

**Title: Survival of Alternative Logics in Mature Fields: The Case of  
Alternative Schools in India**

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**Abstract:**

This dissertation examines how alternative organizations in highly institutionalized and mature fields can deviate from institutions. Institutions are socially constructed rules, norms, and beliefs that result in taken-for-granted practices and routine-like behavior. Mature institutions, characterized by strong rules and norms and highly taken-for-granted practices, are particularly more powerful making it extremely difficult for organizations to deviate from institutionalized practices. In such highly institutionalized and mature fields, can organizations deviate from institutions? I explore this theme through new-institutionalism theory, particularly through the concepts of institutional logics and institutional work.

Institutional logic highlights the presence of multiple institutional environments guided by distinct logics at the societal level. These logics serve as bases for action for individuals and organizations. Most of the extant studies on institutional logics have focused on the dominant logic of the field examining the effect of dominant logic on the organizations or the change of dominant logic in a field or the competition between multiple dominant logics in a field. Very few studies have focused on the alternative logics in a field and the alternative organizations that follow these logics. Even these studies have primarily taken a field-level perspective, and reveal very little about how alternative logic is enacted at an organizational level. Specifically, we do not know how and what alternative organizations do to enact alternative logics given the pressures of the dominant logic, particularly in mature and highly institutionalized fields. In this thesis, I address this gap. By employing the concept of institutional work, I examine alternative organizations at an organizational level and inside the organization.

Specifically, I ask the following three research questions. (i) How do alternative organizations in mature fields maintain alternative logic externally? (ii) How do alternative organizations in mature fields maintain alternative logic internally? (iii) How do alternative organizations in mature fields influence the field towards change?

Given the exploratory nature of the research questions, I employ a qualitative inductive method, the purpose of which is to elaborate theory. Specifically, I adopt a qualitative multiple case study method studying four alternative schools in India. I chose the Indian school sector as the organizational field and the empirical context, as it a mature, highly institutionalized and regulated field with strong forces for isomorphism. A state-centered logic dominates the Indian school education field for more than two centuries. The State exerts considerable control over school education in India controlling all

aspects of the school such as mandating curriculum, textbooks, school infrastructure, teacher qualifications and conduct of examinations. However, a non-dominant, alternative learner-centered logic that originated in early 20<sup>th</sup> century continues to be present in the field through the activities of few schools, which I call alternative schools. The two logics are based on different educational philosophies, incompatible epistemological assumptions and contrasting beliefs about what is legitimate knowledge. These, in turn, affect the whole organizational structure and processes of the school such as the goal of the school, the teacher-student relationship, the role of teachers and students, the curriculum, and the mode of transmission and evaluation of knowledge. Even though state-centered logic dominates the field, the learner-centered logic remains in the field, albeit as an alternative logic, through the functioning of alternative schools. Hence these schools serve as an ideal setting to explore alternative organizations in mature fields.

My findings show that alternative organizations engaged in multiple forms of institutional work both outside and inside the organization and also at the field level. Externally, alternative organizations engaged in two forms of institutional work – legitimacy work and defensive work; internally, alternative organizations engaged in three forms of institutional work – balancing work, relational work and acculturation work; and at the field level they engaged in sub-field creation work. Additionally, I find that the different forms of institutional work affect each other. Further, I find that the characteristics of the institutional referents affected the institutional work done by alternative organizations. Particularly the power and economic status of the institutional referent affected the institutional work done by alternative organizations externally.

This thesis contributes in advancing our understanding of alternative logics in mature fields, offers insight on the institutional work of alternative organizations and highlights the effect of institutional referents' characteristics on institutional work of organizations. My study supports the finding of prior studies that organizational fields are heterogeneous and multiple logics exist within a field. It extends the literature further by showing that even though multiple logics exist within a field, it is not as easy for organizations to gain legitimacy from these logics, as posited in the extant literature. The organizations, subscribing to alternative logic, had to expend considerable effort in securing the legitimacy. Even then, alternative organizations cannot ignore the dominant logic, and they can gain stronger moral legitimacy only by achieving the outcomes prescribed by the dominant logic. Consequently, they have to balance both the alternative and dominant logics within the organization and eventually end up as hybrid organizations.