

Rooting out discrimination

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December 12, 2012



Kailash was once told by a government primary school teacher that there were just two children in his school. He happened to drop in at the school and saw 20 children. He asked the teacher why had he claimed that there were only two children at school. The teacher stood his ground. He said: "Look carefully. There are only two children, the other 18 are Nepali."

What more acute form of discrimination is possible than a refusal to acknowledge children as children? One can imagine the treatment meted out to those 18 children by the teacher.

We are all aware that various forms of prejudice are rife in our society. It is not some abstract social phenomenon, but is played out by ordinary individuals in institutions every day. It is no surprise that all hues of prejudice and discrimination find their way into our schools as well.

If a girl survives the obstacle race to get in to a school, the teacher (often a woman) usually "puts her in her place". It is sometimes her task to clean the toilets, and usually other parts of the school as well. She must help with the mid-day meal; boys don't do all this. All this is then repeatedly drilled in by talk about her current and future place in society, dutifully below and behind the menfolk. Is it surprising that the drop-out rates for girls is staggeringly higher than that for boys? We are so accustomed to hearing more brutal forms of gender discrimination that this may even seem benign.

Caste-based discrimination can invite penal action. But that is only in law books and often in the realm of political theatre. In the humdrum reality of the school, "lower" caste children, very naturally, are fed after all others. They sit at the back of the class and are often dispensed water from a distance.

A child's religion is an obvious marker for discrimination. Language, parental occupation and economic status are, too. Another kind of community marked out for discrimination across the country is migrants, both of the temporary and the permanent kind. Children with disabilities, if they are in school, perhaps have the hardest time. Our schools are in any case not equipped to support such children, and then cold, thoughtless prejudice often worsens the situation. Differences abound in our society. It appears that every difference is a potent source of discrimination.

Both active and passive discrimination is visible in schools. Such prejudiced behaviour exists not only between teachers and children but is prevalent among children and among teachers as well. It is a culture of discrimination, in comfortable equilibrium: within the school and with the community outside.

While there are significant and notable exceptions, this culture of discrimination is fairly common in our schools. Also, it is often a matter of degree, ranging from the obvious and odious to the subtle and indiscernible.

We can battle discriminatory behaviour in society only through reasoned argument, mobilization of opinion, and other civil attempts at the gradual shifting of attitudes. Schools are embedded in society and a similar set of strategies is required there as well.

However, in the case of schools, this is simply not sufficient. Schools need far more decisive, definitive and comprehensive action and such action is legitimate and urgently needed. This is because schools are institutions tasked with laying the foundation for an inclusive, tolerant and equitable society. A failure there not just vitiates the present, but threatens our future as well.

All our educational and curricular goals articulate aspiration for social justice, equity and fraternity. They also aspire for social and ethical development of children. Thus, every individual who becomes a teacher (or a functionary in the educational system) explicitly accepts these objectives. So, unlike the case of the average citizen, discriminatory behaviour in educational institutions is a violation of their professional code and also a betrayal of far more basic objectives.

The solution to this problem does not lie in starting a penal raj in schools for stamping out discrimination. It requires far more fundamental changes. This is required because we are expecting teachers and schools to be oases of inclusivity and the fostering of those aspirational values against the grain of the social forces outside. In today's India, they are hardly that.

It requires a reassessment of the kind of persons we recruit as teachers, giving weightage to empathy and sensitivity. It demands a fundamental overhaul of our teacher education system that prepares young people to become teachers. This will need a revamp of curricular, institutional and cultural modes. It requires that our education system clarify the role and expectations of teachers and schools as a continuous matter and not just in some policy document that's dusted off once in a while. This venture needs constant support for schools and teachers to fulfil these roles against the tide of prejudice in society at large.

This is a complex and difficult task. This is but to be expected as the task is to make our society more inclusive and equitable, for which schools are certainly in the vanguard.

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