Considering Children's Economic Agency: Work and School Decisions in Kanchipuram, India

Miriam S. Thangaraj

Introduction

What happens when children's situated logics for work and school encounter the child labor policy community in India that has repeatedly called for a "blanket ban" on child labor in the country? The answer is troubling, as I found: children's deliberate and deliberated decisions about work and/or schooling were typically dismissed as "misapprehension" or derided as "careless" and "rogue" behavior—paradoxically in the name of children's rights, and to education in particular. This chapter offers an ethnographic account of how constructions of "childhood," constituted in and by adultist discourses of child welfare (Sandin, 2009), international development arguments about educational returns (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004), and the global cultural politics of children's rights (Stephens, 1995), are experienced by children in contexts marked by increasingly neoliberal logics of production and consumption (Harvey, 2005). On the one hand, globally mandated policies to "combat child labor through education" (IPEC-ILO, 2009, p. 2) sought to restore working children to "childhood" (INDUS-ILO, 2006a); on the other hand, working children in Kanchipuram, in the light of their lived economic realities, responded to global mandates for schooling in "flexitarian" ways that belied straightforward conceptions of "childhood." By foregrounding the logics and aspirations of working children, the chapter seeks to acknowledge children's economic agency and frames their flexitarian strategies as a situated critique of global policy constructions of childhood and child labor.

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M.S. Thangaraj (✉)
Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA
e-mail: thangaraj@wisc.edu

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Origins, Part I: Out of the Mouths of Children

In the spirit of the argument I make in this chapter, it is important that I mark its origins in a conversation with 12-year-old Kanniappa.[1] "I want the 'minister' to know what I think—will you tell him what I said," he asked me urgently, one afternoon. It was several months into my fieldwork in Kanchipuram, a municipal corporation in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu—the primary site of my fieldwork in India, in 2009 and 2011–2013—and I was escorting Kanniappa back to his TEC (Transition Education Center) classroom. He had disappeared from the TEC earlier in the day, and I had finally run him to ground by the rubbish-dump that edged Pillayarapalayam, one of the key weaving "neighborhoods" (see Arterburn, 1982) in the area. He was scouring the area for "wire" he explained, referring to the increasingly lucrative trade in scrap metal—25 g of aluminum or 10 g of copper would fetch 10 rupees at the two scrap-metal shops he frequented. Ten rupees that, he grinned, would pay for the four eggs he planned to make a "grand egg-fry" with! I grinned back at his enthusiasm and promised not to tell his teachers.

K [loudly]:	But I want you to tell the "[education] minister" about it; I want him to know that people are nagging me about school. They are giving me *tholla* (trouble), and I want them to stop… It's a "waste", a "time-waste". I could be collecting "wire" instead.
MT [teasing]:	What if you don't find any wire?
K:	I'll work in a *kari-kadai* (butcher's-shop) instead. Do you know, they give you *kaas* (money) and *kozhi* (chicken). I can make a sizzling *biriyani*[2] with it.
MT:	And what if they don't hire you?
K:	I'll work in a *biriyani-kadai*[3] then.
MT:	But what …
K [interjecting]:	And if they don't hire me, I'll work in the *mitai-kadai* (sweets-shop) then. And if they don't hire me, then the *pani-puri kadai* (*pani-puri* shop) near the main bus-stand. I have worked there before—last year—and they gave me fifty rupees as *naal-coolie* (daily-wage).[4]

[1] Pseudonyms have been used for minor-participants, as per IRB (Institutional Review Board) guidelines, though many of those quoted in this chapter were disappointed that their names would not be recognized and their opinions would not be attributed to them. In the case of interview-participants in the policy community in India, the large majority of whom requested that quotes not be attributed to them or their employers by name—child labor was a "sensitive issue"—I have elected not to name any of them.

[2] *Biriyani* is a popular and festive dish of rice, spices, and usually chicken or goat meat, and a staple at "special functions" like weddings, birthdays and other festive celebrations across India. Increasingly, they have also become a popular take-out food—the families I lived among in Pillayarapalayam, for instance, often ordered *biriyani*-packets to mark Sunday lunch.

[3] In the expanding "fast-food" markets of the post-liberalization era of India's economy, *biriyani-kadai*s (*biryani*-shops) have mushroomed across Kanchipuram in the last few years—two new *biriyani*-shops sprung up in Pillayarapalayam during my field-work, attracting a constant crowd of boys and young men each evening.

[4] The quotes used in this chapter were excerpted from field-notes and transcriptions and, where required, translated from the vernacular (primarily Tamil). English words used by my participants

Kanniappa's impressive and intimate knowledge of the local economy had momentarily stumped me. "What about when you are older," I turned to ask him, "fifty rupees won't buy you and your family *biriyani*-packets, will it?" But Kanniappa was not to be moved in the slightest:

> *Thooh* [spitting on the ground], do you know where I'll be in two years' time? I'll be joining a road construction crew when I'm a little bigger—I don't need any more schooling for that! Do you know what the *naal coolie* is? Just the "starting [wage]" is more than two hundred rupees a day.

He would know—after all, his 16-year-old brother, a school drop-out himself, had been working for a few years now as part of a road-construction gang that included other relatives and family members. His *anna* (older brother) was making 450 rupees a day and had recently bought a second-hand motor-bike, Kanniappa crowed triumphantly. "A bike!" He repeated, dancing a little celebratory jig. "You are taping all this, aren't you," he stopped to ask again. "I want the minister to hear what I think, I want him to know what **Kanniappa** thinks."

A significant amount of my fieldwork in Kanchipuram, an "area of high child labor concentration" (INDUS-ILO, 2006b), was spent in the company of Kanniappa and others like him, who occupied a liminal space on the fringes of school as they engaged in the work-based pursuit of their diverse aspirations. While my larger research project considered older cohorts as well, in this chapter, I focus on a subset of participants, categorized as "children"—persons 14 years of age or below, as defined by the Indian Constitution—and identified as "child labor" by various state and non-state agencies. Fourteen boys and six girls, ranging in age from 11 to 14 or recently turned 15, they moved across—occasionally, circling through—the spaces of middle-schools (classes 6–8), state-run Transition Education Centers (TECs) and work. The targets of anti-child labor projects, they charged me—if not as eloquently and insistently as Kanniappa, then equally frustrated—with conveying their concerns to the *mel-adhikari* (top officials) whose efforts they experienced as unwelcome *thollai* (trouble).

Origins, Part II: Have We Asked the Children?

In 2013, about a year after my conversation with Kanniappa, I was invited to one of several "Civil Society Consultations" being held across the country to mobilize local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and advocacy groups towards a

have been largely retained (in quotation marks), as have key phrases and terms in the vernacular (italicized) where useful.

"blanket ban" on child labor in the country—in particular, to ensure that all children enjoyed the right to elementary education. Organized in a southern Indian city and under the aegis of a transnational, child rights-based NGO, the Consultation brought together about 40 participants from a cross-section of regionally focused NGOs working on or researching child labor issues. I listened as participants shared advocacy, implementation and legal strategies for the prohibition of child labor in India; and when it was my turn, I voiced Kanniappa's frustration with similar anti-child labor efforts in Kanchipuram. Describing the manifold strategies that children like him had adopted in response, combining a variety of regular or casual work with varying amounts of schooling, I asked the participants if they had accounted for children's perspectives. When children often demonstrated extensive knowledge of the local economy and explained their school/work strategies in terms of present consumption needs like *biriyani* but also longer-term aspirations and opportunity costs, I asked those gathered: "Have we asked the children?"

I was only echoing Reddy's (1997) position paper "Have we asked the Children?" which recorded children's demands for rights and protections at work voiced during the first international meeting of working children and youth at Kundapur, India, in 1996 (see Miljeteig, 2000). Seventeen years later, and Consultation participants appeared to find the idea preposterous. "Would you take a child—a *child*—seriously?" one of them responded with exaggerated incredulity. Another suggested that I was being callous about working children: "Would you listen to your well-off children if they refused to go to school in order to work?" he snorted. An elderly researcher suggested that my research was, in effect, contributing to poor children's misapprehension; as his younger colleague added, "It is our work, our duty, to correct children like Kanniappa and educate them about the better future that is accrued from schooling." Still others muttered about my "western training," suggesting it inappropriately valorized children's opinions and aspirations. "Soon you will be asking the state to provide free cell-phones to keep them in school," laughed one of the invited speakers, or "free *biriyani*," added a voice from the audience. "What we need," concluded the speaker to loud applause, "is a blanket-ban [on child labor], not some handkerchief ban that rendered children's right to education ineffective."

Child Labor Policy and the Construction of "Childhood": The Erasure of Children's Economic Agency

This chapter is a consideration of children's economic agency: an ethnographic record of children exercising economic agency in making considered decisions for work and/or school in the light of global policy regimes that facilitate the ready erasure of children's economic agency and fuel the rights-based "blanket ban" discourse of the child labor policy community in India. I focus on the former to challenge the latter; and do so by drawing on two broad literatures, Anthropology of Policy and Childhood Studies.

If policy, as Shore and Wright (1997) observed, is a central regulating principle of modern society, that operates by constituting particular kinds of subjects, then—in the vein of the characteristic poststructural anthropological critique of international development (Escobar, 2011; Ferguson, 2006)—child labor policies represent "regimes of truth" about children and childhood that render particular children and childhoods as objects of and the grounds for protective state and, increasingly, global intervention. However, as Childhood Studies scholars have insisted and social and cultural anthropologists have demonstrated, children are not passive determinations of policy projects. On the other hand, they are social actors in their own right, effective in altering the conditions of their own childhoods (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007; Liebel, 2004; Mayall, 2000; Montgomery, 2008; Prout & James, 1997).

The Child Labor Policy Orthodoxy

Some of the earliest interventions on the grounds of children's rights—that is, on the grounds that the substance of children's "nature" was different from that of adults (Cunningham, 1995; Hendrick, 1997)—were in relation to the labor market. The first child labor laws in nineteenth century Britain reified a particular idea(l) of childhood as a distinct and inherently vulnerable condition, best served by the nurture of the family. Institutionalized in factory legislation, this middle-class, Victorian ideology of childhood rendered poor and working-class children as needy or deviant and the appropriate objects of protection and reform by state and society (Hendrick, 1997; Sandin, 2009). Child labor laws were an educational project[5] from the start, purposed to regulate factory-children by removing them into the expanding school-system. In effect, schooling working children out of their "precocity," "independence," and "self-reliance"—read as delinquency by the reformers of the day[6]—while schooling them into the dependence characterizing the "domestic ideal" of childhood and the discipline required of the "nation's children" for the success of British industry and empire (Davin, 1982; Hendrick, 1997; Johnson, 1970). In thus restoring the working child to childhood, reformers believed that an uncertain, rapidly industrializing society was also being restored to its stable "natural" (if adultist, patriarchal, classed, and imperial) order.

Child labor laws were not only one of the earliest labor standards, but one of the first to take on an international character (Engerman, 2003): Factory Acts targeting child labor, for instance, spread to the British colonies, including to India in 1881,

[5] The first child labor legislation, the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act (also known as the first Factory Act of 1802) not only required clean premises but basic education and religious instruction for factory apprentices.

[6] Mary Carpenter, for instance, leading Victorian educationist and advocate of "reform schools" (see Hendrick, 1997), or Dr. Kay, the chief administrator of the government grant for public education (see Johnson, 1970).

spearheaded by some of the same British reformers. Moreover, when the International Labor Organization (ILO), established in 1919, was tasked with the elimination of child labor as a foundational agenda, the British legislative approach was taken up as the proven model for state action; and with the influx of newly decolonized states into the ILO, post World War II, the British model was further internationalized and institutionalized (Cunningham & Stromquist, 2005; ILO, 2010). As child labor legislations spread across regions over the course of the twentieth century, in effect, the twinned languages of children's rights and socioeconomic progress, originating in nineteenth century Britain, became the predominant frame with respect to child labor everywhere.

The twinned logics of child labor laws were also readily amenable to the dominant two-pronged rationale of human capital and human rights that animated international development and education at the turn of the twentieth century. In the context of the Education For All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MGDs) frameworks, child labor was not only a bad investment in human capital, whether at the household or national level, it was also, quite simply, bad for children. Thus, laws banning child labor were seen as both a marker and the means of modernization, intrinsic to the achievement of individual, national and even global development goals and intrinsic to the proper experience of childhood (Boyden & Levison, 2000; Grimsrud, 2003; Kendall, 2008; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004; Weiner, 1991; World Bank, 1995). This orthodoxy on child labor is currently represented by the IPEC, ILO's International Program on the Elimination of Child Labour[7] and the largest global effort against child labor. "[R]ecognizing the extent to which child labour elimination and implementing the right to education for all children are intertwined," IPEC issued a call for "Combating Child Labor through Education" (IPEC-ILO, 2009, p. 2); in effect, framing school and work as inherently oppositional spaces and reinscribing childhood as a period of appropriate dependence on adults and appropriate development and discipline in school.

The global orthodoxy on child labor has been increasingly taken up by the child labor policy community in India as the basis of their demand for a complete prohibition of child labor in the country. The state-appointed Study Group on Women Workers and Child Labour, for instance, signaled a departure from the extant "regulatory approach" of the Child Labor Prevention and Regulation Act (CLPRA) of 1986 and towards what Lieten (2002) has described as the "activist position" of banning all child labor. Where the CLPRA, India's primary child labor law, regulated child labor by employment-sector and working conditions, the Study Group declared that all forms of work, including home-based work, were "bad" for children and recommended new legislation that enforced compulsory education as a means of prohibiting child labor (Reports of the National Commission on Labour, 2003). With the Right to Education Act (RTE) signed into law in 2010, guaranteeing eight years of free elementary education to all children in the country, calls for abolishing child labor "in line with RTE" grew louder (Bring child labour prevention law, 2011),

[7] IPEC was established by ILO in 1992, in the wake of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), to promote a CRC-based approach to child labor.

with civil society consultations convened across the country to pressure for a rights-based, no-exceptions "blanket ban" on child labor.

Childhood and (the Erasure of) Children's Economic Agency

If classical economic thought has defined economic agency as the capacity of actors to make rational, autonomous decisions, then, as feminist scholarship has argued, it has also privileged men as the ideal, even sole, economic agents capable of reasoned and independent judgment (Bodkin, 1999; Pujol, 1995). The earliest labor laws in Britain were not directed towards men but children first and subsequently, women, because unlike men, children and women were not held to be agents capable of deciding or bargaining for themselves (Engerman, 2003). They warranted legislative protection therefore, including, for children, their removal altogether from the "hostile worlds" of rational and self-interested economic activity (Zelizer, 2005). The presumption of children's lack of agency has persisted in formal economic theory; as Nelson (1996) observed, children are either invisible in formal econometric models "due to the implausibility of treating [them] as the rational, autonomous agents who are the only residents allowed (so far) into the economists world" (p. 65) or because they are treated as private or public goods (Folbre, 1994; Zelizer, 1985). As a result, child labor was ignored by economists until recently,[8] or analyzed as a problem of market demand. Children, in this view, were merely instruments in the bargain between parents and employers (Gupta, 2000)—banning child labor, therefore, was the obvious, "natural" solution (Emerson, 2009).

The invisible or passive status of children in economic theory derives from the modern separation of the economic from the social and cultural that, in turn, drives the separation of children out of adult economic worlds and into the protective and pedagogic spaces of family and school. This "modern childhood" (Archard, 1993), reified in child labor laws such as those in Britain, emerged in the particular social and economic histories of western nations (Hendrick, 1997; Rahikainen, 2001). Globalized in the spread of child labor laws, modern childhood regulates children's lives everywhere (Boyden, 1997; Wells, 2009); in effect, privileging school over work and consumerism over productivity (Mayall, 2000), moralizing the economic uselessness of children (Zelizer, 1985) and rendering "other" working childhoods as stolen or lost (Bourdillon, 2006a; Nieuwenhuys, 1998). Childhood studies scholars, on the other hand, have critiqued modern childhood, first, on the grounds that any notion of universal childhood is ideological, and second, that the passivity of children is untenable. Indeed, a foundational claim of the field is that children are active in the construction and determination of their own lives and the lives of those around them, rather than merely the passive recipients of adult care or the passive victims of adult exploitation (Prout & James, 1997). As Liebel (2004) describes, working

[8] As Emerson (2009) notes in his review, there existed little formal economic theory of child labor until recently, when Basu and Van put forward their seminal work in 1998.

children have a "will of their own," used in service of their own visions of a better life; and as "change-makers," they contribute to the socioeconomic development of their communities (Karunan, 2005). Indeed, even when children work in extremely tenuous situations, they actively strategize to make the best of the material and sociopolitical conditions of their lives (Montgomery, 2001). As the accounts of Huberman (2012), Abebe (2013), Bissell (2003) or Nieuwenhuys (1994) amply demonstrate, children are active social (and economic) agents, working not only in response to familial and social obligations, but also to gain economic benefits and social recognition.

Few studies, however, have focused on children's economic agency per se. While the economic significance of children as consumers, in particular, is increasingly being acknowledged, children's behavior as economic agents in their own right is largely understudied; Iversen (2002) and Amigó (2010) offer exceptions. Iversen (2004, 2002), in his study of bonded migrant child labor in the Indian state of Karnataka, demonstrates that children autonomously negotiated work contracts without parental pressure or involvement, often as a means of rebelling against them, and that they were not necessarily worse off as a result. Similarly, Amigó (2010), in the context of work on Indonesian tobacco farms, insists on children's "own economic understanding," describing how children not only had a "remarkably clear knowledge of the local economy" but an equally "remarkable autonomy in making economic decisions" (p. 48). This chapter adds to their accounts of children's economic agency in the context of their decisions about work and school, as they negotiated the state's anti-child labor efforts in Kanchipuram. In particular, it considers children's economic understanding—their remarkable and ready knowledge of the local economy, but also their relatively sophisticated and longer-term calculations of economic outcomes and aspirations—as a challenge to the modern construction of childhood and as a critique of the school-versus-work frame of child labor policy orthodoxy.

Loom to School to Special Economic Zones: Changing Education and Economic Contexts

For centuries, children in Kanchipuram grew up on the world-famous handlooms, their lifeworlds materialized in relation to the silk and gold lace of the eponymous *kanjeevaram* sari.[9] Now old enough to reel the yarn, now adept enough to pick the *korvai* sari-borders, now tall enough to reach the pedal or harness, children's lives described the developmental arc from helper to apprentice to weaver. In the process, they progressively mastered weaving techniques and grew in economic worth and social status, en route to the "independent"/full-time weaver status that signaled

[9] In 2005, the *kanjeevaram* was awarded a "Geographical Indication" (GI) certificate, an intellectual property right of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Investment (Unctad), in recognition of its unique provenance.

adulthood and full membership in the occupational group. Children's work, as Arterburn (1982) detailed in her anthropological account of Kanchipuram's looms, was vital to the production and reproduction of the weaving household; and in producing the characteristic *korvai* border of the *kanjeevaram*, children were in turn (re)produced as the next generation of "Kanchipuram weavers." Earning and learning on the loom was thus inseparably interwoven in childhood and "more children work[ed] than attend[ed] school" (Arterburn, 1982, p. 36).

In 2004 however, Kanchipuram's looms became a site of global surveillance as the INDUS Child Labor Project commenced local operations. A transnational collaboration between the National Child Labor Project (NCLP) in India and the United States Department of Labor (USDoL), INDUS was implemented by the ILO with the support of local NGOs and the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (India's Education For All Program). Memorably described by an education official as the "no work, more school" mantra, INDUS represented the global orthodoxy on child labor and framed children's work on the loom as harmful because it "interfere[d] with children's schooling" (INDUS-ILO, 2006c, p. 8). Project officials, therefore, were tasked with "rehabilitating" working children in modern society by "rescuing" them from the looms, preparing them in Transition Education Centers (TECs) for formal education, and then mainstreaming them in state-run municipal schools. Between door-to-door enrollment drives, awareness campaigns, employer fines and child labor raids,[10] the no-work-more-school mantra was so effectively enforced that, by 2009, when I first arrived in Kanchipuram, the looms had been largely emptied of children.[11]

Even as INDUS-enforced loom to school trajectories were transforming Pillayarapalayam and other weaving neighborhoods in Kanchipuram into a "child labor-free area," other zoning policies were being effected 40 miles away: the state, in pursuit of export-led economic development, was carving out thousands of acres into Special Economic Zones (SEZs), seeking to attract foreign capital and technology into the country. The massive and multinational spaces of SEZs also attracted hordes of young contract workers from nearby areas, including those recently dislocated from Kanchipuram's looms. While the direct and opportunity costs of education after eight years of free elementary school put white-collar employment in the formal economy beyond the reach of most rescued child workers, the SEZs offered a ready alternative. SEZ factory-floors could be accessed with a "10th pass" or "10th fail" secondary-school certificate, or even with an "8th class TC" (transfer certificate) at the end of elementary school. As a result, "children were moving neat-*a* (neatly) from the loom into school onto class 10 and then into the SEZ—just like an

[10] Raids, conducted by district officials and Project staff, involved trawling weaving neighborhoods in Kanchipuram for children on the loom. Children were then "rounded up" and transported by a "raid-van" to the nearest school or TEC. While child workers have described such raids as being treated as if they were "stray dogs" (Bourdillon, 2006b), raids continued to be organized as a spectacular display of the state's care for child workers.

[11] After INDUS was wrapped up in Kanchipuram, the TECs continued to function in the area under the aegis of the National Child Labor Project (NCLP) and focused on non-loom-based child labor.

assembly-line!" described a municipal-school teacher approvingly. Indeed, teachers and INDUS Project-staff showcased SEZ-work as a "good opportunity" for girls in particular, as a means of retaining them in school. In effect, loom-to-school INDUS efforts were largely imagined and realized in Pillayarapalayam as a loom-to-school-to-SEZ trajectory. The promise of newly enforced formal schooling was embodied by SEZ-jobs, even though they were low-paid, low-skilled and contract-based.

School and/or Work "Flexitarianism"

It was in the context of SEZ-returns to schooling that children like Kanniappa were taking decisions for work, not only in the contract-labor spaces of SEZs but also in the booming informal sector work-spaces in Kanchipuram while still in middle-school (classes 6–8). Most middle-school children in Pillayarapalayam worked in the summer; and such economic activity was not perceived as problematic, as it was not in direct competition with school and indeed was often the means to buy new school supplies. Occasionally but increasingly, summer-jobs also translated into regular work through the year, slotted around school-hours in the evenings and weekends. More frustrating for teachers and Project-staff, however, and often, and without the knowledge of parents, a growing number of children, boys in particular, was also cutting classes or sneaking off during free-periods for an hour or so of work. An hour that could turn into a day or more during the various "seasons" in Kanchipuram when extra hands were needed in shops, rice-mills or temples. Yet newer modes of school/work combinations were being experimented with as well. Two of the municipal-school boys I spent time with, for instance, had shifted to "aided schools"[12] where well-intentioned, less-strict attendance policies meant that they could write their examinations despite having missed entire months of school for work. Still others, a significant number, had dropped out of school entirely for work, finding it quicker and more profitable to return to education when older, via night-schools or "corres-classes" (correspondence courses).

The "flexitarian"[13] ways in which boys and girls (to a lesser degree) sought and carried out a variety of paid work, negotiating no-work-more-school policies, was remarkable; though parents, teachers and Project-staff, of course, were less appreciative when they were made aware of such activity. "*Intha kaalathu pasanga* (children these days)," they chided, torn between resignation and outrage when they found children "simply roaming" outside the school with "cash in hand" to spend.

[12] "Aided schools" are run by a private management team and supported by the state through salary and non-salary grants. As a condition of state support, they offer free elementary schooling and maintain adequate enrollment of students warranting state funds.

[13] The striking description offered by a child rights lawyer and activist I interviewed in India, who shared similar examples of children in "difficult circumstances" dealing remarkably and ably with them, in unexpected ways.

With parents having made sacrifices, even borrowing money to keep their children in school, how could children be so "careless" (irresponsible) as to cut classes for *ur suththaradhu* (roaming around), they lamented. Project-staff chased after them, calling out threats of "hostel," referring to the NGO- and state-run residential schools that were increasingly seen as the "solution" for the rogue-*pasanga* (rogue kids) who were constantly "escaping" from their classrooms. "We can't 'control' these rogue-*pasanga* anymore," complained a teacher; "once they experienced cash-in-hand, then there was little one could do."

If the adults in their lives dismissed their activities as turning rogue or being careless, children pursued their "flexitarian" negotiation of school and work spaces, not only with facility, but a focus on the future. In the following sections, I describe four flexitarian trajectories I encountered in Pillayarapalayam, each organized by particular trade-offs between school and work, and each justified, not only in terms of immediate remuneration, but also longer-term life trajectories and economic aspirations. Thus, summer-work, with little direct trade-off between school-hours and work-time, was an opportunity to explore work-based fall-back options to school; short-term SEZ-work after dropping out of school was a means for girls, in particular, to pursue and prepare for good marriages (often with the expectation of returning to some form of education); "own business" work-trajectories rejected formal schooling entirely for long-term self-employment while resorting to night-schools for literacy and certifications; and opportunistic-work was pursued intermittently during school-hours and justified in terms of immediate needs but also in the expectation of unskilled, casual work futures.

Summer-Work and Fallback Options

Where casual work opportunities for some "cash-in-hand" were available year-round and taken on without much planning, summer-jobs were regular, full-time employment, assiduously planned by children, often with the support of their households. With children's time freed up over the summer, they and their parents hoped to recuperate some of the direct and opportunity costs of schooling. In the long row-house I lived in and shared with four other families (as was characteristic of weavers' neighborhoods), the talk among the children as early as March, even before final examinations had been completed, was about their summer-plans. As one of them put it, "I don't want to waste one second of summer," and he had already engaged his social networks to find suitable work opportunities. Thus, Selvi had arranged with her mother's master-weaver to assist on his looms while Chandra would keep accounts for the small cooperative enterprise where a distant aunt was employed. The boys, Mano and Yogi, less constrained by gendered notions of distance and safety, were headed to work in the bazaar-area: Yogi, to the hotel kitchen that had previously employed his father, and Mano to a "silk-house" that retailed the saris produced by his uncle and other weavers in the neighborhood.

While their earnings primarily paid for rising school-related expenses, additional tuition-classes in particular, or helped out with household *kashtam*s (hardships) such as outstanding debt, summer was also the time for exploring fallback options to academic trajectories. As Yogi explained, for all that he wanted to study for an engineering degree, his plans were contingent on the marks he scored in school. "Class 8 or 9 examinations are so difficult," he grimaced, adding, "learning to cook in a hotel is a handy skill if I don't do well in school." With a growing local economy in retailing, hotels, low-end services, transportation and construction, informal sector alternatives to higher-education mediated formal employment were increasingly available and increasingly lucrative. Fifteen-year old Mani, for instance, had spent his first summer working at a "mechanic-shop" in Class 6. The main push for work had been the difficult *soolnalai* (circumstances) the household faced at the time, as his father had been unable to work; but Mani had found working with (motor) bikes so appealing that he had since resolved to make it his future line of work. To that end, he had worked every summer, weekend and holiday at the mechanic-shop; not only had he never troubled his parents for a single rupee, Mani added proudly, he had progressed enough on the job to consider opening his own repair-*kadai* (shop) in the near future. He had been saving up his wages for some time now, and having assiduously followed the rising motorbike sales in Kanchipuram, expected his investment to pay off handsomely.

With the growth of such relatively long-term informal sector opportunities, summer-work was also increasingly a precursor to dropping out, as in Mani's case. As a Project field-worker grumbled in frustration, unless children were locked up during the annual school vacation, her work towards the elimination of child labor was impossible. For children like Mani or Yogi, however, summer-work was the means to identify, explore and build relationships and skills; in case formal schooling proved too difficult to complete or was irrelevant to their aspirations, summer-work generated the economic and social capital for alternative work-based trajectories in the local economy.

SEZ-Work and Planning for "Good Matches"

Shantha, barely 14, was the youngest SEZ-worker I met in Pillayarapalayam, employed at one of the SEZs an hour-long, company-van ride away. Having dropped out a few weeks into class 8, she had joined a "shoe company" as contract-labor, thanks to one of the *akkas* (elder sisters, as older females are respectfully referred to) in her neighborhood already contracted to the company. Determinedly pragmatic and forthright, marriage, Shantha admitted, was on the cards in a few years: "we are not like you Miss, and we don't want to grow old before we marry," she declared. Given her life goals therefore, schooling had not made sense to her; despite the effort it cost her, she had not made much headway in learning to read and write. "Why stay in school, when SEZ-work was available and it paid?" she had reasoned,

and dropped out to work at the shoe-company. Getting around age restrictions on factory-floors by wearing "make-up" and a *salwar*-suit to look older, Shantha had found the work easy—"cutting" leather florets and "pasting" onto shoes—and learned quickly. "It is better than school," she insisted defiantly, describing the "jolly" atmosphere with the *akkas,* gossiping and teasing during lunch and tea-breaks. Crucially, she was saving up her "full salary"—in 5 years' time she expected to have put away enough for the dowry and wedding trousseau that would contract for her the marriage she sought. Yes, she acknowledged, she might come to regret her decision: she wouldn't be able to help her children with their school homework; then again, she reasoned breezily, she could always pay for their "tuition [classes]."

Shantha, at 14, had grasped the logics that drove thousands of older female teens onto the SEZ factory-floors near Kanchipuram: SEZ-work was the means to improve their marriage prospects, especially when educational qualifications beyond elementary/secondary school proved challenging, time-consuming or expensive. A "good match" in marriage depended on the number of "[gold] sovereigns"[14] you brought in dowry, as my neighbor often reminded her two daughters anxiously. Rather than depend on financially insecure parents, girls like Shantha secured their own futures by heading out to SEZs, the short-term nature of the work, aligning well with their planning horizons and translating into the requisite number of sovereigns. While the shift-work modalities of SEZs precluded formal education, many girls, keen to be the kind of good mothers who could "coach" their children for school, also planned to pursue their education after marriage. They hoped to join correspondence courses or complete secondary and higher-secondary school certifications as "private candidates" (typically, older candidates, were not required to enroll in regular school); in the meantime, however, they worked in SEZs to make good marriages that held out the best returns in terms of long-term desires and economic security.

Work-Based Trajectories to "Own Business"

For Daya, work modalities were more congenial and in line with his ambitions than school. An astute reader of the local economy if not of textbooks, he had spent the better part of the last 3 years evading school-teachers and Project-staff, working on the sand-moving *maatuvandi*s (bullock-carts) instead and supplying local construction-sites. Starting out as loader, he had moved up to *maatuvandi*-driver, before renting a cart himself to run a sand-moving operation with a motley group of school-boys cutting classes. When Daya first set up as a sand-mover/supplier nearly two years ago, the price of sand had been 300 rupees for a full-load; once they had paid the 200 rupee hire-charge for cart and cattle and the 50 rupee *challan* (receipt)

[14] A sovereign is a standard measure/weight of gold, named for the British gold coin, that has entered the local vernacular.

cost to the police, there was enough left over for them, he explained, given they were supplying two to three loads a day. "These days, a load of sand costs 500 to 600 rupees, depending on the weather—do the math," he urged. If I was impressed with their fat profits, Daya's sights were set on bigger things: an "own business" in the logistics and transportation sector that he and his great friend Vijay hoped to start. Not only had they both dropped out of school to work in the construction industry supply-chain, thus learning the lay of the land, they were also saving up to buy a *chinna yanai* (a type of mini-truck) on installment to get their transport-company going.

While Daya steadfastly refused to talk about schooling, I was offered an insight into his logics one afternoon as we walked across the *thope* (tamarind orchard) in Pillayarapalayam. We had just been hailed by a student at the nearby municipal school: "What are you doing with this *porriki-payyan*,[15] Miss," he had called out, hooting with laughter as he cycled back to class after lunch. Offended on Daya's behalf, I asked him if he was concerned about being belittled for not finishing school. Time will be the judge, he shrugged.

> In another five years' time, I will have my "own business" and I'll be the one they call "boss." But he will be working in an SEZ, saying 'yes sir,' 'no sir' to his supervisor. I need to be able to read and write, yes? That I can manage; and if I need a "certificate", I can always join the night-school[16] for a couple of months and pass the exam. In five years' time, we'll see who the *porriki* is.

If Daya was comprehensive in his rejection of mainstream schooling, finding it largely irrelevant to his ambitions, then he was also conscious of institutional demands for educational-certifications and acknowledged the benefits of literacy. Drawing on his knowledge of local opportunity structures however, he reasoned that the SEZ-based returns to education did not justify the opportunity costs of schooling; particularly when those opportunity costs included the material, relational and informational resources that work-based trajectories offered towards an "own business" or becoming a "boss." Thus, Daya went about his sand-deliveries, biding his time until his "own business" was a reality and paying no heed to the naysayers or the haranguing project-staff in the meantime. While he himself was no longer on their list of "rogues," having recently turned 15, his ragged crew of three or four middle-school boys continued to be a target of their ire and rehabilitation efforts. Recently, two of them had enrolled in an 'aided school' nearby as a compromise, hoping to take advantage of the school's relatively relaxed attendance policies.

[15] Literally a rag-picker or those who once scavenged for a living; the term was typically used as an insult for young men who were wastrels, though young people often also used it in friendly name-calling.

[16] Night-schools, known as the *Nila Oli Palli* or Moonlight School in Kanchipuram, were popular thanks to strong support from the district administration in the late 1990s as part of The Literacy Mission efforts; however, their numbers have dwindled to two since INDUS.

Opportunistic-Work in the Informal Sector and Pocket-Money

The most irksome of children's flexitarian behavior, as far as school teachers and Project-staff were concerned, was the seemingly consumption-driven and unplanned casual work that students, more boys than girls, engaged in from time to time. Subbu, for instance, in Class 8 at the local municipal school, was (in)famous among his peers for slipping in and out of school unnoticed. Running into him one afternoon outside the school-gates, he admitted he had spent much of the afternoon, and many others as well, assisting his electrician brother-in-law on a job. "He gives me twenty rupees at least each time, Miss," Subbu added proudly. Parthi earned as much, each time the sand-cart made a delivery. Having disappeared from his TEC classroom one morning, I had found him in the *thope*, loading *bands* (baskets) of sand onto the waiting cart. He enjoyed it, he insisted; he was good at it, moreover—the cart-owner trusted him to get the number of *bands* in a load right. "Not like *padippu* (studies)," he added bitterly, "where you never *did* anything." Shankari was more sanguine about her lack of academic skills; and if teachers often upbraided her for taking an extra day off at the weekend from time to time, it was water off her back. Her weekends were usually spent weeding the paddy-fields where she lived, or cleaning out her neighbors' cattle-sheds—even half a day's work paid as much as 50 rupees. Taking a school day off now and again to compensate, she felt, was justified.

Such opportunistic work that brought in some "cash-in-hand" was available through the year, in the fringe economy of haberdashers and scrap-collectors, at food-stalls and marriage-halls, as domestic-help or helpers for house-painters, drivers, electricians, masons and bike-mechanics. At "season" time, it proliferated when crowds of shoppers or Hindu-devotees descended in Kanchipuram, presenting a captive market for groups of youthful sellers of water-packets, cheap toys, handkerchiefs or small eats. Parents and teachers, however, bemoaned their carelessness and irresponsibility in choosing cash over school, while Project staff roundly denounced them as "rogues." As one of the Class 8 teachers would often say, "the children are carelessly throwing their futures away for a bit of 'cash-in-hand'—it was bound to mire them in 'bad habits,'" she feared.

Such "cash-in-hand" moral panics among adults obscured children's view of their labor and consumption practices. "How can I ask my parents for pocket-money, Miss?" Subbu frowned. He knew the *kashtam* (hardships) at home and it was shameful to ask them for money when he could easily take care of his own needs. Undoubtedly, a spicy *biriyani*-packet or a cold-drink or, as in Shankari's case, a pair of earrings, fueled children's interest in paid work; but there was also honor in earning pocket-money instead of burdening parents with their demands. Moreover, while opportunistic work was relatively unplanned and contingent, children were not "careless" in their behavior—indeed, they were canny workers and consumers, with their ears close to the ground in the local economy. Their remarkable knowledge of wage-rates and "commissions" in a variety of sectors, or the best deals on second-hand mobile-phones or cheap *biriyani*, or a host of casual work

opportunities, was acquired through the various kinds of work spaces and networks they participated in, even moving a veteran TEC instructor to reluctant admiration. "The children are very well-informed in these matters," she acknowledged; and already experienced in finding ways to make money in the growing, low-skilled services sector.

While opportunistic-work was an undeniable "escape" from the particular pedagogic modes of classrooms, children were also making considered judgments about their academic abilities and interests in the light of the work modalities and relationships they participated in. As Shankari candidly admitted, she was not academically inclined nor was she interested in SEZ-work with its grueling night-shifts. With little incentive for schoolwork, she was primarily waiting out the years of "automatic promotion" through elementary school (class 8) enshrined in recent education policy, till she could legitimately drop out and tend to home and (vegetable) garden. In the meantime, she felt her time was better spent on remunerative work at the weekends which was better suited to her present and future interests.

"Misapprehension" and "Carelessness" or Situated Logics, Aspirations and Agency?

Among the "constellation" of actors and activities (Wedel, Shore, Feldman, & Lathrop, 2005) that make up the child labor "policy community" in India, children's logics for work were persistently framed as "misapprehension" or "careless"/"rogue" behavior. Among those I interviewed in policy circles,[17] the very choice of work over or alongside school was proof of children's incapacity for rational and long-term returns calculations, prone, as children were assumed to be, to the present and perverse pleasures of "cash-in-hand." Their stance is perhaps best summed up by Burra (2003), an influential child labor researcher in India, who observed:

> Are children capable of being aware of [the] long-term consequences for their adult lives? I rather doubt it. Even if they were able to comprehend the impact of their perspectives, it is arguable as to whether their representations of their best interests should be taken literally. (p. 82)

These policy actors were, in effect, echoing the global orthodoxy on child labor: childhood was a period of dependency and discipline that—irrespective of the contexts and conditions of children's daily lives—precluded the exercise of economic agency on the grounds that it was unnatural or harmful to children. To "choose" to work, therefore, was easily dismissed as "misapprehension" or labeled as rogue behavior, "careless" of the future and driven by presentist desires for consumption.

On the other hand, I suggest that "misapprehension" and "careless" roguery are better understood as children's situated logics, responsive to the social and material

[17] These 20 interviews with state bureaucrats and policy-makers, multilateral agency specialists, staff at transnational and regional NGOs, and researchers/academics are analyzed elsewhere.

conditions of their daily lives; and, in a post-(neo)liberalization labor market of declining job security and shrinking formal employment, purposed towards informal sector futures rather than the formal sector employment trajectories assumed in education policies. For many children in Kanchipuram, work of varying duration, type and regularity was a mundane part of daily life, whether in addition to or instead of school. Given the longer-standing, local constructions of childhood as integral to the social and economic life of weaving communities, many children continued, in the present day, to identify and perform as economic actors in their own right. Not passively resigned to their relative poverty, nor readily reconciled to classroom modalities that they saw as irrelevant or uncongenial in the light of opportunities in the local economy, children made strategic calculations about work and school based on their abilities and aspirations—and they acted on their calculations.

Children's decisions for work, whether more or less opportunistic or purposive in kind, were framed and strategized in terms of a longer planning horizon. If summer-work compensated for educational costs or met household needs, then it also offered the means of exploring alternative careers in the informal sector; and SEZ-work, if short-term by nature, also offered longer-term utility in the socioeconomic security and status of "good matches." In the case of work-based trajectories—moving up from renting a *maatuvandi* to owning a transport-company, for instance—rejecting school was explicitly rationalized by children in terms of longer-term aspirations for ownership. Even the pursuit of opportunistic work was reasoned out and justified by children as a negative assessment of their academic futures. While the immediate satisfaction of buying a pair of earrings or eating *biriyani* was not a trivial consideration, present consumption in itself was rarely the end-game. Instead, children framed their participation in work as a strategic use of their time—a more efficient and enjoyable use of their time, when participation in classroom modalities did not support their interests or aspirations beyond narrowly conceived academic trajectories.

Children's school/work logics, therefore, were not only longer-term oriented, but also calculated in relation to alternative trajectories. Underlying their logics for work were probabilistic comparisons of school- and work-based outcomes that factored in their interests and abilities and were framed within larger structural/material constraints. In making decisions for work and/or school, children were, in effect, choosing between the school-based trajectories to formal employment assumed in policy orthodoxy, the school-mediated trajectory to contract-based SEZ-work as effected in Kanchipuram, and the opportunities available in the local informal economy via more or less organized work and apprenticing trajectories. Trajectories from school to formal employment presumed the absence of academic and economic constraints for post-elementary schooling and assumed the existence of capacious and local formal labor markets—conditions that did not apply to many children in Kanchipuram (or indeed, in many parts of India). On the other hand, school-to-SEZ trajectories were readily accessible to children in Kanchipuram; but while they offered girls, in particular, a route to achieving desirable marriages, the short-term, shift-based and closely supervised work modalities of assembly-lines

did not appeal to all children. Consequently, children sneaked out or dropped out of school, or shrewdly exploited automatic progression policies and lax attendance policies in elementary school, to take up various combinations of work in pursuit of their informal sector aspirations.

Children's situated logics, in effect, embedded the opportunity costs of work and school in the immediate economic context. Whether "good matches," "own business," or a variety of skilled and unskilled work futures in the informal sector, children's aspirations were sensible to them in their everyday contexts in Kanchipuram; they were life-trajectories that were "real" and realize-able, given the sociocultural and material conditions of their life. And in rejecting post secondary education-mediated formal employment, children were responding to the incentives offered by opportunities in the local economy, whether for long-term employment, status or cash-in-hand. Their exercise of economic agency reflected both a sophisticated awareness of the local economy and the ability to act on such awareness in taking up work and school in various combinations. Transnational efforts like the INDUS Project that framed work and school as oppositional to "combat child labor with education" have, in the process, effectively erased children's demonstrable economic agency and foreclosed their own determinations of their futures.

The flexitarian strategies of children in Kanchipuram offer a critique of the orthodoxy on child labor policy and the underlying rights-based and utilitarian claims. Universalistic rights-talk, abstracted from the specificities of children's lived experience and context, has functioned in policy-contexts to preclude the need for engaging with "real" children and their lived situations. Consequently, law and policy in India have continued to veer towards the complete prohibition of child labor (Ramanathan, 2009) despite the tripling of "marginal" child workers[18] in the country since the 1990s (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, n.d.)—arguably, a sign of the growing incidence of flexitarianism among school-age children. Moreover, the human capital calculations underpinning formal schooling in international education discourses are weighted towards waged employment in the formal sector, a large proportion deriving from the public sector (Bennell, 1996a, 1996b). In the process, they overlook both the shrinking of public sector employment and the informal sector-driven growth in employment in India—mainly concentrated in the non-waged, self-employment category—since the (neo)liberalization reforms of the 1990s (Bosworth & Collins, 2007; Mazumdar & Sarkar, 2008; Sarkar & Mehta, 2010). With recent studies questioning the longstanding dogma on wage returns to primary education (Colclough, Kingdon, & Patrinos, 2010), the insistence that "If returns [to schooling] haven't been seen there [in Kanchipuram] yet, they have to come, they have to come" (as the child labor specialist at a multilateral agency in India said to me) is increasingly a statement of faith than a reflection of labor markets in many parts of India.

The faith in "no work more school" policies as the rightful—and rights-ful—response to child labor has undermined the search for alternative modes/models of

[18] "Marginal" child labor is defined by the decadal Census as children who are engaged in some economic activity but whose primary activity is not economic, i.e., they do not work full-time.

education that better accommodate, even support, children's aspirations and agency. For far too long, international development discourses have valorized formal schooling and formal sector employment, in the process, framing alternative trajectories such as the pursuit of "own businesses" and "good matches" as "a more brittle horizon of aspirations…and a thinner, weaker sense of career pathways" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 68). Given the informal sector in India accounted for 82 % of the country's non-agricultural labor force and given the growing power of informal sector workers as claim-makers, paradoxically, in a neoliberal environment that has disempowered traditional labor (Agarwala, 2008), the time has come to acknowledge that it is not the informal sector aspirations of children that are "brittle," but policy conceptions of formal schooling and school-based trajectories that are reductive.

Conclusion

Kanniappa decided that he did not want to return to the TEC with me—that was "final." "I have other options," he reassured me before taking off through the *thope* at a run. Extant child labor policies have little to offer Kanniappa or his friends, beyond pointing to their right to formal schooling; a few days later, project-staff would drag Kanniappa back to the TEC, quite literally. Given their mandate, there was no room to acknowledge his frustration with their efforts to school him; and given the constellation of actors and discourses that constitute the global orthodoxy on child labor there would be no "minister" to listen to Kanniappa or recognize his economic agency. On the other hand, the situated logics and informal sector aspirations underlying the flexitarianism of Kanniappa and other children in Kanchipuram are undeniable—and remarkably astute. Policy idealizations of childhood as a period of dependence and discipline effectively erased children's economic agency by reframing their flexitarian-ism as misapprehension or carelessness, thus dimissing their situated aspirations and logics, and are counterproductive therefore. In this context, it is worth reiterating the Kundapur Declaration at the first international meeting of working children: "We want respect and security for ourselves and the work that we do. We want an education system whose methodology and content are adapted to our reality" (Miljeteig, 2000, p. 20).

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