

## Calibrating the Lives and Lived Experiences of Teachers in India: A Plea for Research

Biswajit Apat<sup>a</sup> & Pranaya Kumar Swain<sup>\*a</sup>

\* Corresponding author

E-mail: [pranay@niser.ac.in](mailto:pranay@niser.ac.in)


a. School of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Science Education and Research, An OCC of Homi Bhabha National Institute, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

### Article Info

Received: March 14, 2023

Accepted: April 24, 2023

Published: August 22, 2023

 10.46303/repam.2023.8

### How to cite

Apat, B. & Swain, P. K. (2023). Calibrating the lives and lived experiences of teachers in India: A plea for research. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, 5(2), 34-51.

<https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2023.8>

### Copyright license

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0).

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to highlight the insufficient understanding of the lives and concerns of government schoolteachers in India, who are often blamed for the deteriorating state of public schools in the country. It examines previous studies on the subject and contends that they have not adequately represented the teachers' perspectives and voices. In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Indian teaching workforce, it is crucial to conduct research that delves into the personal lives and experiences of Indian teachers. To this end, this review paper adopts a hermeneutic approach to select relevant studies for analysis. It explores the evolution of research on the lives of teachers as a distinct field of study, and introduce several prominent studies in this area to provide a foundation for future research in the Indian context. Ultimately, it identifies several key questions that can be addressed through an examination of the lives of Indian teachers.

### KEYWORDS

Lives of teachers; teachers in India; school education; biographical approach

## INTRODUCTION

The National Education Policy (NEP) of India, 2020 emphasizes the critical role of teachers in shaping the future of our children - and, therefore, the future of our nation. This sentiment has been reflected in previous NEPs, which have also underscored the importance of teachers as professionals with significant responsibilities for the nation. However, it seems that educational research in the Indian context has prioritized pressing issues such as school quality, access, equity, and policy evaluation, while neglecting the vital role of teachers. Existing research on Indian teachers working in public schools largely suggests that they are falling short of the high expectations outlined in successive NEPs.

The underperformance of teachers' has prompted researchers to examine the factors such as poor quality of teacher education (Batra, 2014), administrative shortcomings (Aiyar & Bhattacharya, 2016), lack of teacher accountability (Pandey et al., 2008) and the systematic elimination of teachers' agency within the educational system (Batra, 2005). However, this paper contends that alongside these existing research agendas, it is imperative to closely examine the personal lives and experiences of teachers as well. There are numerous reasons why studies focusing on the lives of Indian teachers are essential. With over 9.5 million teachers, India has one of the largest teaching workforces in the world. However, due to the vast array of school contexts, it is challenging to draw general conclusions about teachers' working experiences. The concerns of a male teacher working in a small rural school would likely differ from those of a female teacher working in a crowded municipal school in a metropolis.

Furthermore, the current situation of government school teachers in India is paradoxical in several respects. Under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009, states are mandated to maintain specified student-teacher ratios. As a result, teachers are recruited more frequently, and their salaries have also increased with successive pay commissions. However, the profession has experienced a decline in its status.

The professional authority of teachers appears to be gradually eroding over time. Being at the bottom of the educational hierarchy, they have minimal influence over policies and regulations that substantially affect their lives. Despite teachers still being viewed as *gurus* in popular discourse, they are often held responsible for poor academic performance in public schools. Teachers often find their time and energy consumed by non-teaching workloads and targets. In several states, such as Odisha, Mizoram, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi and West Bengal contract teachers are recruited and paid only a fraction of the salary of regular teachers (Ramachandran et al., 2020). Given these circumstances, it is worth asking whether teaching is still a source of self-worth for teachers. Are they putting their heart into their work? Is their job compatible with all the concerns of their lives?

A serious examination of the lives and experiences of teachers is essential to answer these questions. While there are existing studies in the Indian context that provide insightful information into the lives of teachers, more research is required.

To develop a comprehensive understanding of teachers' lives and experiences in India, it is necessary to establish a research agenda that primarily focuses on teachers. Research on the lives of teachers is a well-established field in North America, Western Europe, and Australia, and the concepts and methodologies utilized in these studies can provide a foundation for the development of a similar research field in the Indian context. In the following section, we will first outline the selection method used to include studies in this review, followed by a thematic presentation of some major studies on teachers in India. The third section discusses the development of a research agenda in the West, which primarily focuses on the lives of teachers. We conclude by identifying critical research questions that are particularly urgent in the context of India and that warrant analyses of teachers' lived experiences.

### METHOD

Due to the limited number of studies that solely focus on teachers in Indian context, this article employs a hermeneutic framework, as proposed by Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2010), to provide an overview of research conducted on teachers in India and to develop a research agenda that focuses on the lives of teachers in Indian society. Unlike systematic reviews that follow a predetermined set of criteria for inclusion and exclusion, a hermeneutic review involves a thorough reading of a set of relevant texts to gain a deeper understanding of the topic and identify additional literature. Thus, literature search and reading becomes an ongoing and iterative process. Each text is interpreted in the context of the whole body of literature. A researcher may leave the hermeneutic circle when extra literature review contributes only marginally to the understanding of the phenomenon. Based on the hermeneutic approach, a few texts on teachers in India were read thoroughly at first. The corpus of relevant literature was then gradually expanded to include school ethnographies and reports containing findings about teachers. Only studies with substantial findings on teachers' lives were included in the study, while studies tangentially related to the subject, such as those on the effectiveness of contract teachers or those based on classroom observation, were excluded.

The final selection of literature was analyzed thematically. We used a hermeneutic approach to gather relevant literature and identified six key themes: images of teachers in India, reasons for becoming teachers, preparation for teaching, working conditions, attitudes and beliefs of teachers, and teachers' work and accountability. The following section provides a detailed discussion of the findings.

### DISCUSSION

#### **Studies on teachers' lives in the Indian context**

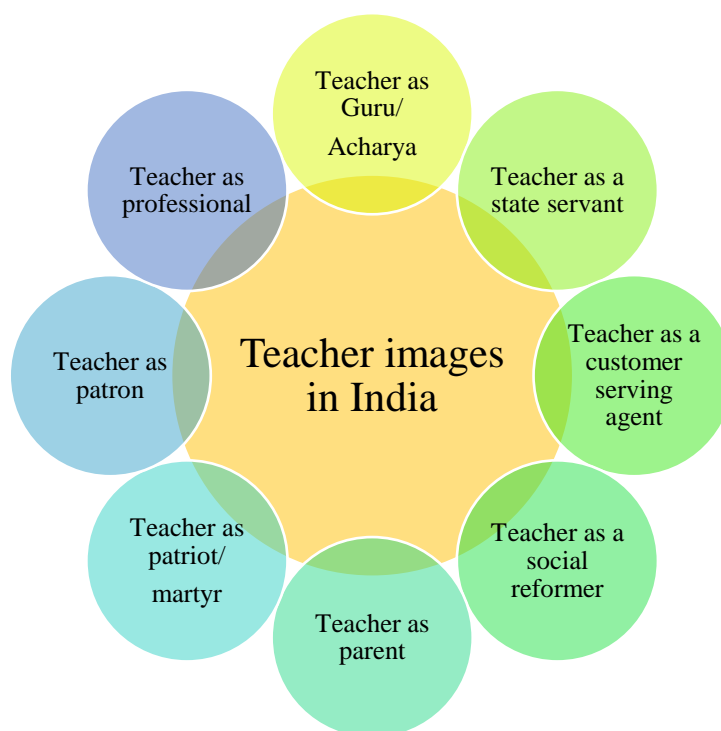
##### *Images of teachers in India*

Indian education has a long history, (Diwan, 2015) but modern school education emerged during the colonial period (Tschurennev, 2019). In tandem with the metamorphosis of the education system (Kumar, 2005), the role and activities of teachers, their status, power and

lifestyle also changed. However, there are a few continuities. A variety of discourses and images concerning teachers circulate in contemporary Indian society. Though some of the images have distant origins and others are relatively recent, they all have a significant impact on the social identity and self-perception of teachers. Teachers try to embody these images through their actions and behaviors (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Teacher Images in India*



(Kale, 1970; Sarangapani, 2003; Abrol, 2017)

Guru/Acharya is perhaps the oldest and most powerful image of contemporary teachers in India, with the term guru referring to a spiritual guide as well as a pedagogical one (Kale, 1970). In ancient India, the guru was essential for education due to the oral transmission of knowledge, and their words held as much authority as the Shastras. Through the Buddhist, Jain, and Bhakti movements the guru became a mystic figure, a prophet, and a person deserving of faith, obedience, and devotion. During the colonial period, the introduction of modern education system gave rise to the notion of the teacher as a state servant (Kumar, 2005). The prescribed curricula and textbooks determined what was to be taught, how and when. Teachers were appointed as state functionaries and paid salaries, leading to their responsibility for considerable clerical work, including keeping records of admissions, attendance, examinations, and expenditures. The variety of roles that a schoolteacher could be asked to perform was itself a testimony of his low status and the non-specialized image of his job (Kumar, 2005, p. 76). Even back then, school teachers were seen as the conscience keepers of the community (Majumdar, 2011). During the struggle for independence, teachers played an important role as nationalists and actively participated in social reform initiatives (Acharya & Krishan, 2010). They worked towards raising awareness of untouchability, writing patriotic poems, and encouraging students

to get involved in relief activities during famines and floods. These teachers became role models for future generations. After independence, national development became the primary objective, and the teacher assumed the role of nation-builder (Kale, 1970). All Five-Year Plans and all Education Committees emphasized the importance of teachers in promoting national development and preserving India's cultural heritage. Additionally, the image of a teacher as a customer-serving agent is prevalent in contemporary India.

In private educational institutes and coaching centers, teachers serve the students as customers. With the rise of liberalization, numerous educational institutes have emerged, some of which charge exorbitant fees for their services. Teachers, particularly those working in private schools, exploit the neoliberal market by commodifying their knowledge and skills and become entrepreneurs (Gupta, 2021). According to Sarangapani (2003), teachers can adopt a variety of positions in a range of ways that are even more fundamental. To a child, a teacher represents an adult. As adults, teachers naturally feel that they are ahead of children in matters pertaining to knowledge and the world of adults. They also have a sense of power over children, similar to the relationship between a parent and a child. As with parents, teachers often believe they care for their students and their actions are always benevolent. Like parents, they expect respect and obedience from their students. In some cases, teachers describe their work as a form of patriotism, a sacrifice for the betterment of society.

According to Sarangapani (2003), some teachers, particularly those from the upper castes, regard themselves as cultural elites and may exhibit patronizing behavior towards their students (Sarangapani, 2003). Some teachers have ties to the local political elite and have direct or indirect involvement in politics, due to which their image as politicians is also prevalent (Kingdon & Muzammil, 2001; Majumdar, 2011).

It is noteworthy that despite many teachers achieving prominence, they are not commonly viewed as educationists or intellectuals in India. This has been the case since the beginning of modern education in the colonial period. College teaching was considered an intellectual profession, while school teaching, particularly at the primary level, was viewed as a low-ranking office position (Kumar, 2005).

To further elaborate, teachers in India find themselves in a contradictory position where they have low status and little control over the curriculum, while at the same time, they exercise full moral, parental and adult's authority over their students. According to Kumar (2005), describes the teacher as a "meek dictator" to highlight this contradiction (p. 73). According to Batra (2005), "the reality is more nuanced and complex, with most schoolteachers across the country being under-trained, misqualified, under-compensated, demotivated instruments of a mechanical system of education that was initially conceived as a support to a colonial regime" (p. 4347).

The following subsections aim to present a collective overview of teachers' lives in India based on the available literature. However, it is critical to note that the studies included here are not comprehensive and the findings cannot be generalized to all teachers.

### *Reasons for becoming teachers*

The PROBE (1999) report suggests that teaching in public schools in India has become an occupation that attracts individuals who are not committed to education, and while deterring those who feel committed to education. In rural areas, teaching in public schools is often perceived a lucrative job, offering good salaries, stable employment, and ample free time for other pursuits. These incentives attract people to the teaching profession even if they lack intrinsic motivation to become teachers. Some teachers feel that Indian society accords a low status to schoolteachers. They often report feeling “forced” to accept teaching positions due to their circumstances, even though they could have pursued higher status jobs under different circumstances (Sarangapani, 2003, p. 70). Some individuals become teachers as a last resort when they are unable to pursue their preferred career paths. Ramachandran et al. (2005) suggest that few teachers consciously enter the profession due to the inherent “nobility” of the profession or because they are inspired by their parents or teachers. Instead, teaching is often viewed by some teachers as a stopgap measure while they prepare for other jobs or competitive examinations.

According to some female teachers in India, teaching is considered an ideal profession for women since it allows them to work outside the home while still fulfilling their family responsibilities (Sarangapani, 2003). Females may also choose teaching for its respectability, job security, and reduced workload. Moreover, this profession is often preferred and recommended by their parents or spouses (Ramachandran *et al.*, 2005). The primary school teaching profession is not the first choice of many teachers. Sriprakash (2011) also noted some ambivalence in teachers’ accounts of their entry into teaching. Some teachers, according to Sriprakash, enter teaching to improve their economic status and job security. The teaching profession is often seen as a way of social mobility, particularly for those facing economic hardships or limited educational opportunities. However, the current teacher recruitment system in India does not effectively distinguish between candidates with genuine interest and aptitude for teaching and those who do not possess these qualities (Ramachandran et al., 2008).

### *Preparedness for teaching*

According to Hall and Millard (1994), teachers are often referred to as “trained” rather than “educated”. Teacher training involves a combination of theory and practical aspects, and teachers are expected to demonstrate their competencies. However, the concept of training is narrower in scope than teacher education. Traditional teacher education programs in India are designed to prepare teachers to plan lessons using standard formats, deliver them, organize school assemblies, and perform other routine activities (Batra, 2005).

The pre-service training programs for teachers in India are designed based on the assumption that trainees already have a sufficient understanding of school subjects and would be capable of teaching in an ideal setting. This flawed premise fails to challenge the underlying assumptions regarding knowledge and curriculum held by trainees. As a result, the training

programs do not adequately prepare teachers for the actual conditions they will face in public schools. Ramachandran et al. (2008) argue:

These courses assume that teachers will have a homogenous community of learners, adequate infrastructure, teaching-learning materials and the luxury of teaching a single class at a time. The real conditions that prevail in most government primary schools across the country are never addressed; thus teacher candidates spend a year or two receiving and being tested on a vast amount of theoretical knowledge that is of little help in real classroom situations. (pp. 64–65)

In-service training for teachers in India follows a cascade model, in which some teachers attend training and then disseminate it to their colleagues at different levels. The main aim is to equip teachers to implement policies formulated at the top level. In-service training is carried out in an ad hoc manner, subject to the availability of funds and unaligned with the needs of teachers (Ramachandran *et al.*, 2018). Shulman (1986) argued that the teacher should not only understand that something is so; but also understand *why* it is so. However, in the preservice and in-service training programs, as well as teacher eligibility tests and recruitment tests, there is a strong emphasis on “something is so.” Teachers are rarely encouraged to explore anything deeper – the “whys.”

#### *Teacher's working conditions*

The PROBE (1999) report outlines a range of disempowering and demotivating factors that negatively impact teachers' working environments. “A teacher trapped in a ramshackle village school, surrounded by disgruntled parents, irregular pupils and overbearing inspectors, can hardly be expected to work with any enthusiasm” (p. 63). Teachers' workplace is plagued by various issues, including poor infrastructure, parental apathy, persistent problems with students, an unrealistic curriculum, undesired postings, excessive paperwork, and unsupportive management (PROBE, 1999). The lack of infrastructure and resources in public schools can vary from the non-availability of essential materials, such as chalk and textbooks, to larger issues such as the lack of classrooms, functional toilets, and safe water sources. Teaching children with limited resources can be a daunting challenge for teachers, and when parents fail to reciprocate their efforts, teachers become frustrated.

The PROBE (1999) report highlights the issue of parental apathy towards their children's education, which leads to irregular attendance and poor performance. It also notes that parents often fail to attend parent-teacher meetings. Additionally, the report highlights instances where members of the local community engage in activities that harm the school, such as vandalizing, stealing, and abusing school resources. Many children lack a conducive environment for studying at home, and may also suffer from malnutrition, poor health, and the burden of household chores. Teachers also feel that the school curriculum is challenging for most young students. However, teachers are not encouraged to think as educators.

As a result, teachers have become unenthusiastic and unthinking implementers of top-down initiatives (Majumdar, 2006), subject to unwanted postings and arbitrary transfers, which

are considered constant threats. In order to avoid undesirable transfers or to secure a desirable posting, teachers spend a great deal of time and energy cultivating relationships and lobbying (PROBE, 1999; Béteille, 2015). The increasing burden of paperwork and non-teaching responsibilities has become a significant issue for teachers in recent years, particularly with the introduction of various incentive programs for students. Teachers are required to enter data and submit the same statistics to various higher authorities on a regular basis and upon request. “Consequently and perversely, teachers tend to cook up data to generate paper truths” (Majumdar, 2011, p. 50).

School management not only fails to address the obvious problems teachers face but is also a source of harassment from time to time (PROBE, 1999). Teachers' efforts are not recognized, and despite expecting reforms in schools, the education bureaucracy offers little academic support to teachers (Sriprakash, 2012). Teachers believe that school administrators do not pay as much attention to the quality of teaching as they do to administrative matters such as school records, enrolment figures, and incentive schemes. The relationship between teachers and education officers is often tense due to a variety of factors. Officers may be unable or unwilling to provide constructive feedback, and their impatience, lack of respect for teachers, and focus on finding faults and shortcomings can exacerbate the situation (Sriprakash, 2012). It is not surprising that most teachers eventually come to the realization that “conscientious teaching is the least prominent and the most thankless of the activities they are expected to perform” (PROBE, 1999, p. 62). Furthermore, teachers themselves do not consider the government education system desirable for their own children (Sriprakash, 2012).

According to the PROBE (1999) report, early career teachers in public schools lose their motivation as they progress through their careers. The report highlights that “among recently appointed teachers we often met people with genuine enthusiasm. The honeymoon, however, is usually short-lived, as the morale of young teachers is battered day after day” (p. 58). There is no institutional hierarchy among teachers within a school. All teachers are considered equal and below the head teacher. However, Sarangapani (2003) reports that there are instances in which teachers attempt to establish hierarchy among themselves. For example, teachers may use their caste or class positions, educational achievements, or involvement in additional profit-making work or politics to elevate themselves above their peers. Patriarchal norms prevail in schools, and although cases of sexual harassment among teachers are not common. However, female teachers are generally treated as second-class employees by their male colleagues in some schools (PROBE, 1999).

#### *Teachers' attitudes and beliefs*

Teachers' viewpoints are not merely opinions, but rather elaborate worldviews that are often shared by parents, administrators, and even students (Sarangapani, 2003). The beliefs and attitudes of teachers have a significant impact on teachers' day-to-day activities and decision-making processes.



Teachers have different views on what makes a good teacher, but some common traits include being soft spoken, tolerant, kind-hearted, hardworking, honest and punctual, devoid of bad habits and well-dressed (Batra, 2005), impartial, sensitive, flexible, inspiring and intimate with children (Majumdar, 2011), personable, maternal, democratic and reflexive (Sriprakash, 2011). Some teachers believe that education should help develop students' moral character and citizenship values (Sarangapani, 2003). They also believe that all children are not equal and not all children deserve the same quality of education (Brinkmann, 2019). Some teachers have a pessimistic view of rural children's educational potential and believe that despite their best efforts, village children will never attain much (Sarangapani, 2003). Teachers often hold the perception that rural communities are uncivilized, uneducated, and backward and rural children are undisciplined (Sriprakash, 2012). Discourses about class and caste are also entwined with this perception, with many teachers believing that the quality of public schools has declined due to the increasing number of children from Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) attending school (Majumdar, 2011).

According to some teachers, villagers are often described as superstitious, lazy, and lacking in hygienic practices, culture, and technology. Teachers believe that illiterate parents are generally disinterested in the education of their children. Teachers hold them responsible for dysfunctional Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) (Sarangapani, 2003).

This deficit discourse is used to legitimize school as an institution intended for the socialization and moral development of children from these communities. Besides the school's civilizing mission, this perception contributes to teachers' legitimization of the school's disciplining role and their authority. When teachers emphasize the discipline of their students, they might be referring to the teaching of obedience, piety, respect, good habits and manners, hygiene and self-presentation, as well as a strong work ethic and a commitment to studying (Sriprakash, 2012).

The belief that schools have a core function of disciplining students is not only shared by teachers, but also by communities and students (Sarangapani, 2003). Therefore, it is not surprising that several teachers hold that in order to instill discipline corporal punishment is necessary (Sarangapani, 2003). These teachers do not consider their use of physical punishment as a lack of love for the children. Instead, they believe that they are beating the children because they care about them, just as their parents do (Sriprakash, 2012).

Students who struggle with basic literacy and numeracy are sometimes treated differently by teachers. Sarangapani (2003) reported that instead of providing additional support to these students, teachers often assigned them manual chores as if they were destined for the world of labor-intensive insecure employment or unemployment. According to Brinkmann's (2019) study, teachers hold a number of beliefs that are in opposition to learner-centered educational reforms. Some of these beliefs include the notion that students are incapable of thinking independently, learning entails passively receiving pre-packed knowledge transmitted by textbooks or teachers, Learner-Centered Education (LCE) means using songs,

actions, games, or drawings so that children learn faster and remember for a long time, teachers must control children through fear and discipline, the purpose of education is to facilitate individual socio-economic mobility, and duty means task completion rather than ensuring outcomes (Brinkmann, 2019). Although many teachers acknowledge the benefits of midday meals (MDM) in schools, some believe that supervising MDM activities should not be their responsibility (Majumdar, 2011). Additionally, it is widely believed that the no-detention policy is counterproductive as it results in the automatic promotion of even “weak” students (Majumdar, 2011).

#### *Teachers' work and accountability*

Anitha's (2005) study highlights that public school teachers engage in four broad types of activities in the classroom. The first type is the non-educational task of taking care of students or “domesticating” them. Teachers are essentially caretakers who protect students from mischief. The second type of classroom activity involves teaching basic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Most classroom activities consist of mechanical repetition of basic materials. The third type is focused on transmitting textbook information to students to prepare them to pass examinations. Teachers conduct well-structured but ritualistic classroom activities. Finally, the fourth type of activity connects information, and skills to the child's experiences to make learning meaningful. These classes aim to develop higher-order thinking skills through highly structured, logical, and participatory activities.

Teachers' work in the classroom, being a topic of pedagogical research, falls outside the scope of this review. However, this review includes criticisms of their inactivity and inertia. The lack of accountability among primary school teachers in India is a serious issue, as highlighted by the PROBE (1999) report. Some teachers exhibit outright irresponsibility, frequently absenting themselves from school or arriving late and departing early. A teacher's regular attendance and punctuality are not guarantees that teaching will take place. According to the PROBE (1999) report, many primary school teachers in India are inactive and “engaged in a variety of pastimes such as sipping tea, reading comics or eating peanuts” (p. 63). Overall, the report concludes that the amount of time and effort spent on teaching has been reduced to a minimum. “And this pattern is not confined to a minority of irresponsible teachers — it has become a way of life in the profession” (PROBE, 1999, p. 63).

Negligence on the part of teachers may be both a cause and a consequence of their involvement in additional profit-making activities. As Kingdon and Muzammil (2001) note: Our observations in rural UP suggest that a good proportion of teachers own some side business apart from their school teaching work, such as bookshops, general stores, and even small industries in towns and in the countryside. Sometimes they also work as contractors for the abundant public works, particularly in rural areas. (p. 3063)

Teachers' involvement in political activities, such as campaigning and contesting for elections, lobbying and strikes, can also divert their attention from teaching (Kingdon & Muzammil, 2009).

The purpose of this section was to review the literature regarding teachers in India. We discussed the images of teachers, their motivations for becoming teachers, their training, the features of their working environments, and their beliefs and accountability. The studies reviewed included those focused exclusively on teachers, as well as school ethnographies and status reports. It is important to note that most of the studies included in this review are somewhat dated and critical, which may leave us with a negative impression of teachers as a community. However, it is worth considering whether significant changes have taken place in the teaching profession since the introduction of the RTE Act over a decade ago. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the existence of diligent teachers who receive praise from colleagues and the communities they serve.

Why is it that teachers' beliefs and attitudes are so resistant to change? Furthermore, little is known about how teachers balance their work and personal lives, how they cope with work-related frustrations and whether they remain committed to teaching throughout their careers. What are their career aspirations? What are their strategies for dealing with public criticism of their work? Are there specific concerns of female teachers and teachers from disadvantaged backgrounds that affect their work and commitment? How do teachers interpret rules and policies while implementing them? In short, their own perspective or their "voice" has a sporadic presence in educational research. The following section discusses how and why it is imperative that we pay attention to teachers' biographies, the whole person they are.

### **Teachers' lives: An area of research**

Since the 1980s, there has been growing recognition that social science, which had long been predominated by positivism, determinism, social constructionism, and debates concerning structure and agency, had become detached from the lived experience of people (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). In response to that, biographical research began to gain wide acceptance as a method of scholarly investigation in a variety of disciplines, a development usually referred to as the "biographical turn" (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Harrison, 2008). The biographical turn refers to the increasing use of biographical research as a scholarly investigation method across various disciplines. However, research on people's lives and lived experience has a long history. Published in 1918-1921, Thomas and Znaniecki's study of Polish migrants in the United States, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, is considered one of the earliest and most influential works of biographical research (Merrill & West, 2009). Thomas and Znaniecki's work was instrumental in the emergence of the Chicago School of Sociology in 1920. This school conducted intensive fieldwork with immigrants, delinquents, and the poor and used biographical methods.

Despite being widely used in the Chicago school, the popularity of biographical methods declined by the 1960s as positivist and quantitative approaches gained prominence in sociology. In 1959, C. Wright Mills aimed to revive humanistic values in sociology through his seminal work, *The Sociological Imagination*. Mills argued that biographical research was crucial to

understanding the intersection of social structures, history, and individual agency. He famously declared that:

The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women. ... Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both. ... The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. ... No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey (Mills, 2000, pp. 3–6).

Despite Mill's exhortations to place people's lives at the forefront of sociological research, there were only sporadic attempts. However, several developments eventually shifted researchers' attention toward individual lives, such as the growth of oral history within history, the second wave of feminism, and the political struggle against racism, discrimination, oppression, and imperialism (Harrison, 2008).

The publication of several influential works revitalized biographical research, including Daniel Bertaux's edited volume *Biography and Society* (1981), Ken Plummer's *Documents of Life* (1983), and Norman Denzin's *Interpretive Biography* (1989). In the field of education, Ivor F. Goodson advocated the use of the life history method to study the lives of teachers (Goodson, 1981, 1991; Ball & Goodson, 1985). Guided by behavioral and cognitive psychology much of the research on teachers until the 1980s focused on teacher behavior, practice, and cognitive processes. However, as Goodson (1981) observed, this approach often treated teachers as interchangeable and timeless entities within the educational system.

The motivation to study the lives of teachers emerged from the recognition that what they do in their classrooms is linked with who they are as persons. In his classic book *Sociology of Teaching*, Waller (1932) reported that there was little separation between teachers' personal and professional lives, and hence, teachers were always on the stage performing their socially expected roles.

As societal values and norms, as well as the teaching profession changed over time, it became apparent that teachers' professional roles did not entirely encompass their personal lives. In fact, many aspects of teachers' personal lives were found to have an impact on their professional lives. For example, Pajak and Blasé's (1989) study on how teachers' personal and professional lives were intertwined revealed several interesting observations. Teachers reported that their work lives were influenced by many aspects of their personal lives including their parental status, marriage, single status, personal interests, spiritual beliefs, extended families and friends, financial circumstances, health conditions, social status and social visibility (Pajak & Blase, 1989).

It is important to note that the dimensions mentioned above were found to have both positive and negative implications for the professional lives of teachers. For example, while some teachers reported that becoming a parent improved their ability to care, be insightful, and work with competency, other felt frustrated, tired, and guilty by the demands of balancing both

personal and professional roles (Pajak & Blase, 1989). Likewise, some teachers regarded marriage as a source of stability, support, and security. However, marital difficulties were perceived as disruptive. Teachers who experienced problems in their marriage reported negative changes in their relationships with students, colleagues, and parents (Pajak & Blase, 1989).

The evolving understanding of teachers and teaching also required a reevaluation of teacher development practices. It became apparent that improving teaching skills involved more than just training teachers in pedagogical tricks and techniques. As Hargreaves (1994) aptly put it:

Teachers teach in the way they do not just because of the skills they have or have not learned. The ways they teach are also grounded in their backgrounds, their biographies, in the kinds of teachers they have become. Their careers— their hopes and dreams, their opportunities and aspirations, or the frustration of these things - are also important for teachers' commitment, enthusiasm and morale. So too are relationships with their colleagues - either as supportive communities who work together in pursuit of common goals and continuous improvement, or as individuals working in isolation, with the insecurities that sometimes brings (Hargreaves, 1994, p. ix)

Goodson (1997) provides several justifications for a research agenda focused on teachers' lives and work. First, it is essential to give importance to “sponsoring teachers voices” as most educational research neglects to include their perspectives (Goodson, 1997, p. 141). The general tendency is to relegate teachers to statistics and footnotes, and consider them as interchangeable and unproblematic. Teachers' voices and knowledge can serve as a counter-cultural force by opposing the power and knowledge held, produced, and propagated by politicians and administrators who control school systems. Secondly, studying teachers' lives can enable researchers to evaluate education reforms from teachers' perspectives. By doing so, reforms that work against the history and context of teachers' lives can be exposed. The third reason for studying teachers' lives is to understand the process of teacher socialization. Preservice teacher training and in-service training are usually regarded as the most significant socializing influences on early career teachers. However, as Lortie (1975) pointed out teachers go through an “apprenticeship of observation” during their childhood when they observe their teachers and internalize their teaching methods. Therefore, it is crucial to observe a teacher's pattern of socialization throughout their life. Finally, taking a clue from feminist research, Goodson (1997) suggests that studying the lives of female teachers itself constitutes a reason for general life history work in education research. This is because women's lives and views are further marginalized and excluded within academic and policy discourses.

In the past four decades, there have been numerous biographical studies conducted on various aspects of teachers' lives and work, particularly in the US and western Europe. Notable studies include: Ball and Goodson's (1985) edited volume on teachers' lives and careers in the UK and USA; Evan's (1988) edited volume on physical education teachers; Nias's (1989) study of

primary teachers in the UK; Bullough, Knowles and Crow's (1991) investigation into teacher socialization; Casey's (1993) analysis of the life histories of women teachers concerned with social change in the USA; Kelchtermans's (1993, 2011, 2018) studies on teachers' self-understanding, vulnerability and professional development; Sike's (1997) study on the relationship between teaching and parenthood in the UK; and Connelly and Clandinin's (1997) narrative inquiry into teachers' personal practical knowledge; the Variations in Teachers' Work, Lives and their Effects on Pupils (VITAE) research project conducted in the UK (Day *et al.*, 2007); and, Day and Lee's (2011) edited volume on the role of teacher emotions in educational change, teaching, teacher education and leadership. In the Indian context, a research agenda focusing on teachers is yet to emerge.

### CONCLUSION

This article reviewed several studies on teachers working in public schools in India and argued current knowledge about the workforce is inadequate. To gain a better understanding of what teachers think and do, it is necessary to examine their lives comprehensively. Teachers are individuals with their own aspirations, tragedies, inclinations, and vested interests that influence their teaching practices. Teachers may come from diverse contexts and belong to various demographic characteristics, such as gender, class, caste, age, marital status, etc. Accordingly, they may have varying levels of exposure, life projects and opportunity costs. Teachers often perform other social roles besides teaching. A teacher may not perceive being a teacher as the most meaningful aspect of their life.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of teachers, it is crucial to adopt a biographical perspective. Accordingly, the second part of the article delved into how research on teachers' lives emerged as a distinct area of study in the 1980s. This discussion offers valuable insights for framing pressing questions in the Indian context. As previously noted, teachers in India are blamed for the degrading status of public schools. "There is a large community of administrators, researchers and writers who have taken to regular 'teacher bashing' and there is an equally vocal community that takes a contrary view" (Ramachandran, 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate what social and professional identities teachers strive to establish for themselves and how they counter the critical narrative. Without a robust sense of positive identity, teachers may lose their enthusiasm for their profession.

In particular, contract employees often encounter additional challenges due to job insecurity and low wages. Most of them are young adults who are in the process of building a viable future for themselves. Does the contractual nature of employment make teachers more accountable and efficient, as advocates of this policy argue (see Kingdon *et al.*, 2013)? Is it possible that contract teachers feel more vulnerable and frustrated? New public management in education has significantly influenced how teachers' autonomy and agency are constructed (Mukhopadhyay & Ali, 2021). The question is, what are the intended and unintended consequences of these new kinds of reforms on the lives and work of teachers? Is the teaching profession heading towards a state of widespread demoralization? Exploring teachers'

biographies can offer valuable insights into these questions and serve as a counterweight to the broader politics of educational control and management.

## REFERENCES

- Abrol, B. (2017). Interweaving narratives of personal and professional selves of a beginning teacher in India. In V. Ross, E. Chan, & D. Keyes (Eds.), *Crossroads of the Classroom* (pp. 197–220). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-368720160000028017>
- Acharya, P. and Krishan, S. (2010). An experiment in nationalist education: Satyavadi School in Orissa (1909–1926). *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(51), 71–78.
- Aiyar, Y. and Bhattacharya, S. (2016). The post office paradox: A case study of the block level education bureaucracy. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 51(11), 61–69.
- Anitha, B. K. (2005). Quality and the social context of rural schools. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 3(1), 28–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973184913411>
- Ball, S. J. and Goodson, I. F. (1985). *Teachers' lives and careers* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Batra, P. (2005). Voice and agency of teachers: missing link in national curriculum framework 2005. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(40), 4347–4356.
- Batra, P. (2014). Problematizing teacher education practice in India: Developing a research agenda. *Education as Change*, 18(sup1), S5-S18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16823206.2013.877358>
- Béteille, T. (2015). Fixers in India's teacher labor markets: behind the scenes. *Asian Survey*, 55(5), 942–968.
- Bertaux, D. (Ed.). (1981). *Biography and society: The life history approach in the social sciences* (Vol. 23). Sage.
- Boell, S. K. and Cecez-Kecmanovic, D. (2010). Literature reviews and the hermeneutic circle. *Australian Academic and Research Libraries*, 41(2), 129–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048623.2010.10721450>
- Brinkmann, S. (2019). Teachers' beliefs and educational reform in India: from "learner-centred" to "learning-centred" education. *Comparative Education*. 55(1), 9–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2018.1541661>
- Bullough, R., Knowles, G. and Crow, N. (1991). *Emerging as a teacher*. Routledge.
- Casey, K. (1993). *I answer with my life: Life histories of women teachers working for social change*. Routledge.
- Chamberlayne, P., Bornat, J. and Wengraf, T. (2000). Introduction: The biographical turn. In P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat, , and T. Wengraf (Eds.), *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science*. (pp. 1–30). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203466049>
- Connelly, F. M., Clandinin, D. J., & He, M. F. (1997). Teachers' personal practical knowledge on the professional knowledge landscape. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 13(7), 665–674.

- Day, C., Sammons, P., Stobart, G., Kington, A., & Gu, Q. (2007). *Teachers matter: Connecting Lives, Work and Effectiveness*. McGraw Hill.
- Day, C. and Lee, J. C-K. (Eds.) (2011) *New understandings of teacher's work: Emotions and educational change*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0545-6>
- Diwan, R. (2015). Small schools in rural India: "Exclusion" and "inequity" in hierarchical school system. *Policy Futures in Education*, 13(2), 187–204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210315579971>
- Denzin, N. K. (1989). *Interpretive biography*. Sage.
- Evans, J. (Ed.) (1988) *Teachers, teaching and control in physical education* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203058893>
- Goodson, I. F. (1981). Life histories and the study of schooling. *Interchange*, 11(4), 62-76. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01810006>
- Goodson, I. F. (1991). Sponsoring the teacher's voice: Teachers' lives and teacher development. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 21(1), 35–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764910210104>
- Goodson, I. F. (1997). The life and work of teachers. In B.J. Biddle, , T. L. Good, , & I.F. Goodson (Eds.), *International Handbook of Teachers and Teaching* (pp. 135–152). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-011-4942-6>
- Government of India (2009). Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. The Gazette of India, August 27, 2009, New Delhi.
- Government of India. (2020). National Education Policy 2020. Ministry of Education. [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English\\_0.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf)
- Gupta, A. (2021). Teacher-entrepreneurialism: a case of teacher identity formation in neoliberalizing education space in contemporary India. *Critical Studies in Education*, 62(4), 422–438. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2019.1708765>
- Hall, C. and Millard, E. (1994). The Means of correct training? Teachers, Foucault and disciplining. *Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy*, 20(2), 153–160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0260747940200203>
- Hargreaves, A. (1994) *Changing teachers, changing times*. Cassell.
- Harrison, B. (Ed.) (2008) *Life story research*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446262368>
- Kale, P. (1970). The guru and the professional: The dilemma of the secondary school teacher in Poona, India. *Comparative Education Review*, 14(3), 371–376.
- Kelchtermans, G. (1993). Getting the story, understanding the lives: From career stories to teachers' professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 9(5/6), 443–456.
- Kelchtermans, G. (2011). Vulnerability in teaching: The moral and political roots of a structural condition. In C. Day, & J. C-K. Lee. (Eds.), *New understandings of teacher's work: Emotions and educational change* (pp. 65–82). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0545-6\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0545-6_6)
- Kelchtermans, G. (2018). Professional self-understanding in practice: narrating, navigating and



- negotiating. In P.A. Schutz, J. Hong, & D. C. Francis (Eds.), *Research on teacher identity: Mapping challenges and innovations mapping challenges and innovations* (pp. 229–240). Springer.
- Kingdon, G. G, Aslam, M., Rawal, S., & Das, S. (2013). *Are contract teachers and para-teachers a cost-effective intervention to address teacher shortage and improve learning outcomes?*. EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.  
<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08a1fe5274a27b200042d/Parateachers2013Kingdon.pdf>
- Kingdon, G. G. and Muzammil, M. (2001). A political economy of education in India-1: The case of UP. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36(32), 3052–3063.
- Kumar, K. (2005). *Political agenda of education: A Study of colonialist and nationalist ideas*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.2307/368203>
- Lortie, D. C. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Majumdar, M. (2006). Primary education: Debating quality and quantity. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(9), 785–788.
- Majumdar, M. (2011). Politicians, civil servants or professionals? Teachers' voices on their work and worth. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 8(1), 33–65.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/097318491000800103>
- Merrill, B. and West, L. (2009). *Using biographical methods in social research*. Sage.
- Mills, C. W. (2000). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.
- Mukhopadhyay, R. and Ali, S. (2021). Teachers as agents and policy actors. In P. M. Sarangapani, & R. Pappu (Eds.), *Handbook of Education Systems in South Asia* (pp. 1295–1318). Springer.
- Nias, J. (1989) *Primary teachers talking: a study of teaching as work*. Routledge.
- Pajak, E. and Blase, J. J. (1989). The impact of teachers' personal lives on professional role enactment: A qualitative analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 26(2), 283–310. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312026002283>
- Pandey, P., Goyal, S. and Sundararaman, V. (2008). Public participation, teacher accountability and school outcomes in three states. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(24), 75-83
- Plummer, K. (1983). *Documents of life: An introduction to the problems and literature of a humanistic method*. Allen & Unwin.
- PROBE (1999). *Public Report on Basic Education in India*. Oxford University Press.
- Ramachandran, V., Pal, M. Jain, S., Shekar, S., & Sharma, J. (2005). *Teacher motivation in India*. UK: Department for International Development.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08c5b40f0b64974001172/3888Teacher\\_motivation\\_India.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08c5b40f0b64974001172/3888Teacher_motivation_India.pdf)
- Ramachandran, V. (2016). The position of teachers in our education system. *Learning Curve*, 25, 50–52. <http://publications.azimpremjifoundation.org/1002/>.

- Ramachandran, V., Beteille, T., Linden, T., Dey, S., Goyal, S. & Goel Chatterjee, P. (2018). *Getting the right teachers into the right schools: Managing India's teacher workforce*. World Bank Studies, World Bank.
- Ramachandran, V., Das, D., Nigam, G., & Shandilya, A. (2020). *Contract teachers in India: Recent trends and current status*. Azim Premji University, Bangalore and Educational Resource Unit, New Delhi.  
<https://eruindia.org/files/Contract%20Teachers%20in%20India%202020.pdf>
- Ramachandran, V., Bhattacharjea, S. and Sheshagiri, K. M. (2008). *Primary school teachers: The twists and turns of everyday practice*. Technical Report. Educational Resource Unit, New Delhi. <http://publications.azimpremjifoundation.org/id/eprint/413>
- Sarangapani, P. M. (2003). *Constructing school knowledge: An Ethnography of Learning in an Indian Village*. Sage.
- Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching, *Educational Researcher*. 15(2), 4–14.
- Sike, P. (1997). *Parents who teach: Stories from school and from home*. Cassell.
- Sriprakash, A. (2011). Being a teacher in contexts of change: Education reform and the repositioning of teachers' work in India. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 8(1), 5-31.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/097318491000800102>
- Sriprakash, A. (2012). *Pedagogies for development: The politics and practice of child-centred education in India*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-2669-7>
- Tschurennev, J. (2019). *Empire, civil society, and the beginnings of colonial education in India*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108653374.001>
- Waller, W. (1932 [1976]). *The sociology of teaching*. John Wiley & Sons.