

Article

# The Politics of Young Children through the ‘Epistemologies of the South’

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**Abstract:** Drawing data from an ethnographic study conducted in an early-years setting in Chennai, India, where everyday politics is couched in material and relational practices, the paper ruminates on the idea of ‘children as subjects’ in relation to politics and public life. By using the framework of ‘epistemologies of the south’, the analysis illustrates how a focus on ‘global cognitive justice’ might enable us to understand the politics of life in the global south differently from Western critical theory. The paper further deliberates on how such a ‘decolonial imagination’ would help us to reframe Eurocentric liberalist thinking and its conceptualisations of childhood and the political, practiced in a zone of messy social reality. In so doing, the paper tries to unpack ‘the political’ through paying particular attention to different ways of being, knowing, and doing children’s politics, and the subaltern practices of generational relations in subject making.

**Keywords:** childhood; politics; epistemology; subjectivity; India

## 1. Introduction

The scholarship on children’s politics has received immense attention in recent years on different scales and dimensions (see the review of [Skelton 2013](#), also [Millei and Kallio 2018](#); [Nolas et al. 2018b](#); [Wyness et al. 2004](#)). As a consequence, now, there is widespread recognition that children are political actors in their own right and the politics that they interact with are diverse, complex, and unpredictable ([Wyness 2014](#); [Kallio and Hakli 2013](#); also see [Skelton 2013](#)). Yet, the ambiguity around children’s politics is far from resolved. Thus, many childhood scholars continue to be grappling with enquires such as ‘what qualifies something to be considered as political’, ‘why politics matters to children’, and ‘how children make a difference to the existing political landscape with their political acts’ ([Bosco 2010](#); [Hakli and Kallio 2014](#); [Kallio and Hakli 2011, 2013](#); [Krafft 2013](#)). Most importantly, the modernist assumption of distinguishing the private sphere as a space for personal and intimate and the public sphere as a space for political and common matter, has been critiqued for being politically deterministic and spatially rigid ([Hakli and Kallio 2014](#); [Aruldoss and Nolas 2019](#); [Wyness 2014](#)). As a result, the focus has been shifted considerably from seeing politics as a specialised, specific mode of activity, to an informal, everyday activity ([Bartos 2012](#); [Kallio and Hakli 2011](#)). It is convincing by now to assume that everyday politics is as important as grand politics, because it is a major source for dissent and creativity ([Nandy and Darby 2015](#)) and, the everyday is always filled with ‘moments of translation and synthesis’ in which the macro and micro are ‘constantly entangled and co-productive’ in political ways ([Neal and Murji 2015](#), p. 813).

Reflecting back to my ethnographic fieldwork conducted in an early-years setting, with children aged between 2.5–5 years old, in Chennai, India, I seek to elucidate the ways in which children are being political, how their subjectivities have come about, and how they act alongside other generation in the early years institution. This paper contributes some knowledge to that already expansive scholarship

of children's politics within the framework of 'epistemologies of the south', which was formulated by Santos (2014) as a response to epistemic injustice to the global south. Following Santos (2014), the analysis recommends to move beyond the Western liberalist understanding of perceiving children as autonomous and articulate subjects in political practice. Further, the paper argues that children doing politics in everyday life is not a solitary, ideational, individuated act; rather, it is relational, interdependent, situated, and idiomatic.

I begin this essay with a focused review of theorising to date the topics of political subjectivity, publics and public life. I then move on to perform a close interrogation of empirical data, constructing an argument as to what 'epistemologies of the south' (Santos 2014) does to add/challenge existing ways of reading the politics of life in the global south. The paper aims to offer a way that 'epistemologies of the south' could help us to understand children's political work in the relational practices in the institution. The analysis particularly pays attention to different ways of being, knowing and doing children's politics and the subaltern practices of generational relations in shaping children's subjectivity.

## 2. Everyday Childhoods, Everyday Politics

As Mayall (2000) notes, childhood is always a political issue and children's lives are represented with a political overture in complex and contradictory ways (Wyness et al. 2004), notwithstanding that some places, groups, events, and aspects of children's lives are more politicised than others (Kallio and Hakli 2013). On the one hand, children as future 'human capital' are governed by adult interests and need; on the other hand, childhood is conceptually privatised and inconsiderately marked off from the cultural, social, and political history (Balagopalan 2011). Subsequent to the ontological politics in childhood studies (James and Prout 1990), an array of scholars began to assert childhood as an assemblage, a complex, a 'more than social', and a relational phenomenon (Kraftl 2013; Prout 2005), which delivered a wealth of literatures on everyday childhoods recognizing children as social actors (Hart 2008). Although this epistemic diversity produced an avalanche of research that explores the multiplicity of childhoods nestled in local contexts and potential political arenas, surprisingly, the 'political' in those lives are rarely approached in explicitly political terms (see the review of Bosco 2010; also, the review of Kallio and Hakli 2011).

This is understandable to some extent because politics is perceived as an exclusive domain of male, adult members of the society, and it is usually located in the public sphere in the form of free speech and reasoned argument (Habermas 1989). For a long time, children's politics have been dismissed, curbed, and overlooked because they have not been communicated in appropriate adult forms in public life (Cockburn 2007; Kraftl 2013; Oswell 2012). Starting from John Locke, the presence of children in liberal theory has almost been relegated, because children are deemed to be lacking autonomy, competence, rationality, and independence, which are considered prerequisites for gaining access to politics and public life (Arneil 2002). In such a conventional register, children are imagined as 'apolitical' or 'political apprentice' who are on the maturation process of becoming a full member of the political public (Wyness et al. 2004). However, since the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children's participation has been advocated as an effective tool to assert children's political status in society; yet, as I spell out below, it is not without its limitations and criticism of being deceptively 'child-centric' (see Nolas 2015 for critique).

At the practical level, there are ample evidences of children's participation in public life, from children's councils to children's representation at the international summits/conventions (Cockburn 2007; Percy-Smith and Thomas 2010). To some extent, they are dubbed as a 'mimic' to formal political set-up, as they are mostly inflected by adultist agendas and world views (Thomas 2007). Concerns have also been raised on the configuration of subjectivity entangled in those discourses which seem to resonate with the Western 'rational political subject' and thereby favours a 'verbal' and 'competent' child for deliberative democracy (Kraftl 2013; Wyness 2013). This top-down bureaucratic model is further critiqued for cultivating a type of political subject suited to the neoliberal form of governance which seeks to comply with self-regulation, conformity and co-option (Raby 2014). Ironically, although

the global standards establish children's lives in the global south in relation hierarchy as 'lack' and 'deficit', the participatory structures and conditions are deemed to be far more enabling for children's political work in the global south (Hart 2008; Wyness 2013). The political acts exhibited in several routinised activities in the lives of child labour, child soldier, and other deprived social groups in the global south, demonstrate a huge potential for activism, resistance and resilience, irrespective of the fact that their subjectivities are configured as 'at risk' and in need of 'external intervention' by popular representations in the global north (Sircar and Dutta 2011).

In order to expand the conceptual framework, at the theoretical level, children's status as 'minors' and viewing politics as a predetermined adult sphere are problematised (Millei and Kallio 2018; Skelton 2013). This has resulted in producing a plethora of literatures that open politics up to new, more radical and ethical ways of thinking in everyday life (Bartos 2012; Bosco 2010; Kallio and Hakli 2011, 2013). Mitchell and Elwood (2012) provide a strong critique on quotidian/informal politics, particularly the use of nonrepresentational theory, which they believe become 'personal (for scholars), self-referential endeavours more caught up with the research process itself than theories of dominance and subordination' (c.f. Kraftl 2013, p. 16). In their view, politics around 'present moment' and 'personal practices' in a way neglects structural, historical and material forces which shape children's political subjectivity in crucial ways. Further, they raise their concern that much of this research 'presages a closure of politics, or, more accurately, a depoliticization of 'events,' through its emphasis on the personal, affective, individual, and ephemeral' (Mitchell and Elwood 2012, p. 796). While I sympathise with their concern on valorisation and essentialisation of mundane politics, what I believe is more important is, as Kraftl (2013) argues, treading a careful path between criticism and conviction in order to understand what matters to children (Bartos 2012), how children are enmeshed in the political world as situated agents (Kallio and Hakli 2013), and how children experience and reproduce P/politics in a way that makes sense to them (Stephens 1995).

Recent childhood literatures show that children can do politics in diverse and idiomatic ways, differently from adultist envisioning (Hakli and Kallio 2014; Kallio and Hakli 2011, 2013; Nolas et al. 2018a). Bartos (2012) for example demonstrates how care as a political concept signifies children's relationship to the world. Her photo journal project analyses the ways in which children's political perspectives, through acts of caring, are expressed—what matters to children and how do they perceive and engage with the immediate environment and social world in ways that are meaningful to their lives (Bartos 2012). Similarly, Bosco (2010) explores how young children act as conduits of their mother's advocacy and activist groups that transform their lives and create a public impact on multiple scales. While troubling the recent discourse on 'listening without hearing', Nolas and others (2018) critique the dominance of rational, cognitive, and verbalised models of communication in the existing participatory literatures over the affective, embodied and lived experiences of children in world making. While doing so, they introduce 'idiom' as an instrument for hearing, and explicate how play, humour and charm have been used by children as a form of cultural communication to express their political acts and their everyday encounters with public life. These examples together indicate that children are capable of doing politics in different ways but, as Skelton (2013) cautions us: 'unless we pay attention to their ways and means, their strategies and tactics, we miss and misunderstand important political process' (p. 126). So, there is a need for childhood scholars to tune into children's world to understand their political experiences better (Nolas et al. 2018a).

### 3. Early Years Institution as a Political Site

Like childhood, the early years institution is always and already political in many ways (see Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Moss 2014; Penn 2002). For postcolonial thinkers, the field of early years itself is colonised through powerful 'language' and 'discourse', which normalises and universalises the dominant image of the Western child across the global south (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Viruru 2001). Prescriptions that are based on a particularly narrow developmental view of childhood are criticised for being 'culture blind' and thereby ignoring indigenous practices and knowledge (Cannella

1997; Viruru 2001; Moss 2014). The marketisation of early years services, particularly the materialistic imperative for play and development, is attributed to the success of creating desire for early investment through powerful neuroscience and human capital narratives (Moss 2014; Penn 2002). The new form of neoliberal governmentality has become a political trope that regulates, monitors, tests, and controls children in the name of education, learning and schooling (Dahlberg 2016). As Fendler (2001) calls it, the soul of the educable subject is controlled by the technology of 'self-governance'. However, although many aspects of early years service provision have been politicised, the early years institution is mainly seen as a space for education/development rather than a political space.

Moss (2007), in an audacious move to 'bringing politics to nursery', encourages us to view early childhood institutions as 'a place for democratic political practice'. He does not view early years institutions as merely an educational site, rather he tries to bring the ideals of public life such as participation, democracy, citizenship, decision-making, and social justice into early years practice (Moss 2007). He also considers early years institutional space as a site of resistance to hegemonic cultural globalization, neoliberal marketization and ideological dominance, where the outcome and efficacy of every child should not be predetermined (Moss 2015). Instead, the process of children 'becoming' something should be seen, as like in a Deleuze (2006) rhizomatic sense, open to all possibilities and never 'ending' (Moss 2015). However, as Millei and Kallio (2018) argue, approaching early years institutions as a space for political practice and children's 'political subjectivity' remain to be an under-theorised territory so far.

#### 4. Epistemologies of the South and Decolonial Imagination

As Foucault (1990) acknowledged, the idea of perceiving human beings as subjects is a modern phenomenon that emerged mainly through the Enlightenment movement in Europe (see Mansfield 2000 for an extensive reading on subjectivity in different schools of thought). Western critical theory, most notably Foucault, illustrates that human beings are not 'subjects' by birth; rather we are made into subjects through different modes of discursive practices of the state apparatus (Mills 2003). In his oeuvre, Foucault (1982) identifies two types of subject: A subject produced through the double effects of power/knowledge and, a self-governing subject who is capable of his/her own regulation and transformation. Western social theories postulated, explicitly or implicitly, 'the subject as the foundation, as the central core of all knowledge, as that in which and on the basis on which freedom revealed itself and truth could blossom' (Faubion 1994, p. 3). So, Foucault's antithesis is a critique to Eurocentric thinking that portrayed human beings as rational, self-reflexive, and unified subjects (McNay 1994). Through his various scholarly works, he demystified the assumption that knowledge is always progressive and is directly associated with the improvement of human conditions (Ransom 1997).

Santos (2014), however, offers a powerful critique of Western critical theory on knowledge production, in general. He argues that both the Western social theories and Western critical theories, to some extent, share the 'same epistemological foundations that suppress the cognitive dimensions of social justice, and thus renders the universal the Western understanding and transformation of the world' (Santos 2014, p. ix). For example, if conventional theory speaks of democracy, critical theory proposes to engage with radical, participatory, or deliberative democracy. There is no doubt that critical theory is committed to the 'plurality', 'multiplicity' and 'representation' of 'others', but they fail to address the fundamental challenges such Eurocentric modes of thought posed in understanding, explaining or theorising postcolonial knowledge/life as a form of legitimate knowledge/life (Santos 2014). Thus, critical theory assumes a derivative character as it limits its debate within the possibilities that initially are not its own, Santos (2014) asserts. His framework on 'epistemologies of the south' and his explanation of the knowledge–ontology–epistemology trilogy is helpful in understating the politics of reality in the global south. In the preface of the book entitled 'epistemologies of the south: justice against epistemicide', Santos (2014) states that,

'There is no way of knowing the world better than by anticipating a better world' (Santos 2014, p. viii).

By basing his ideas on three premises, his book further explains that:

‘First, the understanding of the world by far exceeds the Western understanding of the world. Second, there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. Third, the emancipatory transformations in the world may follow grammars and scripts other than those developed by Western-centric critical theory, and such diversity should be valorised’ (p. viii).

With the use of several intriguing concepts, Santos (2014) wonderfully illustrates that modern Western thinking is an *abyssal thinking* which divides the Western from the non-Western in the name of science, reason and progress. ‘*The abyss*’ is the metaphor that Santos (2014) used in order to demonstrate how the Western modern thought radically divides social reality into two different lines of thought—‘this side of the line’ and ‘the other side of the line’—which is founded on ‘a system of visible and invisible distinctions, the invisible ones being the foundation of the visible one’s (Santos 2014, p. 118). The *abyssal lines* are not fixed throughout human history though, they are changing, but it operates in such a way that “the other side of the line’ vanishes as reality, becomes nonexistent, and is indeed produced as nonexistent’ (Santos 2014, p. 118). Interestingly, both these lines are constitutive of Western modern thinking, but their co-presence is thought to be impossible, because *abyssal lines* divide human from subhuman in a manner that ‘human principles do not get compromised by inhuman practices’ of the global south (Santos 2014, p. 124).

The Western modern thinking is mainly concerned with ‘knowing’ and ‘representing’ the subject, as such, the liberal rational subject is considered as a characteristic of modernity that ‘claims for itself a singular universality by asserting its epistemic privilege over all other local, plural and often incommensurable knowledge’ (Chatterjee 1993, p. vi). Santos (2014) proposes that overcoming this epistemic violence is possible only through ‘epistemological break’. Therefore, what is required is not alternatives, rather ‘an alternative thinking of alternatives’—a new *postabyssal* thinking (Santos 2014, p. 133). It is non-derivative thinking; it involves a radical break with modern Western ways of thinking and acting, and this can be summarized as ‘learning from the South through an epistemology of the South’ (Santos 2014, p. 134). In addition to Santos’s (2014) ‘*postabyssal* thought’, Savransky (2017, p. 13) advocates the necessity to cultivate a decolonial imagination by which he means an orientation not just toward ‘a decolonization of knowledge, but also of reality’. This may avoid, he believes, reproducing Eurocentrism in the process of reproducing it, by considering other ways of being side by side with other ways of knowing (Savransky 2017).

Much of the Western political thinking, starting from Kant (1970), is focused on the theory of morality and/or justice—what is politically right/wrong; what is just/unjust. From such a point of view, as formulated by Habermas (1989), reasoned argument is expected to be taking place in a civil society, a sphere outside of state and economy (Flyvbjerg 1998). As Chatterjee (2004) divulges, however, the idea of civil society in India is a space of elite urban middle class, whereas the vast majority of the population uses sectarian identities in a zone of ‘political society’ where clientelism, civil rights, and other violent tactics co-exist. Jayal’s (2013) analysis on ‘lived citizenship’ elucidates how citizenship aspirations of many social groups in India are routinely thwarted in the name of eviction, corruption, custodial death, and human rights violations on a day-to-day basis. Despite this, the parochial view of civil society is globalized and normalized through its project on provincializing Europe, and its history is universalized as a history of deliberative democracy for countries to emulate (Chatterjee 2004). Sensing a danger in this, Chatterjee (1993) critique that if the postcolonial countries are expected to adopt what the West proposes as political ‘modernity’, then, there is nothing left to be ‘imagined’ for the population of the global south. His cultural/historical analysis on the fragmented characteristics of Indian politics suggests that the subaltern groups in India are not pre-political, but they are being political in different ways than how we idealistically define.



## 5. Methods and Data Collection

My doctoral research was not specifically designed to bring out the 'political' in children's everyday life; rather, my project was concerned about children's lived experiences at the intersection of official and everyday pedagogies (Aruldoss 2013). As such, children's agency and their performative childhood naturally came to the fore, which I found were inexorably embedded with a sense of politics too. The ethnographic fieldwork in three early years institutions was conducted for almost a year between October 2010 and August 2011, making roughly 55 visits in total, by employing participant observation, informal conversation, listening, semi-structured interviews (with teachers/care worker and selected few parents), and reflection. This paper however draws on a subset of data collected from a government-funded, government-run early years *Anganwadi* centre, which is the nodal point for the convergence and implementation of the central government flagship programme called 'Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)'. The ICDS *Anganwadi* centre, which provides immunization, childcare, supplementary nutrition, and preschool education for young children, was located in one of the slums in central Chennai.

The field visit was carried out at on least 1 or 2 days in a week and the times of my observation were confirmed on a weekly basis after consultation with the *Anganwadi* worker. According to the official record, there were 25 children, between 2.5–5 years old, enrolled in the centre. On record, the *Anganwadi* centre has a timetable; however, during my observation, I seldom saw them practicing the timetable as prescribed. It was obvious in my observation that the centre was loosely organised according to the availability of the staff team (a care worker and a helper) and its resources. The care and preschool aspects of children were directed towards the provision of an informal, joyful and stimulating environment for learning, with an emphasis on nutritional support for growth and development, as reflected in the national policy/programme documents. The timing and day of my observation varied depending on what I wanted to observe on that particular day in the *Anganwadi* centre. Sometimes I chose to observe children in the morning to study how they arrived; sometimes I preferred to observe in the evening to see how they left; and most of the time I would stay for the whole morning session until they went for a nap after lunch. In general, I spent nearly 4–5 h on each visit, and, in total, I made 16 documented visits to the ICDS *Anganwadi* centre, besides my informal visits and interviews with adult stakeholders.

## 6. The Politics of Reality and the Child Subject in the Anganwadi Centre

In his framing of 'epistemologies of the south', Santos (2014) seeks to claim common sense and social practices as legitimate forms of knowledge to understand 'the politics of reality' in the global south as well as to transgress the *abyssal* divide in Western modern thinking. He asserts that common sense and social practices are knowledge practices, and it can be considered as practices of alternative, rival knowledges. Mirroring Santos, Savransky (2017) admits that conceiving scientific knowledge as a form of social reality and an instrument for epistemology is a profoundly modern and western conception. Unlike the preoccupation with scientific knowledge in the global north, Santos (2014) argues that the knowledge that comes to the surface and is in circulation in the global south is existential and experiential; it is intuitive, embodied, and made of words and silences-with-actions, reason-with-emotions. In so doing, he deliberates on the issues around knowledge production, (mis)representation, ignorance and social reality in Western modern thinking and the limitations of Western critical theory in finding answers to these issues. This hegemonic knowledge and hegemonic ignorance have resulted in the enormous waste of social experiences in the global south. Therefore, one of the central arguments that Santos (2014, p. viii) makes is that 'the understanding of the world by far exceeds the Western understanding of the world', because social realities are differently produced in the global south, so the politics of reality needs to be recognised to achieve epistemic justice. In what follows, I sketch out briefly how the local/global childhood discourses, official/everyday pedagogies, and science/common sense are mediated in the early years centre, and how it produces a messy social reality in a zone of indeterminacy, nonlinearity and incoherency.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, there is always an intersection between the global and local childhood discourses in the educational context in India. For example, the official policy document of the ICDS programme relies heavily on the Western child development theories for its knowledge base, while the everyday pedagogy is mediated by reflective practice, social construction, experiential knowledge, and children's action (Aruldoss 2013). In the official discourse, the child is mainly abstracted from the normative universal child, as such, the child subject is constructed in a linear, universal development model. Although the official discourse insinuates the global north child subject as its main referent for policy design, the subject making in the institution in everyday life, as I will show below, comes to existence through inter-subjective experiences and inter-relatedness with other beings. In his analysis, Santos (2014) explains how the idea of a liberal subject in Western modernity is caught up in the tension between social regulation and social emancipation (Santos 2014). This visible distinction of regulation/emancipation is built on the invisible distinction of metropolitan societies and colonial territories. Interestingly, the regulation/emancipation distinction is applicable to metropolitan societies whereas the appropriation/violence dichotomy is rendered to the colonial population (Santos 2014). This appropriation/violence is not only physical or symbolic, but it also happens in knowledge production. The epistemic violence, as Spivak (1999) points out, subjugates the colonial population as 'other' and seeks them to appropriate the Western normative discourse in the name of child-centeredness, best interest of the child, children's rights, human capital, modern science, and reason (Viruru 2001). Western modernity almost provides a stable and comprehensive description of childhood.

In contrast, what particularly struck me in my field visits was the messiness of the social reality in the everydayness of the centre. The centre was loosely structured with a timetable and there was a huge amount of complexity, fluidity, and incoherency in everyday organization, mainly because of the workload and multiple responsibilities of the staff team. The Anganwadi workers (a care worker and a helper) in the centre were supposed to perform a variety of duties as part of their job description. For example, at the time of my fieldwork, the care worker was entrusted with a range of activities including the provision of preschool education, home visits of pregnant women in the local community, meetings with adolescent girls and mothers, nutrition monitoring, and ration administration, besides maintaining a number of official registers (family survey, prenatal and antenatal care, children's weight, beneficiary note and so on). Similarly, the main responsibility of the helper was buying fresh vegetables from the local market, preparing food for children, preparing and maintaining the cleanliness of the centre, and assisting the care worker in running the centre.

Often, I have seen the staff team juggle these multiple responsibilities with a lot of fluidity. As one of the model centres in the city, this Anganwadi centre also attracted visitors on a regular basis, both informed and impromptu, and that hindered the rhythm of the everyday activities. Also, I have seen members from the local community just walk-in to the centre to discuss and seek advice about child and maternal health-related issues with the care worker. As per rule, the staff team are not supposed to entertain people from the local community in the morning. However, the care worker provided a pragmatic response when asked: 'it is really difficult to say no to people. If we say no to them then they will not cooperate when we go for house visit' (field notes). The care worker also felt that establishing and sustaining this bond with the local community was essential for successfully carrying out her official responsibilities, mainly for children enrollment, prenatal and postnatal care, and home visits. So, the transgression of official rule here was justified with her common-sense knowledge on her existential crisis. Also, in a strict sense, they were expected to spend as much quality time as possible with children for their education/development in the morning hours. Despite their best efforts, I have seen them struggling to fulfill this wish for one or the other reasons, mainly with their record work and intermittent interactions with the significant other. This fluidity in the everyday organization of the centre also characterises the complexity, incoherency and indeterminacy of the centre.

In order to overcome these difficulties, I have seen the care worker using different tactics for the smooth functioning of the centre. The main tactic employed was the appointment of child leaders, two older children within the group at the time of my fieldwork. I have seen these two child leaders

being used for teaching rhymes, guiding younger children in toilet training, leading other children while playing, and organizing the group when the care worker was engaged with other activities or in her absence. As the care worker hails from the local community and has worked in the centre for nearly three decades, the level of social interaction and bond she had with the local community, children and their parents were evidently high. At times, the adult–child relationship was extended beyond the official care worker–child relationship. I have seen parents sharing stories of family life or children’s behaviour at home and asked the care worker to discipline them in the centre. It also happened vice versa, where children shared stories of family life and the care worker advised mothers on topics such as parenting and child well-being, not only in her capacity as a care worker but also as an elder member of the local community. Such personal interactions also happened in public, in the presence of others, including in my presence. Knowing the personal/family histories of children and having a better understanding of children’s living conditions, she occasionally offers the most deprived children material help, either cash or kind. Such personal acts of the care worker were not part of her official responsibilities. In her interview, she said that as a care worker and a local person, she feels that she has a sense of responsibility and ethic of care towards others in the community. So, it was obvious that the adult–child relationship in the centre was in excess of how it was imagined in the official policy discourse.

Another thing that was closely tied to the child subject in the centre was the social practices around ‘appropriate’ eating practices. The discussions around health and nutrition occupied a central place in everyday practices in the Anganwadi centre. Children were repeatedly instructed by the care worker on the benefits of eating healthy vegetables/fruits and appropriate hygienic eating practices in their everyday conversations. The rationality underpinning this practice was, understandably, children becoming ‘healthy’ and ‘hygienic’ subjects in order to fulfill the country’s policy aims and its commitments to achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDG’s back then in 2011) on nutrition, early learning, and well-being. This was emphasised more so in the *Anganwadi* centre, as children hail from economically less privileged backgrounds, and the ICDS programme has been a flagship programme of the central government with the aim to address child malnutrition, child/maternal mortality and child development in the country. Therefore, the pedagogical intervention and status of children in the ICDS programme has always been a matter of political debate where children have been expected to appropriate the status of ‘healthy subject’ as constituted in the official discourse. The production of healthy subjects also fits into the political needs of the state. Pike (2010) in her analysis highlights how the dining practices in the educational institutions always produce a politicised space. The process of appropriation takes place in a juxtaposing way though: It constitutes the subject, and at the same time, surrenders the subject. As Davies et al. (2001) reflects, this is the beauty of the double effects of knowledge/power: The educable subjects are not only forced to take up subject position by coercion but also by desire and appropriation—a form of implicit coercion. Despite this negotiation between the official discourse and everyday practices, children did exist in the centre in dynamic and animated ways, especially in their own social environment where they constitute themselves, as shown below, as political actors.

## 7. Different Ways of Being, Knowing and Doing Children’s Politics

One thing that was strikingly visible in the *Anganwadi* centre, was children bringing snacks, mainly crisps, candies and biscuits, to the centre. In one of my informal conversations with the care worker, she raised concerns of this changing material practices amongst children/parents which was to some extent linked with the process of globalization, marketisation, and rising consumerism in the country. She reminisced how the present generation of children/parents were more inclined towards processed snacks than home-made snacks and how that might affect the culture of healthy eating practices, in general. The mothers, however, in order to cajole their children for a peaceful morning farewell, bought them eatables from nearby shops, while dropping them at the centre. This practice appeared to be socially contagious. In my informal interaction with a mother, she felt that she was



compelled to buy eatables for her son, otherwise her son would feel bad when the rest of the children eat. As the activities of the centre were loosely structured, I have seen children munching snacks throughout the day, as and when they wish.

On a number of occasions, I have also seen children sharing eatables with others, but there is always politics in it, for example, with whom they share, what they share, and how much they share is implicated with political intentions. Literatures suggest that the act of 'sharing' is deeply political in which the intimacy, bonding, social norms, cultural practices, power relations and social status between individuals, social groups, and communities are intricately enmeshed (Molotch and Noren 2010). The practice of sharing is also connected to the ideals of ethics of care, redistribution and social justice. The following narrative demonstrates 'the politics of sharing' amongst children in everyday practice:

'I was sitting in an early years centre in an under privileged neighbourhood at Chennai. On that day, there were about 15–20 children in the centre aged between 2.5 and 5 years. Rahul, a boy, who had always been quiet and gentle with others, was eating a small pack of potato chips that he brought from home while sitting at the corner of the activity room. Most children were playing at that time. Two girls, Priyanka and Diya, slowly approached Rahul and then stretched their hands toward him, meaning they want some chips. He seamlessly deflected his attention and continued eating. The girls never moved on and they pestered him to share few chips. He looked at them for a minute, then, gave few chips to Diya but said no to Priyanka. Priyanka implored him for some more time and then finally said 'I am 'ka' with you' (meaning I am not friend with you anymore) and urged Diya too to say 'ka' to him. 'Ka' is the abbreviation of a Tamil word 'Kaay' that literally means raw fruit. During altercations and friendly fights, I have seen many children in my field sites use these signifiers, Kaay (raw fruit)—Pazham (ripped fruit), to end or renew the relationship with others. This seems to be an idiomatic practice in childhood, and this has been figuratively used to indicate if the relationship is sour or sweet. Diya didn't react to Priyanka's demand; instead, she gobbled up those chips and moved away to play with others. After some time, when children re-organised for the next activity, Priyanka sat by Rahul. When Rahul turned the other side, Priyanka stealthy removed some chips away from Rahul's snack box. Rahul noticed Priyanka's secretive act, stared at her in anger, then, complained to Jasmine, a little grown-up girl in the group to intervene (field notes, 28 April 2011).

The anecdote captures children's everyday interactions in which children do political work. It showcases children's multi-layered political acts, which is implicated with many facets of human life such as reasoning, morality, innocence, and justice. From the excerpt, it was not clear why Rahul acted differently with those two girls, acting out of benevolence to one but not the other? When I asked him later on that day about the reason for his (re)action, he didn't say anything. It is fair to assume that there might be a basis for his action, or, he may have just responded intuitively, or, he may not have wanted to share the reason with me at all—all these seems to be plausible. First of all, Rahul was not bound by any compulsion to offer those girls what he was having, but he did offer a few chips to Diya, not to Priyanka. Possibly, he might have been annoyed with the girls by their constant nagging or he might have done it out of compassion—but his motive for differential attitude towards one girl rather than the other opens up room for ambivalence. Also, it is obvious that these two girls have no right to demand Rahul to share his eatables for which they have no entitlement. When Rahul rebuked their friendly demand, they were visibly upset, and Priyanka's feeling of distress was aggravated even more so because of Rahul's manifested bias against her. This opens up space for Priyanka to act politically. Perhaps, from the viewpoint of Priyanka, Rahul's action was unjust. When she didn't get what she wanted, then, Priyanka was trying to succeed by finding a political alliance in Diya so as to use a much larger collective force to persuade Rahul. This corresponds with Mitchell and Elwood's (2012) observation of children doing politics based on alliances and a shared use of symbols that takes place outside of conventional understandings of political behavior and/or engagement with civic institutions

per se. However, Diya ditched her friend once her demand was accomplished. Priyanka's pursuance didn't stop there, and she found different means to achieve her sense of gratification.

Looking at the narrative above, one may wonder how we can understand the political acts of three children. All three children effectively acted as intentional beings in the excerpt. They also tried to forge an alliance and network strategically with others in order to deploy collective forces when the situation demands to act so. When Rahul noticed that Priyanka was taking away his chips surreptitiously, he felt it was unjust on her part and made a grievance to an older girl to solve the issue. There has been so much variability in the subject positions of each child and the moral value attached to categories such as 'fair/unfair', 'just/unjust' changed quickly depending on their circumstances and our reasoned arguments. It is fair to assume that the political act here is transiently constructed through idiomatic practice. Moreover, the political is experienced through the other, i.e., through inter-subjectivity in the social environment. Interestingly, all three children effectively deployed political agency in one situation but not in another.

Looking at the narratives of Rahul, Diya and Priyanka, one may wonder how we can understand the subjectivity of all three children, where the material practices of snacks and the relational practices of sharing with others coalesce. Santos's (2014) analysis illustrates that the Western liberal subject is a conceptual invention by the dominant system of social regulation in order to control, manage and regulate us. In this mode of thought, the subject is expected to present himself/herself in appropriate ways in the public space (Mansfield 2000). But, as Mansfield (2000, p. 6) describes, subjectivity is 'primarily an experience, and remains permanently open to inconsistency, contradiction and unself-consciousness'. This corresponds with the notion of 'ontological becoming' where the idea of becoming is never ending. Also, it's pertinent to note that political subjectivity is not a value neutral concept. The recognition of a political subject and under what circumstances the political subject is recognised raises some fundamental questions as demonstrated by Hyndman's (2010) analysis on two contrasting case studies of child soldiers and its resultant discourses around victim/activist, violence, terrorism, and legal entitlement. In cases where children are acknowledged as legitimate political subjects, it is either of those children in activism or where children's lives are politically wrapped up in a crisis/conflict situation. Indeed, not all the aspects of children's political acts receive equal treatment, for example, children's political views and expressions on sexuality are less recognised in relation to other aspects of children's life world (Kraftl 2013). Therefore, the notion of 'political subjectivity' of Priyanka and how it resonates within the contested debates on childhood innocence and political morality is much to our musing.

By reading the example above, how can we interpret Priyanka's action in relation to innocence and morality in juxtaposition to Western thinking on politics? The term 'innocence' is considered as one of the foundations for Western modern childhood upon which the notions of vulnerability, dependency, immaturity and incompetency are further constructed in its descriptions (see Viruru 2008). This innocence discourse, in a way, conceptually privatises childhood from the adult world, and, most significantly, it also denies them the right to be a part of public life. The belief that children are innocent and vulnerable and are in need of protection from worldly threats has its roots in the Western Christian thinking. Viruru (2008) argues that although the term innocence is frequently associated with childhood in everyday common usage, it has a deeper meaning in its conceptualisations: as a lack of knowledge of oneself. Interestingly, it has a political element too. Childhood innocence is not universal, rather it's a social construct and it has been used to deny them their participation from family life to public life (Garlen 2019). This romanticized version of innocence has attained a durable effect, 'so durable in fact, that to question its logic seems tantamount to sacrilege' (Garlen 2019, p. 55). I would argue that troubling the notion of 'innocence' in the case of Priyanka might be useful to understand politics from a different viewpoint. As Santos (2014) argues, this may give us an opportunity to rehabilitate the social experiences that have been ignored so far, perhaps, with a different analytical lens. The case of Priyanka is a proof that the idea of innocence should gain emancipatory potential at least conceptually from its normative moorings in order to understand the political in childhood.

Her action also leads us to (re)think the morality discourse in politics. Generally, the normative discourses around politics in the Western modern thought are concerned about rule of law, freedom of the individual and morality/ethics. These parameters are believed to be essential for the robust functioning of democracy. For Levinas, subject is a bridge between ethics and politics (c.f. [Stone 2010](#)). For Nietzsche, political orientation to ethics/justice is much more important than economic redistribution for political/social change. In his view, morality is not universal and it is being imbued through the process of 'moralisation' and encounters with the cultural history (c.f. [Ansell-Pearson 1994](#)). However, there is a tension between the ideal and the real, between how politics should be and how it is, in the global south. The Western critical theories of Foucault and Habermas are pretty useful in their attempts to strengthen democracy and civil society ([Flyvbjerg 1998](#)), but they are not adequate to capture the political complexity and messy social reality of the global south, where politics has its own trajectory and logics of practice. As [Chatterjee \(2004\)](#) claims, violent tactics and clientelism co-exist in the political process of Indian society. Nietzsche's view on conscience and free will is somewhat important here (c.f. [Ansell-Pearson 1994](#)). He views that conscience is not intrinsic and it evolves through orientations. Also, the conceptions of morality and immorality, and the moral prescriptions in circulation, will be central to the way someone evaluates the political action/behaviour of oneself and others. While reading Priyanka's action, I would argue that rather than using immorality as an excuse for the elite to exercise control over the subaltern, there is a greater need for us to understand how the politics of immorality actually works in everyday politics in the global south. As [Savransky \(2017\)](#) asserts, a reorientation of thought on the abyssal line that differentiates knowledge from reality is imperative too to understand the politics of reality.

Finally, it is obvious that children perform political acts in idiomatic ways and the signifiers such as '*kaay*' and '*pazham*' are evidently different from the languages of ideal politics such as reasoning, deliberation, and argument, as identified by [Habermas \(1989\)](#) in his rational communicative action. Such idiomatic expressions are exclusively communicated in child-specific scripts and grammars which normally elide the attention of conventional political discourse.

## 8. Concluding Remarks

This paper is my modest attempt to contribute some knowledge to that already expansive scholarship of children's politics within the frames of 'epistemologies of the south'. As [Nieuwenhuys \(2013, p. 5\)](#) writes, however, the purpose of the paper is not to offer 'a theoretical justification for anti-western sentiment' or an outright rejection of 'childhood' or 'children's rights' as a form of cultural imperialism (c.f. [Wyness 2013](#)). Instead, what I sought to attempt here is challenging the dominant Eurocentric thinking from where the golden standards are established, marginalities are judged, subaltern practices are ridiculed, and the epistemic privilege/violence is sustained (c.f. [Wyness 2013](#)). With that spirit, the paper sought to establish a dialogue between epistemologies of the south and Western critical theory on the basis of mutual respect for collective learning (see also [Nieuwenhuys 2009, 2013](#)).

Generally, the youth or adolescence is considered as a 'threshold' stage for entry into public life, a period for political awakening. This paper, along with a growing number of recent evidences, suggests that 'early experiences' are crucial for political orientation and children are capable of being political in diverse ways in everyday lives. The formation of political subjectivity in a life course is not 'abrupt'; instead, childhood as a 'precursor', inter alia, provides socio-political resources and existential experiences in shaping their political orientations. Children's political practices are socially situated, and their political consciousness is embedded in inter-subjective interactions and inter-relatedness with other generations in the institution. It is unfair to assume that children and young people would do politics in the same way as adults do, and the empirical analysis presented above, particularly the signifiers used by children for ending/renewing a relationship, substantiate this argument. Children do politics in different ways, so, in order to understand their different ways of doing politics, we need to tune into their world with different ways of seeing/knowing. For children, politics is not pre-given,

and as Jeffrey and Dyson (2014) say, it is generative, it is ambivalent, it is fluid, and it is dynamic. Also, the everydayness and social practices of the subaltern population in the early years centre indicates that the social reality produced therein is much more complex, as Balagopalan (2019) describes, in a zone of non-sovereign relationality, than the scripts and grammars of Western modernity. Finally, children are not the victims of ‘politics of knowledge’, rather they are victimized by the ‘epistemology of absent knowledges’ and ‘the limits of representation’; as such, the fight for recognitional justice should be considered as a ‘knowledge born out of struggle’ as Santos (2014) proclaims.

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