The Teaching of Maitri

Amman Madan

We want education to shape children into good members of society. But children are pulled in different directions by different people. For us, a good member of society means someone who does not discriminate, seeks justice for all, and respects everyone. But children's immediate social environment often teaches them that their own group is superior and other groups (castes, religions, genders, classes and so on) are inferior.

Figure 1. Children form a large part of their knowledge of the world through stories.

My colleague, Tarannum Shaikh, observed among LKG children in a private school in Bhopal that many had internalised at that early age their families' belief that those who eat chicken are 'unclean'. Most of the children in this private school belonged to powerful castes. In India, non-vegetarianism is closely associated with caste and community. Several people draw the lines of high and low caste or community based on the food people eat. Through education, we want children to recognise themselves as Indians and as human beings, above all else. As Ambedkar noted, this is what the Buddhist term 'maitri' means; it is also what was called 'fraternity' by French and English speakers. However, within children's families and neighbourhoods, there is a lot of emphasis on the differences between groups and on recognising caste, gender and class hierarchies. Given this situation, the teacher has to put considerable thought into how to proceed with their educational objectives.

Several psychologists believe that children start mentally constructing 'social maps' as early as the age of one year. These maps are well in place by the age of 4-5 years. Children are conditioned by their surroundings to adopt certain social behaviours and biases. For instance, they learn to associate appearances with social status and learn to be wary of those whose clothes are different.

"Several people draw the lines of high and low caste or community based on the food people eat. Through education, we want children to recognise themselves as Indians and as humans, above all else."

Children learn that the amma who comes home to wash their utensils is spoken to in a different tone. Boys are mocked for playing cooking games, and girls are silenced when they imitate riding motorcycles. From this age onwards, children begin to feel closer to those who share similar clothes, hair, or complexion, while distancing themselves from people who appear different. This distance is taught both in the form of fear and also in that of curiosity. The form it eventually takes depends on a mix of their individual thoughts, the surrounding beliefs, and the counter-discourses that challenge those beliefs.

School education offers a chance to change the social maps that have already formed in the minds of children, where identities and emotions have created fixed images. Children feel happy when they see certain people and groups, and experience fear, disgust or anger towards certain others. It is not easy to erase these emotion-laden perceptions. One way to change them is to generate some fresh emotion-based images. After that, children themselves will strive to create harmony between the two contrasting images. Often (but not always), the result is the creation of new or blended images.

We weave the world through stories

Children form a large part of their knowledge of the world while listening to stories about it. They get immersed in stories and are transported to a world that is different from their own. Stories are a major source from which their emotions and mental maps of social groups are formed. They learn about relations of inequality and hatred to a large extent through stories. At the same time, these stories are also capable of teaching them about maitri and relationships of equality.

The difficulty is that if certain beliefs and emotions are already formed, then our minds are very efficient at holding on to them. Boys often learn that it is only men who perform heroic acts. When they are told a story in which Kamla climbs a mountain or saves her younger brother from wild animals, they enjoy the story but do not recognise the fact that Kamla is a girl. It is easier to not pay attention to this, and their original belief—that it is males who are brave and heroic—remains completely intact.

Many experts who have worked on prejudices and biases (Aboud 2009, Bigler & Liben 2007) argue that if we want to change a social map, it is important to emphasise the new map. It is not enough to just talk about the brave girl; emphasis has to be laid on that brave person being a girl. Many elements will have to be included in the story that emphasise her identity as a girl; only then will the understanding of girls being brave take root in the minds of boys. Otherwise, like the proverbial water, it will merely touch the feet of their prejudices and then flow away without wetting them.

> **Through stories, children learn about relations of inequality and hatred to a large extent. But stories are also capable of teaching them about maitri and relationships of equality.**

A good example is found in Munshi Premchand's famous story *Idgah*. Many children learn that the followers of other religions are evil, think only bad thoughts, should be feared, and so on. This is what some people of every religion—Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians —teach their children about others' religions. Premchand's story has a reversing effect on those who feel anger, hatred and suspicion at the mention of some communities.

The protagonist of the story is clearly a Muslim, and the festival described is that of *Eid*. As the story progresses, we see a visit to a fair and the helplessness of poverty through a child's eyes. This helplessness is something that people of all religions know and recognise. And the ending of the story (which I will not reveal) is such that it evokes tears of admiration for this Muslim child and his very human struggles. Reading this story brings about a slight shift in the negative images and feelings about Muslims in the minds of children from other religions. They are as human as anyone else.

Similarly, sharing the story of Ambedkar's life is a means to tilt away from the prejudices that come from the caste system.

Games of cooperation, not competition

In school, children go out to play during recess. Not everywhere, but in many places, it is common to see children of one group playing separately from children of other groups. Boys and girls are often seen playing separately. In the plains of Uttarakhand, Bengali children are separate from the Hindi-speaking ones. Children from one area tend to play together, while those from other localities play separately. This leads to relationships characterised by conflict and competition. Who will play in the best spot (for example, in the shade during summer or under the sun in the winter months)? Even when they play together, they are on different teams. All of this further consolidates and strengthens the lines of social division.

A Canadian economist named Matt Lowe conducted an interesting experiment on the games played by social groups (Lowe 2021). He organised a cricket tournament

for the youth of different castes in Uttar Pradesh. First, he distributed advertisements announcing that a tournament would be held throughout the winter months with attractive prizes and inviting applications from players. Then, it was declared that the teams would be formed by Lowe and his associates, not the players.

The applications received were carefully screened, and the players were tested in bowling, fielding, and batting. Teams were formed of members with similar skill levels. Lowe made some teams consisting of players from the same caste and others comprising a mix of castes. Before the tournament started, individual players were asked a few questions without revealing the entire purpose of the experiment. For example, they were shown the full names of some players (from which their caste could be inferred) and asked whom they would choose if they were to form a team, etc. As it often happens, the names of the players they selected were largely from their own castes.

The actual single-caste and mixed-caste teams chosen by Lowe played through the entire tournament season. Everyone in a team worked together and learned to coordinate with each other, trying to defeat other teams through cooperation. At the end of the tournament, Lowe once again asked them similar questions, for instance, among these names, who would you choose for your team; if you were to send anyone for further training, whom would you send; and so on. Now, the responses of some of the players were different compared to earlier. There were no differences in the players who played in teams of the same caste. However, among those who played in mixed teams, there was an increase in the selection of players from other castes. It should not be concluded that the entire mindset of these players and their mental and emotional maps had changed, but a change was certainly visible in them.

The basis of Matt Lowe's experiment was the *Realistic Conflict Theory*. This theory states that people inevitably form groups; it is human nature after all. However, whether they will hate each other or try to harm one another will depend on what the circumstances are and on the perspectives of the individuals involved. The most famous example of this is seen in an experiment conducted by Muzaffar Sharif and his colleagues in America in the 1950s.

Eleven-year-old white boys came to attend a residential summer camp. Sharif divided them into two equal groups. Activities, such as racing and tug-of-war, were done with both groups, in which the victory of one would imply the defeat of the other. The winning team would be applauded while the losing team would be ridiculed. Within a short span of time, unity formed within each group. The children realised that when they helped their group members, they too benefited. Along with this, they began to make fun of the other group and take pleasure in their defeat. The relations between the two groups began to sour very quickly. Within a few days, these children, who did not even know each other earlier, started behaving like old enemies. So much so that one day, during mealtime, things escalated to physical pushing and shoving.

Figure 2. In school, new friendships and fresh realisations emerge in children's minds.

At this point, Sharif put a stop to the competitive activities. A day's rest was given. Then, they were called upon to do some activities in which both groups were forced to cooperate. They were told that the truck bringing food to the camp had broken down and that everyone would have to push it together. Then, the pipe going to the water tank had to be replaced, for which everyone would have to work together. Slowly, the children of both groups became friends, and the conflicts between them dwindled.

Sharif and many other experts believe that when conditions foster competition, hatred and suspicion increase. Conversely, when circumstances make mutual competition advantageous, friendship and love flourish. This involves other factors as well—ideologies have an impact, inequalities matter, the struggle for political power plays a role, and so on. However, there have been thousands of experiments that have supported this fundamental understanding—create conditions that make cooperation beneficial—and millions of educators have adopted this principle to promote *maitri*.

Teachers have organised games in which children from different social groups have cooperated with each other instead of competing against one another. Teachers have deliberately created mixed groups for every classroom activity by ensuring that the children in each group have nearly similar skills; otherwise, cooperation is not possible. But the result has generally been that strong friendships have emerged between children from different social groups.

Impact of social, political, and economic structures

Activities and stories like these alone will not change everything. More often than not, hatred and suspicion between groups are caused by social, economic, and political structures. These issues will not end only by increasing friendships among children. The basis of casteism lies in the fact that some families have more resources while others have less. Their ideologies and customs maintain hierarchies. Competition between different castes persists—for jobs, for respect and so on. The basis of conflict between religions stems from their lack of intermingling, along with differences in their leaders and political systems. Their internal ideologies, functioning and various customs all help them maintain internal unity. When two different religions see each other as rivals for jobs, power, and respect, mutual fear and anger increase. Meanwhile, the basis of patriarchy lies in men's control over resources and their cultural dominance. In a patriarchal system, men and women get caught in competition with each other over who will make decisions and who will obey.

There are multiple causes for hatred, prejudice, and exploitation. Ultimately, only by changing these structures can they be eliminated. But the school still provides us with an opportunity to build relationships that are different from those in society. When new friendships and fresh realisations emerge in children's minds to counter pre-existing prejudices, it has a significant impact. Previously, it seemed that there was only one voice in their hearts; now, a contrarian voice also speaks softly. How the children will resolve this contradiction is ultimately not in the hands of teachers. It is the children who must navigate this. Some will find resolution, while others may not. Some will resolve it in one way, while others may have a different way. Yet, the teachers and the school will have added a new stream to the thousands of streams of their lives—the sweet stream of *maitri*.

References

Aboud, Frances E. *Modifying Children's Racial Attitudes*. In The Routledge International Companion to Multicultural Education, edited by James A. Banks, 199–209. New York and London: Routledge, 2009.

Bigler, Rebecca, and Lynn S. Liben. *Developmental Intergroup Theory*. Current Directions in Psychological Science 16, no. 3 (Jun 2007): 162–66.

Lowe, Matt. *Types of Contact*: *A Field Experiment on Collaborative and Adversarial Caste Integration*. American Economic Review 111, No. 6 (June 2021): 1807–44.

Translated from Hindi. Translator: Simran Luthra Vetter: Bhumika Translation revised by author.

Amman Madan has studied anthropology and sociology. He has been involved in teaching and research on issues of education and society for the last three decades. Currently, he teaches at Azim Premji University, Bhopal.

Contact: amman.madan@apu.edu.in