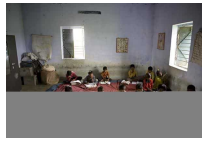


Opinion | Preserving the real value of the Constitution

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The school was invited for lunch in the village. The lunch was arranged with the elders in attendance, and the whole community present. The public (government) primary school was doing good work, led by its lone teacher, Sachin. It's his fire that had changed the school.

At the door of the house where the lunch was arranged, some of the students were told not to enter, but sit outside and eat. These children were from Dalit families. Sachin spoke to the organizers. He wanted that there be no discrimination; in the school there was none. The organizers would not let the Dalit children eat with those from "upper caste" families inside the house. The teacher did not relent. As the argument escalated, he decided to stop the lunch. Either all of them ate together or they would go back to the school. Frantic negotiations started among the organizers. In the end, the kids sat together.

This teacher is an exception. Even those who never discriminate between their students on any ground inside the school find it hard to take the battle out of the school. They and their students face such conflicts daily, on every dimension of prejudice and discrimination—caste, gender, religion, poverty and more. This is not a trivial issue. We expect school education to play a crucial role in developing an equal society. But the school is fully embedded in this very world of discrimination. Teachers have to have the understanding and the courage to battle this inside the school and outside. What can support and enable the teacher, to develop this understanding, and have the tenacity to fight these battles day on day?

On a hot September evening, 53 teachers were watching the television screen showing Shyam Benegal's Samvidhan. The room in the government upper primary school was about 600 sq. ft, and sweltering. My colleague Ravi was running the third episode of the 10-part series on the screen. The full series was scheduled to be screened on 10 consecutive days. This was in a small town called Dhorimana. This is 55km from Barmer, Rajasthan.

Ravi would pause the show at crucial moments, throwing a question at the gathering. There is a particularly poignant moment when Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Hansa Mehta discuss the depth of patriarchy that even they have to face. Ravi paused the show and asked, "How are things today, almost 70 years after the Constitution?" It sparked a furore. There were 10 women in the room. But the debate was not divided along the lines of gender. A few men admitted that despite progress in these 70 years, patriarchy and gender discrimination were alive, even within themselves. The discussion moved to caste

and then to religion. A minority confessed to the seams of discrimination and prejudice running on all these dimensions. Ravi brought it to a close; the intention was to light a few sparks, not to conclude.

The next time he stopped was after an intense segment where B.R. Ambedkar, Alladi Krishnaswamy Iyer, Syama Prasad Mukherjee and others debate the right to freedom of expression. Till one man spoke, seemingly there was agreement that we had secured freedom of expression for all in the past 70 years. He said, "What about that woman Gauri Lankesh? She was killed for expressing her views, wasn't she?" I was surprised to hear that in Dhorimana. But it did spark a fiery 15 minutes. Ravi managed to end the session, without the intensity going down, but with no animosity remaining.

Thirty-five teachers attended the show across the 10 days on an average, with a low of 20 and a high of 58. They came because they were interested, there was no order or incentive. It was an intense 10 days of exploring the Constitution. All in the context of the reality that they live in. Much after the 10 days had ended, we asked the teachers the value of Festival of the Constitution. Understanding the Constitution was only a part of it. The real matter was the discovery of like-minded colleagues. A peer network, which could provide sorely needed support on conflict-ridden matters. This sense that there was someone close to you was a spur for action in the school and outside.

Policies and curriculum mostly enable the teacher. But that is inconsequential, when confronting all this within her community and social relationships. There are those few like Sachin who may have the inherent courage. Many of even those wilt over time. Most who would like to battle discrimination find it hard to act, even within the school.

These biases are deeply ingrained in our society. The question to ask of ourselves is: What supports the teacher (or anyone else) in her daily life in the quest for our Constitutions' ideals? There doesn't seem to be much. Most of those who battle to bring our Constitution to life, in the Dhorimanas of this country, feel alone. They need not, because they are not really alone in Dhorimana. Once they get talking, they build a coalition for the Constitution. But this has to be done, it doesn't happen on its own. We cannot await Godot, we have to do this ourselves.

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