the institution's origins and subsequent developments can be read into the physical features and infrastructure of the school.

As mentioned before, the school is built on a vast area of forested land. It is situated at some distance from the nearest small towns and spotted with little villages and dwellings. The Principal of the school explained that the unique experience of studying at RVS also comes from the fact that it is probably the only time that these children get to live in rural India. The pastoral setting and idyllic beauty of the school is an important theme both in Krishnamurti's writings and the Culture Classes held at present.

The most recognisable landmark associated with the origin of the school is the "Big Banyan Tree" or "BBT." All students learn the story of the Big Banyan Tree at some point of their lives in school and in their collective imagination the BBT is the very birth place of RVS. The story goes that Krishnamurti was surveying potential sites for the building of the school

when he spotted a big banyan tree. The tree was the only trace of green on the entire stretch of land. Seeing the tree convinced him that it had sacred qualities and also indicated the presence of water in the otherwise barren region. Krishnamurti came to believe that if tended to properly, the valley could be made green. And so the school was built at Rishi Valley around this banyan tree. The remainder of the now expansive forest has been planted by the students of the school over the past eighty years. The BBT, however, is no longer in good shape and it is not clear whether it can be revived from its few remaining roots. Similarly, there is another banyan tree in the school which is named "Krishnamurti Banyan Tree" or "KBT" because it is said to have been planted by Krishnamurti himself. Both these trees along with another "Small Banyan Tree," or "SBT," are important landmarks of the school in space and time that evoke nostalgia and a sense of belonging.

During my stay at RVS, students of Class 4 (which is the beginning class for students, other than the children of staff members, when an entire batch is inducted into the school) were specially taken on a walk to see the BBT and KBT as part of their introduction to the school campus. An ex-student who grew up in Rishi Valley was invited by the teacher of Environmental Sciences to tell the students about the tree and its importance in the school. The young alumnus narrated how Krishnamurti found the tree, how the first structures of the school were built around it, how a stage made of stone was installed at the foot of the tree for special events, and why it had to be removed when it was found to be hindering the growth of the tree. He then repeated this exercise for KBT.

Another instance of the discussion of the history of the school took place in an early morning Culture Class for students of Class 11. The teacher took the students to the terrace of the highest built structure of the school, the new laboratories building, and asked them to look around and take in the view of the hills.

> Teacher: Part of the project of what we do in this school is to look at what we are doing through everything we are doing. Even the day for students is structured in particular ways for a reason. Since the time the oldest of you—I mean, oldest being those who have been here for the longest time, joined, things haven't changed much. For example, we still have a Freshers' Hike, and probably will continue to have that tradition. It might seem like the school is a well-established place, but it has gone through transitions and changes. This will be the 85th year of the school.
>
> [He begins telling them of the time when he was a student at Rishi Valley.] Teacher: There is a lot more vegetation now than before. One could get a completely open view of the surroundings from the assembly hall. Water is an issue. Well, this has always been a drought-prone area. And while it is true that the

water issue has become worse because of the population and agriculture, this has always been a drought-prone area. The soil quality is poor and the people only practice subsistence agriculture. So why did Krishnamurti decide to set up a school here?

Student: He saw a tree.

Teacher: Yes, he saw the Banyan Tree here. But his connection to this site is more than that. Krishnamurti was born very near here. The theosophists were very important here and because of that you have the Besant College in Madanapalle.[5] The theosophists wanted to set up a world university here. But when Krishnamurti saw the BBT it occurred to him that there is presence of water here. [He begins to read from a Krishnamurti Foundation India publication titled *Rishi Valley: The First Forty Years*.]

The forest is a constant symbol of the history of the school because the land has been forested by the RVS community over many years. The trees have grown with the school and the green environment is a fundamental element of learning at Rishi Valley with its many outdoor classrooms, nature walks, bird-watching sessions, meditation spaces, tree-plantation days and playing spaces for students. The present physical landscape of RVS has a history that can be traced back to the BBT, which is an origin point for the green forest of Rishi Valley, just as much as the school's origins lie with Krishnamurti. Thus, the historical significance of the physical landscape of the school imbues life on the RVS campus and its rituals such as nature walks etc. with additional meaning. Mircea Eliade notes in *The Sacred and the Profane* that the symbolism of the tree stands in not just for the cosmos, but also life, youth, immortality and wisdom (1959, 149). It may be argued that in the ritual retelling of Krishnamurti's and the school's relationship to the important trees of the school including the BBT, KBT, SBT (and many other older trees which can also be identified by their unique names), a plethora of themes that constitute the culture of RVS may be evoked simultaneously—Krishnamurti's spiritual insight and wisdom, the "life" that the establishment of the school brought to the valley, RVS's proud legacy of living in harmony with nature, the continuity of the school as an institution, etc.

5. Madanapalle - a small town in Andhra Pradesh, located about 13 km away from Rishi Valley School.

Classroom discussions on the past culture and rituals of the school

The present everyday rituals of the school also involve a discussion of the school's culture in the past. In a Culture Class for Class 8 (B), the discussion on why one is being educated went something like this:

Teacher: Some of your parents also studied in this school, right?
[Seven students in the class raise their hands to indicate that their parents are old "RV ites."]

Teacher: Your parents must have told you about the time when they were in school. Have they told you something about the school that has changed? Tell us and others can listen.

First student: Sir, there is more variety in food.
[Giggles from the class.]

Second student: Sir, 8th standard used to be part of senior school.

Third student: Sir, many buildings are new.

Teacher: No, not about architecture, but something about the culture of the school?

Third student: There was asthachal.[6]

Teacher: Yes, it was certainly a lot more regular than it is now. Now it is only on the non-monsoon days.

Fourth student: Sir, boys had to wear white and white…White kurta and white pajama.

Fifth student: Sir, the jump from 7th to 8th was huge.

Sixth student: Sir, the BBT. Now it is almost gone.

Teacher: Have your parents told you the story about the importance of the BBT?

Student: Krishnamurti chose this place because of the BBT.

Teacher: Yes, these are all small changes. Another thing that has changed is that every December there was a different atmosphere in the school. Can you guess why?

Student: Krishnamurti and more people used to visit the school.

Teacher: Yes. He used to interact with teachers and the students. Every year, once a week he used to come and talk to the students. In my experience, it was the 7th and 8th [class students] who were very active in the discussions. People would go greet him and talk to him. He was a friendly and accessible person. He was well known but still he would talk. Through many, many years we had these talks. This was an important part of the culture of the school.

6. Asthachal - ritual in RVS of watching the sunset (Thapan 2006, 57).

Student: Sir, did you know him?

Teacher: Yes, I was here in the '80s…Following from our discussion of why you are being educated, I will read four excerpts from Krishnamurti's books to you. [He opens *This Matter of Culture* (1966) by Krishnamurti to read out loud to the class.] These talks were in the '60s, before your parents were in the school. India was a very different place then and so was the school…

The close connection between Krishnamurti and the school, not just because he was the founder but also because he was a regular visitor of the school was emphasised in this session. Further, students were keen to ask questions about how things were in the school in the past — about special dinners, the regular variety of food, outdoor classes, the swimming pool that no longer exists, about sports such as hockey which are no longer as popular with the students etc.

The published talks and writings of Krishnamurti are an important source for students to understand the changes and continuities in the schooling experience at RVS. A number of senior students informed me that over the years they had been able to read various titles by Krishnamurti and his published talks. Teachers themselves showed the initiative of bringing this literature to read out excerpts to their students in Culture Classes and Class Teacher's Periods.

Faculty Discussion Groups, Faculty Meetings and The Sunday Dialogues

The faculty divides itself into small discussion groups comprising of five to six members who meet once a week. These Faculty Discussion Groups are explicitly meant for discussing Krishnamurti's writings. A group selects a specific text and discusses it. By contrast, the Sunday Dialogues are weekly meetings open to anyone who is interested, with no set agenda, where people can take up any topic that interests them. It does not have to be philosophical or abstract or even directly about education. But here too I observed that Krishnamurti's writings and thought serve as a readily available discourse to engage with a wide range of concerns about life and living ethically. Because he was a prolific writer who wrote on numerous themes, most sessions are able to weave his views into the discussion. Krishnamurti's philosophy, as well as concerns about the practice of this philosophy by students and teachers at RVS, become reference points for formulating a variety of ideas that emerge in the Sunday Dialogues and Faculty Meetings.

For example, in one of the Sunday Dialogues, the group discussed ways to develop an attitude of selflessness to conserve our planet. One of the senior teachers opened the discussion by elucidating the various schools of thought that one can identify to approach this issue and then categorically explained which one of them was closest to Krishnamurti's position which is to go to the root of the crisis and look within oneself, at one's own attitude and conduct. In response, a student pointed out that the brief meditation break after the school assemblies was one of the times which allowed him to collect himself and think about how he can be more mindful of the repercussions of his actions for the Earth's resources.

In a Faculty Meeting held for the Humanities department (which serves more as a reading group than a meeting for functional issues) at the start of the semester, teachers reflected upon their readings in the previous semester which included a discussion on the Chomsky-Foucault debate "What is truth?" and it emerged that an important pillar of the discussion was an analysis of which of the two was closer to Krishnamurti's position. The larger question, the head of the meeting said, is "how do we interpret the humanities in a Krishnamurti school?" That to me is an interesting instance of when the ethics of a whole body of academic disciplines is framed within the question of "what a Krishnamurti school should be teaching." Some of the teachers reported that these discussions gave them a handle on how the academic content taught in class is to be selected and developed.

Conflicts and contestations over school culture and school policies

If RVS encourages individuals to become aware of its history and use that as a framework to reflect on the activities of the school, there is also room for disagreement over the nature of these activities. However, for the individuals who express reservations about the attitudes and policies of school authorities, the same narrative of the history and philosophy of the school simultaneously functions as a ready discourse within which these differences can be articulated. I argue that this broad discursive frame is another site where the metaculture of the school is produced and sustained.

The relevance of Culture Classes for students and how much they engage with the content of these sessions is a function of how interactive the session is made. An ex-student recalled Culture Classes during his time in junior school being very boring because either the students would just be free or the teacher would decide to talk and the students would only be required to listen

passively. Even here, the idea of how classes at RVS should be, that is, different, fun and interactive for students, was an idea brought up by the respondent to contrast it with his experience of similar classes in two other schools where he had studied before joining RVS.

Middle school students said that they liked Culture Classes when the discussions were made interesting by the teacher and when they got to talk about what they liked. Many said that they look forward to Culture Classes because they are a respite from the academic classes where they have to do written work and here they can talk to their "Akka" and get to know her better.[7] Many teachers in the school are alumna of RVS and/or have been teaching here for many years, and so one of the students' favourite topics for discussion is to ask the teacher how things were at RVS back when they were students or had newly joined as teachers. Thus, Culture Classes and Class Teacher's Periods become spaces for transmitting not only the school's formal history but also an informal history composed of individuals' experiences over the years. Many teachers in their discussions with the students and with each other conversed about how RVS's culture had changed for the better or for the worse in the course of their time there. For instance, one teacher who had studied in RVS complained that the school schedule has become much more rigid, and for all of Krishnamurti's emphasis on letting children be free to learn about themselves, the tightly packed routine of classes and extracurriculars hardly gave students the time to experience leisure, or teachers the time to prepare lessons and activities.

The senior students expressed varied opinions on whether or not they liked their Culture Classes and other extra-academic activities. A group of senior girls said, "When you get to [Class] 12th, it gets a bit much. We have just too many of these classes and sessions alongside studies to handle." Others gave examples of the sorts of field activities these discussions led up to and one said, "Yes. I guess they are good. We would have never gotten to know about the people who live in villages around us or talk to the dining hall staff about how they work if our teachers didn't make us do it." "We get exposure to things we would not even have thought of discussing," chimed in another.

7. Akka - "elder sister" in Telugu (major language spoken in Andhra Pradesh). In RVS, a part of the friendly relationship between students and teachers is that female teachers are referred to as "Akka" and not "Madam" as is common in mainstream schools. Male teachers are addressed as "Sir," as is the practice in most schools in India.

Their responses reflected that Culture Classes not only educated them about various aspects of their lives but also led them to appreciate the overall experience of studying at RVS. This is also linked to the efforts of some teachers who, I was told, connect the activities done in Culture Class to the subjects they teach. For instance, a much respected senior teacher of economics took his students into the kitchens of the Dining Hall of the school to get them to see the process by which their meals are made and served by the staff everyday.

Many of the senior boys said that whether or not they enjoyed Culture Class discussions depended on whether they found the teacher taking these classes approachable. They liked those sessions where the teacher seemed genuinely interested in getting to know what they thought. This indicates that one way in which the students feel invested in the ethos of the school is by voicing their ideas on various topics for which Culture Classes and Sunday Dialogues are a crucial platform. Their engagement with the metaculture of the school depends on how much they weave their personal concerns into their understanding of the culture of the school.

Teachers also articulate differences over the culture and policies of the school. One of the older teachers who has been teaching in the school for over two decades claimed to be personally influenced by Krishnamurti's view that different students have different needs. She also appreciated the freedom that one gets in this school to discuss and reflect on the nature of their work. For her, what was truly unique about the culture of the school was hard to put into words (nevertheless she put it most eloquently):

> It's in the air. It is not a checklist of things that will make this a Krishnamurti school. But there are lots of discussion meetings, dialogues…These help me in testing my moorings, testing whether I am doing the things espoused here. The way the school is run facilitates the philosophy and its ethos. There is something humane about it—ideas like respect for people, for the environment, kindness, generosity are important. The way it is here is unique to RV[S]. Other K [Krishnamurti Foundation] schools…the way they do it, it is prescriptive. Here there is an…invitation to that philosophy. You may or may not be convinced about it.

However, one newer teacher found it difficult to maintain good terms with other teachers and found the experience of the school disappointing because of the gap between what the school professed and what was practised:

> I like the elements of student-teacher relationships here. But the demeanour of some of the older teachers… They don't laugh. I think if you are around children you have to be happy and smiling and encouraging. Some people treat this like a bizarre spiritualist space and show a stoic attitude.

> I find a huge difference in what they preach and what they practise. Some people seem to have a paranoia about people having free time. They schedule things such that students don't even have the time to…just be, you know? For how much Krishnamurti spoke about the importance of leisure and to just sit and watch trees, these kids don't even have that. And this is very different from what these people, the teachers who used to be students here, experienced. They could just be, read, run wild without being told 'now you do this,' 'now you read,' 'now you can play games.'
>
> It feels like they do the opposite of what K [Krishnamurti] said. I appreciate and value what he writes about. But I find it so distorted here. There are three or four people pretending that they are the only people who know what he says. I stopped going for the [Sunday] Dialogues. But now we have these compulsory Faculty Discussion Meetings. So there goes another hour every week when I could be reading.

Even in this articulation of their dissatisfaction with what the school's everyday culture is, the reference point remains Krishnamurti's writings and the experiences shared by people who have been at RVS in the past. This is true of some senior students too who expect the rules and regulations of the school to be consistent with the values which the school espouses. Thus the metacultural elements of the discourse at work here allow the school community to assess continuities and discontinuities in the culture at RVS.

The interpersonal relationships between teachers are also affected by the fact of certain teachers having been here for many years and having known Krishnamurti personally. Over and above just the matter of seniority, their longer engagement with the philosophy of the school seems to create a rift between them and those who are new and choose to engage with Krishnamurti's teachings in a way that is different from the older "ideologue teachers" (Thapan 2006, 82).

A common grievance of students and teachers about the numerous rituals observed in the school like Culture Classes and the Dialogues is the time that it demands of them. It is challenging for an institution to make time for such sessions without the risk of compromising on its academic and other extracurricular functions. Despite the reservations held by some, these rituals of reflection and discussion come to be seen by many within the school as a distinctive part of the education at RVS, and also important for making the students invested in how and why it is that they are being educated here in what is clearly an alternative school.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to show how RVS can be defined as an alternative school through ritual practices of reminiscing and reflecting on narratives of the institution's history, philosophy and culture. These practices, however, do not attempt to mystify or fix the interpretation of the kind of alternative education provided here, rather, the discursive field of the everyday culture of the school is marked by self-reflexivity and critical engagement. These rituals negate the unquestioning and unquestionable character of other rituals found in mainstream schools and seek to promote critical independent thought while at the same time strengthening a sense of belonging to the school. Further, these rituals of a relatively more open form and content—such as the discussions in Culture Classes, Faculty Meetings and Sunday Dialogues outlined in this paper, stand in a metacultural relationship to other activities of the school including academics, extracurriculars, assemblies, meditation sessions, nature walks, disciplinary rules, etc.

While this study does not claim to define alternative school culture (since alternative institutions themselves are highly varied in their thought and practices), I posit that the way in which the alternative school culture at RVS is produced and transmitted presents some themes worth exploring in greater detail in the anthropology of education. First, the case of RVS shows that school culture also comprises of a metaculture that manifests itself in the rituals, symbols and discourses of the school. This element of metaculture can provide cues for a better understanding of how schools fashion their individual legacy and ensure its continuity in the larger society of which the school is a part. Second, the kinds of metacultural rituals found in RVS that explicitly discuss the participation of its past and present members in a shared school culture *as school culture*, challenge the idea of school rituals as something that is imposed by higher authorities on students, as if rituals need exist only for the purpose of socialising students into unquestioned submission. Rather, rituals at RVS seek to negate the hierarchical relationships between and the disciplinary and ideological control over staff and students. This is precisely because the particular school culture at RVS is built on an understanding which is critical of those schooling practices that put constraints on individual freedom and encourage conformity rooted in the fear of authority and social expectations. The metaculture of this school is comprised of such an understanding and is both produced by and reflected in the rituals that may be unique to Rishi Valley School.

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