



Teaching ‘Marginalisation’ to the Marginalised

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I am the Manager of a government-aided minority school situated in the walled city of Delhi. More than sixty percent of the children in the elementary and higher classes of the school are from socio-economically and culturally marginalised backgrounds. The editors of Learning Curve requested me for an article because, as a member of this school community, I have been mulling over issues of exclusion and inclusion. I could have written about the marginalised and subaltern lives of our children. Since, however, many of the readers of this journal are practicing teachers, I felt I should share my reflections of a few Social Science classes that I took in the school in November 2012.

The students in question were from Class VIII and the topic was ‘marginalisation’, a topic that is part of the prescribed NCERT/CBSE syllabus of the school. We used ‘Understanding Marginalisation’, a chapter of Social and Political Life, textbook for Class VIII (New Delhi, NCERT, 2008) as a basic text. The interaction I describe happened in Hindi-Hindustani-Urdu. As a Professor of Education I constantly engage with higher education but rarely, as a practicing teacher, with school education. The brief experience recounted here brought to the fore my dilemmas regarding teaching marginalisation to the marginalised in a Delhi middle school and I share these with you.

My interaction with the children made me wonder about several questions. Would this chapter help the marginalised understand their position vis-à-vis other classes, groups and communities better? Would it prompt them to think about possible solutions for the transformation of their lives? Alternatively, would the realisation of the conspiracy of societal structures (and allied agencies) impede their progress? Would it intimidate them into silence and acceptance of the

status quo and discourage them from making the requisite effort to change their situation? Furthermore, since all of us have multiple identities, several margins may characterise any society such as those of class, caste, gender, language, religion etc. In teaching this topic we would indeed have to address the question of overlapping identities and compounded disadvantage, but also that of cross-cutting identities. I’ll return to this issue towards the end of this piece.

All the children in the class belonged to the Muslim-minority background and were from migrant families of skilled and semi-skilled labourers of U.P, Bihar and Rajasthan. Of the twenty, only six were girls. At least fifteen boys worked in small factories (karkhanas) to supplement family income and the girls helped their parents in income-generating activities such as packing of different materials like shirts, bags, clips, purses etc. The dingy karkhanas served as both the living and working space for many children, who resided here with only their male relatives in order to access ‘quality education’. Their homes – if these can be called that – lacked sanitation and ready access to basic facilities such as water, health and playing space.

Following the structure of the chapter, I started to teach by discussing the marginalisation of Adivasis. The many aspects we covered included cultural marginalisation and its linkages with the structures of opportunity and access. Through this the children were able to grasp well what hashiyebandi or marginalisation meant at both individual and societal levels.

The students were quick to relate key issues to their own lives. Regarding their own marginalisation due to language-related expectations, for instance, they had this to say:

- *“Once we went to St George School for a match. Even the little primary-school children were speaking English. We felt sad for we wondered why are we are not able to speak English. We also go to school but have failed to learn.”*
- *“When children from rural areas say ‘sarak’ (the softer ‘r’) instead of ‘sarak’, they are ridiculed.”*

As we moved to the marginalisation of Muslims, the kids were able to relate to the chapter even more. They had a lot to share in this regard:

- *“Muslims are seen in a demeaning way.”*
- *“If Muslims and Hindus fight and the case is in the courts, Muslims are belittled. The case is won by Hindus.”*
- *“Villains in films are shown as Muslims.”*
- *“Once my neighbor was looking for a job; members of other communities were unwilling to give her a job. When she got one, she had to undergo a lot of humiliation. Is being Muslim a sin?”*
- *“If there is a bomb blast anywhere, Muslims are the first to be named.”*
- *“When Muslim women go out in burqa, they are treated with disdain for being different, for not being like the non-Muslims.”*
- *“Not just us, but all Muslim brothers are aware that Muslims are harassed. If an untoward incident happens then Muslims are blamed for it. They show the Muslims as culprits even in films.”*
- *“Muslim families are economically weak; children are forced to shoulder economic responsibilities. Hence they drop out after school and don’t go to college.”*
- *“When Muslims were subjected to atrocities and cruelty in Gujarat no one came forward to help them. This happened because no Muslim there had any government job.”*

A close look at these responses will make us realise that the children’s individual experiences were being legitimised as group experiences. The information and data from the Sachar Committee Report given in the chapter further validated their

experiences; it encouraged them to equate these to the experiences of the entire religious community. Their replies dwelt on: experiences of prejudice on using the hijab or burqa, experiences of discrimination by state-run institutions such as the courts and the police, paucity of opportunity in education and employment etc. Some were also able to make the connection between their cultural and socio-economic lives.

I realised what I had achieved through the interaction was only a more pervasive community-level consciousness. The questions which I was now forced to pose to myself were: would their Muslim consciousness and the understanding that this community is a victim of the larger social-cultural structures give them confidence or would it further impede their progress? Or would the children subscribe to the theory of compounded disadvantage and see their marginalisation to be a product of the interpenetration of several factors? It may be fair to argue that in some ways Indian Muslims are marginalised just by virtue of being Muslims. But how far is religious identity alone responsible for the marginalisation of these Muslim worker-children?

Why should the textbook or the teacher have the power to make religion the children’s overwhelming identity? Should they not have the freedom to understand that they have an array of identities? If in the future they decide to wage a struggle against their exploitation should they not have the freedom to choose an ‘anchor’, a ‘prime mover’ from their multiple identities? But would this not be tantamount to drowning their distinctive minority identity within the larger whole or making it hazy? On the other hand, doesn’t ‘othering’ happen when an overpowering Muslim identity is thrust upon people and their multifarious characteristics are ignored? Shouldn’t my children understand the historicity of their position and be encouraged to resist its construction as a ‘natural essence’? Shouldn’t the constitutional promise of the protection of minorities be revealed to them while still leaving them with the freedom to understand and confront their marginalization? It is important that students and young adults are able to relate to

the multiple facets of their identity; only if they are able to do so, would they be able to recognise the multiple facets of other people's identities as well.

We can see from the children's responses that they had a deep sense of estrangement and alienation. It was important for them to realise that they were a part of a community so that they could draw strength from each other and combat their marginalised position together. The dilemmas I share made me realise the challenging, critical and political nature of the role of a teacher. The challenge was too much for me to bear. I felt I couldn't continue to teach this theme with the same thoroughness and confidence!

Yet, I wanted to take the topic to its logical conclusion. Anil Sethi, whom I have already acknowledged, and who had earlier helped establish the History Club at the school, offered to take the interaction further. The following is an excerpt from the two hour interaction that took place between the students and him:

Teacher (T): We all have several identities. Can you tell us which these are?

Child/Children (C): We are Hindustani but we are also Muslim.

T: Yes; and there could be many others too. You may be from Bihar and you have a language or languages. You may be a boy or a girl. And different income levels can also be the basis of identity. Isn't it?

C: Yes they are!

T: Then why do we say we are marginalised by virtue of being Muslim? In some families boys are given a lot more care and attention than the girls. Such a boy may not be on the margin in his family, but because of the family's low income, he may feel marginalised in society. Can marginalisation be understood through a single lens?

C: "We Muslims are low in caste and status, hence we are marginalized."

T: "And in some situations, Muslims can also be understood as a caste group." The whole community is then regarded as a caste. In many

places, upper-caste Hindus observe pollution taboos with Muslims just as they do with the lower castes."

C: "All such Muslims are victims of marginalisation."

T: "If they are the victims, who are the perpetrators?"

*C: "They don't get the support from the government."
[A detailed discussion takes place]*

T: "Many Muslims of status went away to Pakistan (at the time of Partition). Is this one of the reasons why the government does not pay heed?"

T: "When two or more (marginal) identities operate in tandem, several disadvantages may accrue."

C: "In a few situations it is not the fault of the government. Muslims don't study much."

C: "This happens as they are forced to take up work because of penury."

T: "Then which of their identities is putting them in a position of disadvantage?"

C: "Both of being poor working-class people and being Muslim."

Later a discussion ensued about ways to confront marginalisation. The different responses revealed that most children had understood their different identities as well as the related disadvantages. They had also grasped the interpenetration of identity-factors. They had an understanding of socio-political barriers to their progress, albeit in accordance with their age. They even spoke of solutions. These 'solutions' may be utopian but aren't dreams the raw material of any action?

I initially assumed that the children were open and frank with me because they saw me as a co-religionist. But the non-judgmental environment of mutual respect and trust ensured by Anil made them even happier and willing to share their experiences. This, for them, amounted to an acknowledgement of their position and they appreciated the empathy of a person belonging to some other community. The discussion also helped

the children peep into democratic struggles as a site of possible emancipation:

C: *"We will have to launch a movement."*

C: *"Yes, we'll have a movement for Muslims, a movement against the government so that we can get jobs."*

T: *"But you had said that marginalization happens also because the concerned people are workers."*

C: *"Yes, being workers enhances their marginalisation."*

T: *"So, how will you organize your movement?"*

C: *"We'll mobilise all the worker-brothers so that we get a just wage, so that we can have houses; the workers' children must be educated well and they must move on in life!"*

T: *"What really is meant by a mass-movement? How will we organize it? How will it pan out? Will we organise it as Muslims, as workers, or as both?"*

I have been very appreciative of the Social Science textbooks prepared by the NCERT, based on the National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF, 2005) but they remain - and should remain - only one of the tools in the hands of a teacher trying to navigate dialogic understanding in different contexts. A teacher in a school where most children are from

advantaged or from Hindu-majority backgrounds may teach this topic with the different objectives of familiarizing and extricating solidarity for challenges faced by the minority community.

The creators of Social and Political Life, Parts I, II, and III, NCERT textbooks for Classes VI, VII, and VIII have been wise to include a chapter on socio-political marginalisation. In these books they speak of overlapping and cross-cutting identities. In our country, class and caste or class and religion, for instance, can be both symmetrical and asymmetrical. There are locales where the lower castes or Muslims are the lower classes as well (overlap or symmetry) just as there may be locales where this may not be so. Yet, as much research and investigation have shown, the overlap between being Muslim, being poor and being challenged by several other disadvantages preponderates. In the ultimate analysis, the reality of compounded disadvantage that marginalized groups such as Muslims, Adivasis and Dalits suffer from must be brought home to students.

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