

Experiences of Dalit children:

1. I met Namori, a 12-year-old Dalit boy, whose family along with others found an opportunity within the earthquake to abandon their native village on the Pakistan border to settle 15 Kilo Meters away from Bhuj (the district headquarter of kutchh), and felt liberated from continuous caste harassment. I asked Namori, “ What would you like to be in future?” His diplomacy threw me off guard. “ You tell me” , He said. I persuaded him to tell me himself. Without much hesitation, without looking in my eyes, looking far off towards the dusty barren stretch of waste land surrounding his locality, as if he was telling himself he said, “ Why should I even think of it when there is no work available anywhere” .

2. Champa, 12 years of age, is a bright girl studying in her village school in 6th class. Both her parents are landless farm workers and when I met them a year and halfback they were paid Rs. 12 for ten hours of hard labour. With their income, unable even to feed themselves, they decided to ask Champa to drop out of the school. Champa was sad and her mother could not bear her sadness. I offered help to take care of Champa’ s education amidst tremendous protest from her sick and old grandmother, who shivered from the very thought of Champa’ s rejoining school, as the burden of domestic duty would fall on her. Aware that her protest had hurt Champa, the grandmother tried to please the child,

“ We will make you happy my child by marrying you off” .
“ You do not want to make me happy by allowing me to attend school” , said Champa. The grand mother tried again,
“ Don’ t feel bad, my child we will find you a good boy.”
“ How am I to get a good boy, when I am not going to be educated?” asked Champa, and I only had tears rolling my eyes.

3. Sangita is 14 years and she is a manual scavenger in Gujarat. She dropped out of her village school. She was unable to bear the humiliation, when her teacher pushed her to the last bench, as she ranked higher in the class. Many other scavenger children in her village also dropped out. Sangita, with tears rolling her eyes told the camera crew making ‘ Lesser Humans’ , “ I had dreams of becoming a doctor but all my dreams have shattered” .

4. A hardly eight-year-old scavenger community boy complained, “ Our teachers tell us to sit away. Are not we human beings?” Another boy intervened, “ Our teacher tells us that why at all we need to attend the school.”

5. A note found on the dead body, cut into three pieces of a 12 year old scavenger community boy narrated how he was forced to commit suicide by falling in front of a train by the behavior of a teacher bent upon suspending only him from the school since the deceased along with other boys were caught playing with teachers scooter. The boy had felt too bad since the teacher after forcing his father to sign an apology note in the most humiliating way had told the boy, “ Now I will see how you will study and further progress in life.”
6. I was once requested to intervene by the Dalit undergraduate and post-graduate students staying in the Ahmedabad based hostel sponsored by the state social welfare department to resolve a tiff with the management. I witnessed when I visited their staying quarters that the condition of the hostels were not fit even for the pigs.
7. I recently met a Dalit youth who had passed electrical engineering with distinction. Having failed to get employment he was forced to work in a factory for Rs. 2000 a month. His fellow worker was earning the same salary and doing the same work without finishing even the schooling. The youth told me that the first question asked to him during various interviews that he appeared was, “ What is your caste?”
8. Recently I witnessed the most pathetic hostel conditions for the college students in Ambedkar University, in the same hostel that was started by Dr. Ambedkar himself. There was hardly any bed that was in a good condition and students were cooking in the hostel rooms, as there was no mess facility.
9. All these incidents reminded me of my own primary education in the best school of my town, a missionary institute. We were admitted in the school and exempted from paying fess for being the poor catholic children. But there were occasions when we were made to sweep the classrooms when other children were playing in the compound.

The common characteristic in all these real life stories is that all the characters are Dalits. Secondly, none of them are ready to tolerate the humiliation imposed on them, as there is protest. And the protest symbolizes their aspirations, which often are found non-articulated. This is all happening in educational institutions dealing with the power of knowledge. The power of knowledge and its value for the communities oppressed through social and religious institutions as a tool of liberation is evident both from the behavior of the teachers, in these cases all non-Dalits, and the protest of the Dalit students against such oppression. The concern however is that especially children are vulnerable to powerlessness in against pathetic behavior of teachers.

Historical background:

We need to look at the present Dalit situation in its historical perspective. Some of the so-called scriptures especially like Manusmriti that described caste law, had one definite prohibition for all law castes considered menial. They were denied right to learn and even listen to the scriptures. The punishment for the violation of these rules was severe. Some of the caste prejudices that we witness today inbuilt into the experiences of discrimination faced by Dalit children, has the so-called religious and social force, derived from the historical inheritance.

History of National independence has witnessed unpleasant clashes over the introduction of rights to education for the Dalits.

1. Jyotirao Phule, a social reformer from Maharashtra started schools for Dalits and women, to be thrown out from the parental house and continuously harassed by the Brahmins. The latter felt that what Jyotirao did, essentially defiled their religion. Later on representation from Jyotirao, the colonial Government introduced admissions for Dalits in the schools. To protest this all the teachers, who happened to be Brahmins resigned from their jobs. They believed that to give knowledge to the untouchables was against their religion.
2. It was the Gandhian effort that a schools for untouchable children could be started in Panchmahal district of Gujarat but no Brahmin teacher were ready to teach Dalit kids. In both these occasions it was the Muslim teachers who took up the job.

The learning:

Those in power and those who continue to be the privileged sections of Indian society based on caste have inhibited the empowerment process through education and knowledge of Dalits. The same was the learning of the blacks in USA and other regions.

What is Education? :

Many ask the question: Why those Dalits who have attained higher education and better economic prospects get alienated from their community? The answer lies in the fact that we often confuse literacy with education. Secondly, we cannot ignore the fact that knowledge in the context of India is influenced by the caste and class positions and therefore it ultimately justifies the *Verna* ideology essentially manifested through inequality of human beings. The knowledge thus born out of the caste mind and psyches cannot fuel social change. Therefore

even when Dalits gain so called higher education, what they essentially internalize is the caste ideology. The model therefore they inherit from the educational system is the one of the oppressors; the very image that is one is trying to challenge.

Needless to say that here **when we speak of education for Dalits, we are talking of their empowerment to challenge the caste based discrimination and the way of life determined by the Verna ideology, that has strengthened the caste system.**

Basic questions to Dalit education:

The Dalit struggle for self-empowerment faces some basic questions that we need to deal with.

- ✓ What is education?
- ✓ What is the concept of liberation from the caste-based oppression that we seek to propagate through education?
- ✓ What is the identity that we seek to develop for the Dalit masses through education?
- ✓ What would be the approach and methodology to Dalit education?
- ✓ Are we going to develop the curriculum of Dalit education based on the reaction to the dominant castes or would it be different in consonance with the kind of social order that we propagate?
- ✓ Can the Dalit movement entrust the *state*, a body deceived as a neutral organ of governance but which is essentially the manifestation of the prevalent socio-political structure, with the responsibility of Dalit education? (The recent move on the part of the ruling right wing Hindu party to alter history books need to be looked in this perspective)

Following has been some basic issues that deal with the above questions.

Identify:

The question of identity has been the core concern of the Dalit movement. By and large Dalit identity has been defined always in the interface with the non-Dalit identity. The impact of this has largely been counter-productive. To believe in the supremacy of the non-Dalit character and attempt to follow the same as a model of one's assertion can only be disastrous.

Dalit identity has in the historical perspective been restricted to name-calling. The journey began from the *outcastes* and passed through various names such as *oppressed people*, *untouchables*, *fifth Verna*, *harijans*, *adi-dharmi* (community practicing original faith), *scheduled castes* and *Dalits*. This was the search for something liberating. The present Dalit movement is equipped with pedagogy

and it has done good work to create an ideology that can be the source of moral strength.

'Dalit' therefore does not restrict itself to the caste identity of a community. Rather it propagates a moral position for the community that is bound by a common ideology and a set of values. These are based on the vision of a new social order.

'Dalit' therefore promotes: Self-respect, Equality and Freedom. These values denounce both the concept of upper and lower castes. This identity cuts across various caste communities as well as distinctions based on grounds such as sex, religion, colour, national or ethnic origin and provides space for all who shares these basic values and a way of life based on them in a manner that is non negotiable.

Education:

It is the satisfaction of basic psychological needs that play an important role in the overall growth and development of the personality of the children. In the context of the caste system, the Verna ideology is reinforced on the children, both Dalits and non-Dalit through practice and promotion of caste practices. The prejudices towards each other section flourish and the set of social behaviors with system of sanctions are institutionalized.

The high drop out ratio of Dalit children from primary education of 50% and 64% for the girl child is largely due to the denial of satisfaction of basic psychological needs. The enormous stress created on the minds of tender children through rejection of their needs and themselves as equal to their fellow students has adverse impact on the growth of their creativity of a near permanent nature.

At this point it is important to recognize the fact that the peer group pressure is an important element for learning and developing balanced social behavior. It also helps developing the self-esteem. In the case of Dalit children, the peer group pressure is the major element that promotes frustration and rejection of the personality of Dalit children.

Education in the above context in the case of Dalit children therefore refers to creating an institutional mechanism, which basically creates conducive environment where their self-esteem can flourish and their creativity can blossom. It means essentially to expose them to the values of self-respect, equality and freedom. And above all it means creating conducive environment where there is no rejection of both their needs as well as personality. It also means that there is no overloading of expectations from them what is considered a good behavior that is born out of the culture, which propagates supremacy of the non-Dalit psyche.

This kind of education presupposes a kind of a teacher and the pedagogy both. The teacher here is more of a friend and philosopher and not a taskmaster. It is very important not to convey to the children that there is some problem with them that needs correction. The teacher should be able to advocate and develop reverence in the minds of children towards the basic values that are at the core of the Dalit identity.

It also needs to be kept in the mind that these children when they walk in the school they already do carry along with them the baggage or a dose of the caste system from the social environment and they need to offload that with proper understanding.

Pedagogy:

The important question is whether a balanced social formation of Dalit children is possible in isolation and segregation even in the best institutional environment. Since the mission of creating new identity for Dalits is important to us that presuppose a healthy social and political interaction between groups having the peculiar social positions, this question becomes even more important.

Although, it is a well-accepted truth that other poor who may be even more poor than the Dalits, they do not face discrimination. The sense of social power over dalits for this poor act as moral booster to ignore ones poverty. Although one may agree that there cannot be segregated schools for Dalit children, the essential question relates to the distribution of opportunities. Politically, the fact of Dalits owning quality educational institutions may increase their social power over others.

This apart the important question so far as the pedagogy is concerned, pertains to the content of education. Sadly and increasingly education in the modern times is more perceived in the terms of future economic career rather than as a tool to shape ones life and values. The question of values and ideology are important aspects to Dalit education.

The role of fantasy and creativity is also important to Dalit education. The suppressed energy requires greater avenues and fewer inhibitions to satisfy hunger to know, master, acquire, create, explore, dream, demonstrate etc. This leads us to the question of teacher, the tools and the method. The curriculum has to add more that is not in the books prepared by the NCERT, vulnerable to political agenda. This requires more teachers' training than that of students.

So far as the basic education is concerned we are talking of three levels: *Pre-primary, primary and the mid-school*. The first level needs basic care, love and introduction to the system. The second level requires personal supervision of the

parents and community, conducive environment to develop and sustain interest in the school. While the third level requires special care, opportunities for learning, environment where the creativity can flourish and the ability to fight the competition is nurtured.

In the context of education that we talk of for Dalit children, it is best that the parents and the community institutions handle the first level. The second level should be done at the government school, at the governments expense with the special supervision of the parents and the community. The third level, from class 5th to the 10th should be handled by the community owned private but collective system, and at a little distance from the home. Needless to say that the system of co-education is integral part of the system.

Responsibility:

The usual argument and the position of the majority is that the responsibility for education of the citizens is the responsibility of the *state*. Had the state been a neutral agency of governance there would have been hardly any space to differ from the common perception. From what we read through, the experiences of Dalit children after 54 years of National independence and in the state where Gandhi set up the first university to train the cadres of freedom fighters, there is hardly any doubt the Dalit movement is justified in its position of rejection of the state as a sole responsible agency to rule the domain of education. The present education system is designed to maintain the social status quo.

What the state can be held responsible is to commit the resources. But as far as the curriculum, the teachers' training and the method of imparting education to Dalit children are concerned; it has to be without option the, responsibility of the Dalit movement.

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