

Pedagogical neutrality and conflicts in the classroom

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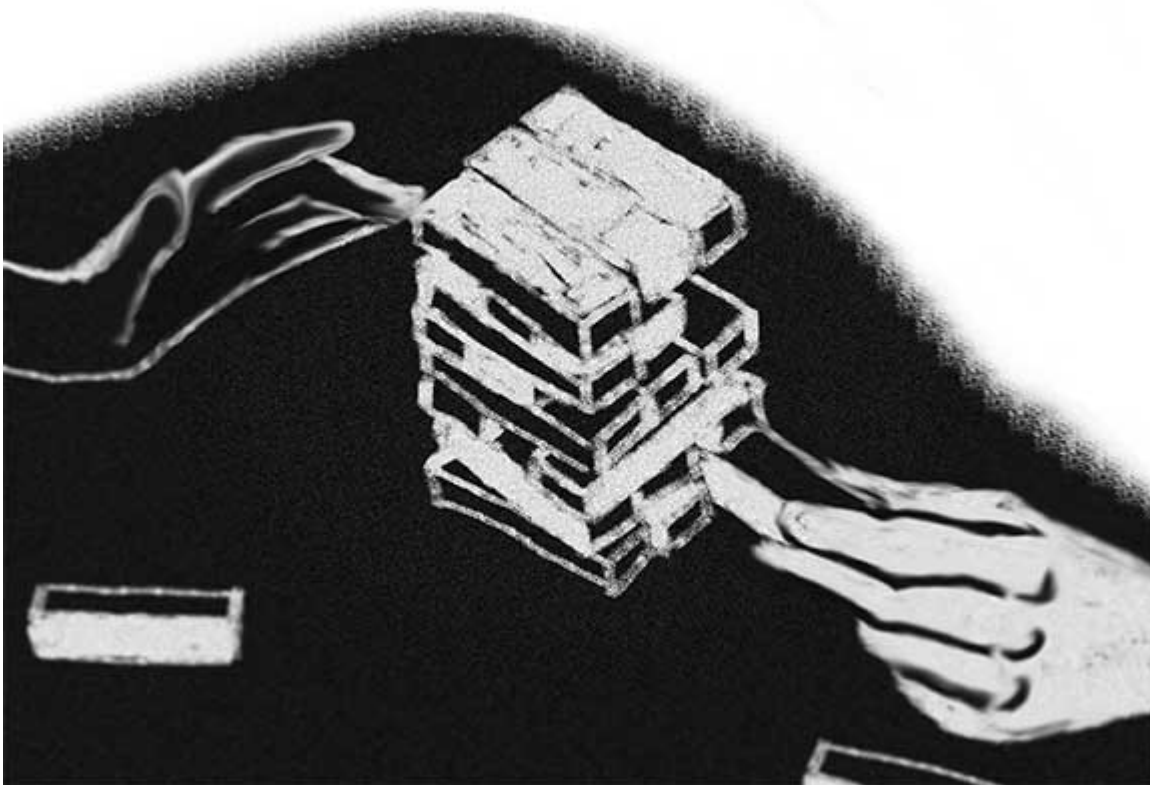
Prakash Iyer

Anubhuti: Students learn many things from home and families and come into class with preconceived notions. They disagree with each other and we teachers have to deliver judgment on who is right and who is wrong. How do we do this and ensure children and their families do not hate us?

I was teaching the history of the caste system and explaining ways in which caste oppression played out. One student said his parents told him that untouchability is wrong and is no longer practiced in India. He said caste is practiced only in rural, backward areas where people are uneducated. He went on to say that his house-help was “*lower caste*” and even then his parents were so nice to them.

Another student was visibly offended hearing this and screamed, “How dare you call people ‘*lower*’ caste!” He said calling people *lower* or *upper* was proof that his parents were casteist. He was fuming in anger and had tears in his eyes. I had to intervene, and to calm him down said I agree it was a mistake to use the term and advised the first student that rather than *upper* or *lower*, we should say *different*. I explained how development and education helped rid our society of regressive practices.

I am glad I dealt with it as an issue of language and calmed the situation. I am still wondering why this student was so agitated and angry. Our class is quite caste neutral and the first student was being nice and sharing something important that he had learnt. Now the other student hates me thinking I am taking the wrong side. I need to work some more to make students unemotional and focus on cognitive learning in class.



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Ira: But Anubhuti, is it possible to reduce complex social issues like this to merely cognitive? They are bound to cause agitation and even trauma. Maybe the child was agitated because he related the class to his and his parents' life experiences, and possibly has different learnings about caste than the first child. How do we know he did not experience extreme discrimination and the use of the term '*lower caste*' reminded him of all that. You should have encouraged him to speak more rather than shut his learnings out. Maybe others would have learnt some more about caste discrimination.

Sorry, but changing the word to *different* can itself be construed as casteism! The word, *different*, unless explained, could still contain a sense of hierarchy, which is inherent in the term '*caste*'.

Anubhuti: You mean my students will think I am casteist? The first student was not discriminating against his classmate. He was stating what he had learnt from his experiences at home and his parents. I believe they were doing something good and it was worth mentioning in class. It gave me the chance to convert this disagreement into a learning opportunity for everyone. I was able to explain how education helps get rid of abhorrent practices like casteism. If people spoke more about continuing caste atrocities, we would lose the possibility of being hopeful.

Moreover we might end up categorizing the students into oppressors and oppressed. That would be worse!

Ira: See you are struggling to use an alternative to *different*. But seriously, do you really believe caste is not practiced by educated people? Take untouchability, for example. I know many people who have separate vessels for their house-help. They drink tea made

by the house-help in exotic, expensive crockery, but the house-help are expected to drink tea in steel glasses kept separately for them. Isn't this untouchability? Wouldn't you feel insulted if you were given food in different plates?

Children learn from all this. In school, they may learn not to engage in extreme forms of caste atrocities, but they could learn subtler ways of casteism from their experiences at home. Unless we make that connection with their realities they will not really learn much about caste, except for the meaning of the term.

Anubhuti: But I am teaching history, which is about the past. I do agree terrible practices like untouchability and casteism were prevalent in India, and learning about the past will ensure they know history well enough not to repeat it. My job is to create a stable, ideal environment in the class so that everyone learns our common history.

As for contemporary times, we have civics in which we teach the constitution. The constitution does provide ample laws to ensure that discrimination based on caste or caste atrocities do not happen. The first step is to make the next generation aware of these laws. Any more details should be left to the civics teacher; that is not in the history syllabus.

Amrita: Sorry to interrupt, but I am concerned with this limited understanding of history education. We are who we are today because of our pasts and our contemporary realities are a continuation from the past. In this sense, history education contributes to our identity. This identity is not only a common political (national) identity but also our identities as individuals and parts of communities that have been and are part of the larger society we live in. Our identity as citizens of the country is informed by our knowledge of the nation's common history. Whereas, we identify ourselves as part of a community by learning the history of the community and place of the community in the nation's history. We should not only be teaching the common national history, but also the particular histories of all religions, language, and communities based on caste.

The way we narrate the history of the nation and its constituent communities, determines what each person thinks of themselves. For instance, if you remove caste from the syllabus, you are removing numerous differences between people that exist even today – even though we are all Indians. If we emphasize the common past and do not do justice to the pasts of individual groups, we are insisting that everyone agree to one identity and consider their individual identities as less important. The student in your class must have been feeling the same – as if you are denying his caste identity and the injustices on the people of his caste.

Imagine what would the *dalit* population feel if we did not include Jyotiba Phule, Ambedkar in the syllabus, and only kept Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati (all three fought against the caste system). It would pass the message that dalits were not capable of reforming themselves, and they needed upper caste reformers to do that for them.

History syllabus should be concerned with representation in the common narrative. History is a critical part of citizenship education. That is not the job of civics alone. Anyway, the syllabus is a distinction we make, but learning is integrated in the learner's mind.



Ira: But Amrita, there is merit in Anubhuti's argument of creating a safe space in class by removing all contemporary references to caste. Doing that would bring in the kind of conflicts she was talking about. Moreover would we want to classify students as being part of oppressive groups and the oppressed within the classroom! That would be dangerous don't you think?

I think too that students would have learnt contradictory things from their parents and communities. But keeping the class insular to these contradictions will actually help develop a clear and ideal picture of the nation we want – rather than delving into the problems that make our society seem terrible to live in.

Amrita: Don't you see problems with your recommendation? You are hiding children from the realities outside, which are a continuation from the past. We are morally wrong if we brush past atrocities under the carpet and only provide an imagination of a beautiful country we want to build. If we do that the syllabus itself becomes a tool of injustice.

Moreover if I teach that caste discrimination is wrong only because it is illegal, won't I be doing injustice to civics education? It is a moral issue, not only a question of obeying or disobeying rules.

In history, we can create multiple narratives from the same set of events. We can downplay some events and emphasize others. For e.g., there is a reason why our history textbooks focus a lot on the Bhakti movement, social reform, and the freedom struggle. These are critical junctures in our common history that provide an idea of an inclusive, tolerant, and syncretic nation; and as means to pose Kabir, Basava, Ambedkar and Phule as ideals to follow and emphasize that caste discrimination is evil.

Ira: I agree that we can create different narratives of a common history. By your own argument, we can emphasize the times when caste was only a means of classification of occupations, which later transformed into hierarchy and stratification. This happened mainly when the British identified backward caste, tribes, and communities in order to ensure they are included in the mainstream. Why don't we create this narrative which is safe and idealistic and equates us with most other civilizations where caste does not exist?

Anubhuti: Tagore said this very thing in his speeches on nationalism. The problem with this narrative is that caste was a means of classification of occupations in a very distant past, possibly thousands of years back. We have no means to categorically say when or how the caste system transformed society into a stratified one, making communities mutually exclusive. We can surely say that we have been like this for centuries now, and this casteist thinking is so deeply embedded in our reality that saying this does not exist would be akin to a dream...a fantasy! We can learn from our past and not repeat it, but we cannot wish it away completely.

Amrita: I agree, we cannot wish away the present either when caste atrocities are so prevalent. That is why the Constituent Assembly dealt with it so intelligently. Most of us teachers fail to see that caste reservations are not only to distribute schooling and jobs. The reservation system is based on the principle of equal opportunity and more importantly equal representation. We need people from diverse backgrounds and identities in all public spaces. This would help change even the notion of merit or good learning.

It is essential, even critical, for our classes to have students from different caste, class, gender, and even religions. That will bring in plural identities and the need for multiple historical narratives like it did in your class today. You should have helped the child bring his learning also into the class; other children would have benefited from it.

Of course it is difficult to bring disturbing emotions into the class, but learning is an emotional endeavour too – especially social science. We cannot and should not reduce social science to a cognitive exercise. Our job is to help develop the right dispositions and contribute to the formation of social and political identities.

Anubhuti: This makes teaching history more complex than I thought. I thought it was developing an interesting narrative of the past and making students aware of how societies change. I did not realize the implications of the historical narrative. It is

necessary for me to bring the multiplicity of pasts into the class and connect them explicitly to the identities children in class inhabit. The normative aspect of history – formation of political identity – is closely connected with civics and political education.

It is scary for me to bring such fundamental conflicts into the classroom. I realize that I was running away because of my own fears and being a bad history teacher. I was too keen to be pedagogically neutral, but in situations like this, neutrality amounts to escapism.

I should externalize the concept of caste and teach it as a social structure that creates oppression, rather than naming communities as oppressors. That way students will be learners of social structures and locate their own identities in this larger structure.

We have to rediscover our many pasts through the lens of the principle of equality.

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