

EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL REENGINEERING
A CONCEPT NOTE TO SUPPORT THE DALIT MOVEMENT THROUGH PRIMARY EDUCATION

- Martin Macwan

Experiences of Dalit children:

1. At his new home, I met Namori, a 12-year-old Dalit boy, whose family along with others found an opportunity after the earthquake to abandon their native village for a shot at liberation from continuous caste harassment. Namori's old village was on the Pakistan border, and his family had resettled 15 kilometers away from Bhuj (the district headquarters of Kutchh). I asked Namori, "What would you like to be in future?" His answer threw me off guard. "You tell me," he said. I persuaded him to tell me himself. Without looking in my eyes, looking far off towards the dusty barren stretch of wasteland 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 half back 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 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 then 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," she said.
"You do not want to make me happy by allowing me to attend school," said Champa. The grandmother 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 in my eyes.

3. Sangita is 14 years old, 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 in the back of the classroom, even though she ranked higher in the class. Many other scavenger children in her village had also dropped out. Sangita, with tears rolling down her face, told the camera crew making the documentary *Lesser Humans*, "I had dreams of becoming a doctor, but all my dreams have shattered".

4. A hardly eight-year-old boy from the scavenger community complained, "Our teachers tell us to sit separately. Are not we human beings?" Another

boy broke in, “Our teacher tells us that there’s no reason for us to attend school at all.”

5. A note found on a 12-year-old boy from the scavenger community’s dead body—now cut into three pieces—narrated how he was forced to commit suicide by falling in front of a train. The boy had been part of a group of boys caught playing with the teacher’s scooter, but the teacher had been bent on expelling only the scavenger boy. The boy was devastated after the teacher forced the boy’s father to sign an apology note, and in the most humiliating way had told the boy, “Now we will see if you can study and further progress in life.”
6. The Dalit undergraduate and post-graduate students staying in the Ahmedabad-based hostel sponsored by the state Social Welfare Department once requested that I intervene and help resolve a tiff with the management concerning the hostel. Upon visiting the hostel, I witnessed that its condition was not fit even for 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 even finishing his schooling. The youth told me that the first question asked to him during various interviews in which he appeared was, “What is your caste?”
8. Recently I witnessed the pathetic hostel conditions for 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. My siblings and I 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 theme 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, and there is protest. The protest symbolizes their aspirations, which often are found unarticulated. This is all happening in educational institutions dealing with the power of knowledge. The power that knowledge represents as a tool for liberation, and its value for the communities oppressed through social and religious institutions, 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 children are especially vulnerable to powerlessness against the hostile behavior of their teachers.

Historical background:

We need to look at the present Dalit situation in its historical perspective. Some of the so-called scriptures, especially those such as the Manusmriti that described caste law, had one definite prohibition for all castes considered menial: they were denied the 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—prejudices inseparable from the experiences of discrimination faced by Dalit children—maintain so-called religious and social force derived from historical inheritance.

The introduction of the right to education for Dalits has encountered all kinds of opposition. Two such experiences are briefly described below.

1. Jyotirao Phule, a social reformer from Maharashtra in the 19th century, started schools for Dalits and women, only to be thrown out from his parents' house and face continuous harassment from the Brahmins. The Brahmins felt that what Jyotirao did essentially defiled their religion. Later, on representation from Jyotirao, the colonial Government introduced admission for Dalits in schools. To protest, the teachers—all Brahmins—resigned from their jobs. They believed that to give knowledge to the untouchables was against their religion.
2. Through Gandhi's effort, schools for untouchable children could be started in Panchmahal District of Gujarat. No Brahmin teachers were ready to teach Dalit children, so Muslim teachers took up the job.

The lesson:

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

What is Education? :

Many ask the question: Why do those Dalits who have attained higher education and better economic prospects become alienated from their community? The answer lies in the fact that we often confuse literacy with education. Moreover, we cannot ignore the fact that knowledge in the context of India is influenced by

caste and class positions, and therefore ultimately justifies the *Varna* ideology essentially manifested through the inequality of human beings. The knowledge thus born out of the caste mind and psyche cannot fuel social change. Even when Dalits gain so-called higher education, they internalize the caste ideology. The model they therefore inherit from the educational system is 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 caste-based discrimination and the way of life determined by the Varna ideology, which 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 for Dalit education?
- ✓ Are we going to develop the curriculum for Dalit education based on a reaction to the dominant castes, or in confluence with the social order of equality that we are trying to 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 nationalist party in Gujarat to alter history books needs to be looked in this perspective.)

The following have 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 always defined in the interface with non-Dalit identity. The impact of this has been counter-productive. To believe in the supremacy of the non-Dalit character and attempt to follow it as a model of one's assertion can only be disastrous.

Dalit identity has in the historical perspective been restricted to name-giving. The journey began from the *outcastes* and passed through various names such as

oppressed people, untouchables, fifth Varna, 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 the concept of both 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. It provides space for all who share these basic values and a way of life based on them in a manner that is non-negotiable.

Education:

The satisfaction of basic psychological needs plays an important role in the overall growth and development of a child's personality. In the context of the caste system, the Varna ideology is reinforced on children, both Dalits and non-Dalits, through practice and promotion of caste practices. The prejudices that various groups develop towards each other flourish, and a set of social behaviors with a system of sanctions is institutionalized.

The high dropout ratio of Dalit children from primary education—50% overall, 64% for girls—is largely due to the denial of the satisfaction of basic psychological needs. An enormous stress is created in the minds of tender, impressionable children through a rejection of their needs and constant reinforcement of the idea that they are not equal to their fellow students. This stress has a nearly permanent adverse impact on the growth of their creativity.

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

Education in the above context in the case of Dalit children therefore refers to the creation of an institutional mechanism that fosters an environment in which their self-esteem can flourish and their creativity can blossom. It also means exposing them to the values of self-respect, equality and freedom; not overloading them with expectations of the non-Dalit version of what is considered "good", which

propagates the supremacy of the non-Dalit psyche; and above all it means creating an environment in which there is no rejection of either their needs or their personality.

This kind of education presupposes both a kind of a teacher and a kind of pedagogy. 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 mind that when these children walk into school, they already do carry along with them the baggage of the caste system from their social environment. This baggage needs to be eliminated 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 we presuppose a healthy social and political interaction between groups having peculiar social positions, and at the same time pursue the mission of creating a new identity for Dalits, this question becomes even more important.

Although it is a well-accepted truth that Dalits are not the only poor in India, and some others may be even poorer than Dalits, they do not face discrimination like Dalits do. The sense of social power that non-Dalit poor feel over Dalits acts as a morale booster to ignore their poverty. Although one may agree that there cannot be segregated schools for Dalit children, the essential question relates to the distribution of opportunities. Politically, Dalit ownership of quality educational institutions may increase their social power over others.

So far as the pedagogy is concerned, this question pertains to the content of education. Sadly and increasingly, education in modern times is perceived more in terms of a future lucrative career than as a tool to shape ones life and values. The questions of values and ideology are important 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 the hunger to know, master, acquire, create, explore, dream, demonstrate, and so on. This leads us to the question of the teachers, tools and methods. The curriculum has to add more than what is in the books prepared by the NCERT, vulnerable to political agenda. This requires more training of teachers than students.

So far as basic education is concerned, we are talking of three levels: *Pre-primary*, *primary* and *mid-school*. The first level needs basic care, love and introduction to the system. The second level requires the personal supervision of the parents and community, and an environment conducive to the development of interest in school, and the continued presence of that interest. While the third level requires special care, opportunities for learning, and an environment in which 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 parents and community institutions handle the first level. The second level should be done at the government school, at the government's expense with special supervision of the parents and the community. The third level, from class 5th to 10th, should be handled by the community-owned private but collective system, and at a little distance from the home. Needless to say that co-education is an integral part of the system.

Responsibility:

The usual argument and the position of the majority is that the responsibility for the 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 of the experiences of Dalit children after 54 years of National independence—and in the state where Gandhi set up the first university to train cadres of freedom fighters—there is hardly any doubt that the Dalit movement is justified in its position of rejection of the state as the agency solely responsible 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 to do is to commit the necessary resources. But as far as the curriculum, the teachers' training and the method of imparting education to Dalit children are concerned, it absolutely must be the responsibility of the Dalit movement.