

# The Mother, the Other and Language Education: Making a Case for Critical Language Awareness

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"The 21st-century citizen will work in media-, text-, and symbol-saturated environments. For the unemployed, underemployed, and employed alike, a great deal of service and information-based work, consumption, and leisure depends on their capacities to construct, control, and manipulate texts and symbols."

(Luke, 1995, p. 5)

## **Introduction**

This paper is study of a co-educational, Hindi-medium, government-run middle school in Indore in the state of Madhya Pradesh, India. This was a classroom ethnography conducted with a class VIII classroom<sup>1</sup>. I have taken a critical pedagogic<sup>2</sup> approach to interrogating classroom processes and my discussion of language classrooms in this paper is framed by the assumption that education has a role to play in furthering equality and inequality, and social justice and injustice for learners and their communities.

Based on the evidence of children's experience of language classrooms as well as of social relations and representations (texts/images) outside school, I would like to argue that in addition to the very narrow purpose of teaching grammar and literacy skills, the study of language itself-as envisaged in Critical Discourse Analysis perspectives (Fairclough, 1999) must become part of language education in schools. Instead of being developed as sites where learners reflect on patterns of language use and develop the ability/skills needed to unpack power relations underlying texts, language classrooms remain embedded in marginalizing discourses around religious and gender identities. Due to restrictions of space, I will focus on the Hindi

language classroom, even though similar concerns arise with regard to the English language classroom as well.

## **Education, Difference and the Question of Representation**

Post-independence, mass public schooling became the norm, and despite the inequalities and infrastructural and curricular issues plaguing it, formal education has become accessible to an increasing number of sections who were traditionally denied access on the basis of gender, caste and region. However, this expansion of education has not been accompanied by a systematic interrogation of the purpose, content and practice of education; i.e. "what education is for, and for whom" (Fairclough, 1999) and "[w]ho succeeds and who fails in schools? How and why?" (Luke, 1995).

These questions arise because schools value a certain cultural capital and reject or deny others. Since, we are still struggling with questions of access and retention, raising the issue of how (language) education tackles issues of representation and social justice may seem like jumping the gun to some. However, whether we are ready for it or not, the world around us has changed. The world that adolescent students

are negotiating today-as workers, learners and consumers<sup>3</sup> is drastically different from what the existing education system prepares them for. Language classrooms are still focused on making students memorize, recite, and reproduce lessons and the 'right' answers. But, as interviews with students revealed, this is a terribly narrow and unrealistic version of what they actually have to accomplish through their linguistic abilities: such as dealing with employers and abusive male members in families, negotiating identities as members of violent gangs<sup>4</sup> and other peer groups, listening to songs, watching daily soaps on television, viewing/reading text messages and video-clips on WhatsApp.

Here are a few examples of the kind of texts and images learners routinely process:

- 1) The following are the lyrics of the song, "Manali Trance", composed by Yo Yo Honey Singh for the Hindi movie *The Shaukeens*. Honey Singh is a particular favourite among boys in my study. Many of them have the song on their phones and seem familiar with the video accompanying it. The song has been available on radio and television for some time:

It opens with a girl swaying amid a mass of apparently "high" young men and women, mouthing these lines (sung by Neha Kakkar):

*Badla mizaaj mera phookte hi grass  
Grass lage hai mohe sabka ilaaj  
Thoda toh main jhoom loon iske nashe mein*

*C'mon DJ laga de dubstep trance*

(A rough and ready translation would be: soon as I smoke grass, my mood lifts / grass feels like a cure for all ills / while I'm on a high, let me sway & dance / DJ, put on some dubstep trance).

- 2) Many boys reported having seen videos of cows being slaughtered by Muslim-looking men on their smart phones, via WhatsApp. These videos typically show images of how cows are tied up brutally in a prelude to being slaughtered, struggling cattle, gory details of cows/bulls being restrained and killed, bloodied floors and butchers' knives, etc.
- 3) Add to these videos, graffiti scattered across the city, more ubiquitous in areas inhabited by the poorer sections but also highly visible at some prominent squares in the city: "*gau mata ke hatyaron ko fansi do*", "*gau mata ko rashtra pashu ghoshit karo*", and "*shakahar apnao, bacchon chartiravan ban jao...*" ("hang the killers of the cow-mother", "declare the cow-mother our national animal", "adopt vegetarianism, children, become moral").
- 4) Television is a major source of entertainment, at least for girls<sup>5</sup>. The shows that most girls reportedly follow are family dramas broadcast on Hindi television channels such as Colors. Gender roles and images perpetuated by these shows are usually circumscribed by patriarchal values and worldviews. Women are often portrayed in the roles of dutiful, religious, caring and self-sacrificing wives, mothers and sisters (e.g. the main characters, their mother and aunt in television drama *Sasural Simar ka*). Even if women/girls are shown to be high-spirited or wilful, they are not very independent or rebellious. There are the usual negative stereotypes of women as well: spiteful aunts, autocratic grandmothers or scheming mothers-in-law. However, there are also a few unconventional role models in these shows. For example, *Diya aur Bati Hum* revolves around the life and work of a policewoman and seems to have inspired some girls to desire this role for themselves.

While it would be difficult-indeed even incorrect-to draw a blanket conclusion regarding all entertainment offered by Hindi channels, there is certainly an urgent need to create a space where learners can reflect critically on the images and messages conveyed through these shows.

Whether it is sensual voices and erotically swaying bodies supposedly on a grass-induced high, bleeding and dead cows, or high-spirited but self-sacrificing wives and daughters, how are the children to make sense of these images and texts? How might these interpretations affect the way they negotiate their religious and gender identities and "others"? What worldviews, values and experiences shape their processes of meaning-making? What do these questions and these representations have to do with language education?

We might begin to answer these questions if we recognize that "language is a social practice, that language is shaped by and shapes values, beliefs and power relations in its sociocultural context, and that language use can contribute to discursal and social change" (Clark and Ivanic, 1999, p. 64). And that, "...visual images in particular are an increasingly important feature of contemporary discourse [.]" (Fairclough, 1999, p. 71). This is the view of language and language education advocated by critical theorists of language in the interests of a *critical* pedagogy of language. They propose "critical awareness of language" as a goal of language education "at all ages and levels" arguing that this would help students understand how they view themselves and how they are viewed by others, that is, help them become conscious of how they come to be positioned in particular ways within various discourses. They can then, perhaps, begin to critique and challenge the social roles, positions and relationships assigned to them.

As the examples described earlier reveal, learners are besieged daily by "representations .... produced elsewhere" (Fairclough, 1999, p. 75). As children watch/hear/read these representations, they need to be able to raise questions regarding their purpose, production, distribution and content. For example, who owns various television channels? Who produces, directs or sponsors these shows? Who is the intended audience? Whose cultural capital gets "air"ed; why only particular gender roles and relations are endorsed; and whether alternatives can be imagined, enacted and aired. Similarly, one may ask why only one animal's life is sacred. What cultural and political interests does proliferation of cow-slaughter videos serve? Whether the kind of food we eat should be a factor in determining our moral superiority/inferiority. Learners must be encouraged to raise such questions if they are to reflect on the social relations they are embedded in.

### **Evidence of Differentiation and Marginalization from the Classroom**

What I found in the language classroom was an endorsement of the very social relations that often prove oppressive for learners because of their gender or religion<sup>6</sup>.

The teacher, Sharma sir (not the real name), spends most of his time lecturing the children on good habits and "moral" values. He punishes them (hits, calls them names, orders them out) and yells at them for not sitting properly or in the places he assigned them to, for talking or laughing. Seating boys and girls next to each other is a punitive strategy he adopts in order to curtail movement and conversations; more than other teachers, he insists on making the children sit this way.

His usual non/verbal approach to children is perceived as undignified and resented by many children, particularly, girls. He often addresses students as animals (*jamwar!*), uses curse words

(*abbe, saale*), and makes rude comments about their posture, ability, etc. Another characteristic of his interaction with students is his constant moral policing, from disciplining every movement of the learners' bodies, to their interaction with each other and possibly romantic or sexual aspects of this interaction<sup>7</sup>.

### **The "Mother" and the "Other" in the Hindi Classroom**

While Sharma sir sometimes praises individual girls, his references to women/girls are usually in the negative<sup>8</sup>. He also makes derogatory comments about some of the girls in the class. He and the English teacher both seem particularly disapproving of two girls - Pooja and Sapna (cousins). Pooja's mother is a sweeper in the school. The girls belong to the SC community<sup>9</sup>. Neither girl's behaviour is disruptive, but both teachers seem to disapprove of their friendships with boys. Sharma sir regularly finds opportunities to humiliate Sapna, making her answer questions almost every day. He tends to test her memory and general knowledge, not her knowledge of grammar or usage. Clearly, he finds it permissible to shame girls in front of the class by commenting on their academic inability or moral character. He harasses Pooja with comments like: "*kise dekh ri hai mud ke, ---- ko ya ---- ko..?*" (who is it that you are turning to look at all the time.... --- or ---?), naming two boys sitting behind her. Even if she were looking at a boy, it is not a crime but he makes it sound like one, in order to embarrass and reproach her.

The only instances where he shows respect and admiration for women is when he talks about ideal forms of motherhood. Textbooks and teacher alike employ the trope of the sacrificing, nurturing mother when talking about rivers such as Narmada (*punya salila Narmada maiya*) and historical figures such as Ahilyabai Holkar (*lokmata Devi Ahilyabai*). In other words, right

alongside television shows watched by the children, teacher and texts also end up perpetuating the particular (limited) roles and images imposed upon girl-students by their families and communities.

Sharma sir also goes to considerable trouble to regularly mark Muslims as the "other", while simultaneously establishing "natural" binaries for Hindus, through references to Hindi as "our" language and English and Urdu as "their" (foreign that is, British and Mughal/Muslim rulers') language. While he praises some Muslim children for their academic ability and good behaviour, he also carefully and frequently marks them as Muslim by underscoring Urdu as "their" language. This seamless connection between Muslims, foreign rule and Urdu is as problematic as the connection between Muslims, non-vegetarianism and cow-slaughter. Any mention of non-vegetarianism elicits collective groans from the students, with some students offensively caricaturing meat-eating. I never saw Sharma sir object to this attitude. He does not directly bring up cow-slaughter but often mentions the holiness of the cow and its importance to "us". Specifying this "us" seems superfluous given the propaganda audible/visible in the city<sup>10</sup>. A couple of boys often mock their Muslim classmates by addressing them as "mutton", *kasai* (butcher), and with comments like, "*ye hamari gaayen kha jate hain na..!*" (these people devour "our" cows). Coupled with wider anti-Muslim propaganda, the teacher's silences and pronouncements assume greater significance.

### **Conclusion**

Given such classroom scenarios, and wider socio-political changes sweeping across the Indian society, an approach to language education that is rooted in the paradigm of Critical Language Awareness seems eminently desirable and equally difficult to accomplish. The notion of developing the study of language itself

as part of the purpose and process of language education in schools necessitates taking on urgent questions of state-spending on education, pedagogic practice, curriculum, teacher-education and resources available to teachers and learners. Language classrooms can become sites of critical awareness of language/discourse only if we are willing to rethink the very purpose of education. The choice is between serving the needs of the economy or "education for life within which a critical awareness of discourse is necessary for all" (Fairclough, 1999, p. 81).

## References

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this work is to critically explore and understand the ways in which classroom (big 'D') 'D'iscourse empowers and/or marginalizes learners from various sociocultural backgrounds, through its texts, pedagogic practices and social relations. My work involves classroom observation over a period of seven months as well as in-depth interviews with teachers and students.

<sup>2</sup> "There is by now a fairly large body of work under the rubric of 'critical pedagogy' . . . Viewing schools

as cultural areas where diverse ideological and social forms are in constant struggle, critical pedagogy seeks to understand and critique the historical and socio-political context of schooling and to develop pedagogical practices that aim not only to change the nature of schooling, but also the wider society." (Pennycook, 1990, p. 24).

<sup>3</sup> My study reveals that they are enacting all these roles every day. Most boys are already part of the informal economy, particularly through the ready-made garment industry, while girls are either working outside or at home, bearing the brunt of an alarming informalization of our economy. In addition, as users of mobile phones and flash drives, etc., and as audience of television shows, they are also consumers in their own rights.

<sup>4</sup> Many boys are also part of groups of young men in their locality. Often these men are also party workers for political parties active in the neighbourhood. The boys become involved in conflicts between groups and also rely on the groups to back them up in their individual conflicts. When such group or individual conflicts erupt, boys report that they try to resolve these through talks before resorting to violence. Thus their own and others' wellbeing sometimes depends on how well they can talk their way out of a potentially violent situation.

<sup>5</sup> Most girls report having their movements heavily policed and see themselves as having the most freedom in school. It is only in school that they can talk to friends, share secrets and move about without their every movement being under the judgemental eye of adults (one girl even reports being spied upon by her younger brother at the behest of the mother). The private/public divide shapes girls' lives, desires, freedoms, opportunities and fears most significantly, and girls realize it very well. Since, unlike boys, they cannot go out to work or play (even if they can there are often restrictions on dress, voice, games, playmates, etc.), watching television is an important part of the lives of those girls who are not deprived of some free time due to a heavy domestic workload.

<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly, caste and class are equally significant indices of difference and oppression and

it is only a restriction on space that is preventing me from discussing all aspects of inequality in the language classroom.

<sup>7</sup> For example, he has sometimes complained to the class teacher (also the Sanskrit language teacher), that some of the boys hug and kiss a lot. His tendency to always be suspicious of children's relationships and disapprove of romantic attachments is noted and commented upon by the children.

<sup>8</sup> For example, sometimes, he has mentioned women only to make fun of their alleged tendency to talk too much, their inability to focus on the task in hand, (e.g. to be thinking of all sorts of domestic chores when sitting for pooja), or getting free samples from fruit vendors.

<sup>9</sup> While Sapna is a bit more vocal and assertive, Pooja is a quiet girl. Pooja seems more interested in school work than Sapna but both enjoy reading stories. Sapna also seems to have body image and skin-colour related issues. She is more heavily built than other girls in the classroom and quite dark; and some students routinely made derogatory references to her skin colour or mimicked her, which may account for her extreme self-consciousness and nervousness when asked to read out aloud in class.

<sup>10</sup> For example, religious sermons in temples, graffiti on walls, public speeches.

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