Different Cultures of Citizenship | Which to Teach?

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What should be the content and goals of an education for citizenship? This is not a simple question. There can actually be several ways of answering it, with serious disagreement among the various positions possible. It is also a dangerous question to ask, but schools and teachers have little option but to pose it, if they wish to be relevant to our times and be able to teach something meaningful to their students.

To begin with, there is the issue of whether to take the narrower view of looking at citizenship that focuses on how we behave vis-a-vis the State – for example, if children should learn to follow what the government says. Or should we take a broader view of citizenship as being about how to behave in the public realm as a whole and not just with respect to the government? For instance, how to act in one's local residents' welfare association, on the roads, on public issues like those of global warming, communal harmony and so on. This perspective on citizenship is much bigger than that which deals with the government alone. Most people in education today, when pressed, would probably say that they prefer the bigger and broader version of citizenship. Children should, after all, learn to be active and responsible members of the local community and that community is not just the *panchayat* or the municipality. This is an easy choice to make. But other choices are more difficult.

This article is about some conflicting ideas which I had seen in a *taluka* of central India two decades ago (Madan 2003, 2005) about how to behave in the public realm, and which still vex us. I was then working with *Eklavya* and lived in the small town of Hoshangabad for three years. This became the base for doing an ethnographic study of cultures of citizenship in the town and three villages around it, while also running libraries in them. It turned out that there were deep divisions between different possible approaches to life in the public realm. The issue of what kind of citizenship to teach in schools is similarly divided into different possible paths, of which we need to choose the one to take.

Rational and egalitarian Constitution

Standing at one side of the divide over citizenship is the Indian Constitution, written by a committee headed by B.R. Ambedkar. It does not just give the framework followed by the post-colonial Indian state, it is also a stellar example of the culture and code of behaviour for public life which our freedom struggle stood for. The culture and values which underlie the Constitution have influenced the activities of many individuals, NGOs, the government and private companies. At their heart is the idea that all humans are the same and we should see everyone at a deeper level with the same eye. This is the idea of equality, which comes from the growth of western democracies and also from portions of the *Upanishads*, from Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and other powerful cultural influences. This culture says that all the people of this country are ultimately the same. Their socially ascribed identities – their religion, caste and gender - do not really matter.

> When the government builds a primary health centre in a village, it is for everyone and there is no discrimination on the basis of the social identity of the person who comes there. It is held that the caste, religion and gender of those who seek treatment in it should not matter to the centre. Only a positive discrimination to favour the weak is acceptable. So, for example, when government installs hand pumps, instruction is given that these be set up first in the *mohallas* where there are none already. The instruction could further say that these be set up in the *mohallas* of SCs (Scheduled Castes) and STs (Scheduled Tribes), since they usually lack resources for building wells and hand pumps. This is apparently an exception but is still in the spirit of equality of all. After all, creating equality requires that those with no resources be brought to the level of the rest.

The growth of markets and the penetration of the Indian state into remote parts has given a

big boost to the culture of reason and equality in many places, including Hoshangabad. While acknowledging that everyone is the same, these have also led, in practice, to growing inequality in many places, but I shall leave that question aside for the present. The point is that in a region like this, with deeply entrenched caste and gender inequalities, the market and the State are important institutions which promote more inter-connected cultures and ways of thought. With their growth, the spirit of reason and universalism has expanded, even if it is often compromised by the existing inequalities. When we look at this vast social transition taking place in our land, it appears that teaching citizenship would mean teaching a culture of equality, reason, universalism, freedom and so on, which are enshrined in our Constitution.

Domination, not equality

The Constitution and the religious voices which spoke of the oneness of all humanity, it should be noted, confront a social reality that denies and rejects equality. The caste system was strong in Hoshangabad when I was there, and inter-caste marriages were rare. The caste system rests on the basic principle of inequality, not equality. It believes that there should be different rules for different social groups, not the same for everyone. In the caste system, it is held that some people deserve more respect and resources than others. By all reports, this has not changed much.

The upper-ranking castes had a powerful belief in their superiority. Their beliefs were supported by the fact that they were also the biggest landowners in this primarily agricultural region. They made up the largest number of government employees too, having been the first to get an education. They also controlled the biggest businesses and most political positions. One particular Brahmin family – one of whose men was the local MP, another an ex MLA, a third the head of the *Zila Parishad* and a fourth the principal secretary of Madhya Pradesh – owned over a thousand acres of land. Public power was predominantly male and the few women who were taking up official positions were habitually mocked. The lower OBCs (Other Backward Castes) were slowly rising and trying to form a political force with their numbers. But the upper castes were a powerfully entrenched force which they had to deal with.

The culture of caste reached out into many corners of social life. Eating meat was publicly frowned upon. Upon meeting a stranger one of the first things which was inquired into (if the surname did not reveal it) was that person's caste. Getting a house for rent in 'upper' caste localities in the town was very difficult for Muslims and those who were not from those castes. The spirit of the Constitution here was squashed by the forces of the caste and class system. The culture of public life was that of deferring to one's superiors and being assertive and dominant over one's inferiors.

Caste, wealth and occupation formed the structure on which power and politics rested. The employees of the government, particularly the officials of the Collectorate were deferred to by all. A cluster of politicians and contractors worked intimately with employees of the local state government to work in ways that suited them. The ideals of the Constitution faded to irrelevance here. People joined the State or worked with the State because it was a step towards power, not because they wanted to deliver equality, justice or fairness to all. A government job was much sought after not because it was a way of creating equality and providing justice to all, but because after getting it you could 'take it easy.'

Gender, caste and social networks were the basis of most public activities. Cultivating social networks was necessary if one wanted to get things done. Through them, one was able to use money and position to cajole, bribe or threaten to achieve one's ends. This was done primarily through networks of men – women were conspicuously left out of them. Differences in power and a hierarchy of respect were clearly visible to all. Social life was divided into segments and one worked for one's own segment, not for universal good as recommended in the Constitution. When any *panchayat* got some money for the improvement of roads in the village, it was the road in front of the *sarpanch's* house or in the *mohalla* of his caste-folk that was repaired first.

There was also widespread resistance and unhappiness with this social pattern. Cynicism and a lack of faith in the government were widespread. Youngsters, women, Dalits, Adivasis and the lower OBC – all those at the lower levels of the social hierarchy - were the ones who spoke to me most passionately about freedom and equality. Yet, what could you do? In the absence of an alternate vision of public life, one based on fairness and justice, it was easy to slip into apathy and try to just work along with this system.

The local hierarchy was held in place through a mix of the use of fear, apathy and cultural symbols.

Journalists who tried to expose the complicity of contractors, politicians and government officials would get beaten up. Disagreements were frowned upon. The powerful thought that any disagreement was a sign of political opposition that could lead to losing face in public. Those who disagreed were considered a nuisance and had to be silenced in one way or the other. Publicly questioning a local ward member meant you could forget about getting anything done from the government so long as the person was in power. He (or rarely she) would, henceforth, oppose all your proposals tooth and nail, irrespective of their merit. Honouring and paying obeisance to powerful people was an important agenda for all religious and cultural festivals. Not honouring them in the various public events being hosted meant, as *Eklavya* learned at its cost, that they thought you were arrogant and needed to be cut down to size. Staying on the right side of powerful people was very important at all times.

I asked a large number of people why they and others worked and took action in the public realm. Why did they help to dig a water tank, or organise a religious festival or donate money for a cause? The answer in almost all cases was because the person leading the cause was someone they had to follow so that they could get into his good books or simply stay out of his bad books. Rarely were things done just because they were good things to do, about which, more later.

The contrast between this culture and that which lies behind the Constitution is sharp. The Constitution's culture insists that the government's activities be in the service of universalist values, like equality and justice. So, the state would make rules that said that the allocation of funds was for setting up, say, a hand pump, in a Dalit *mohalla*. But the various actors involved would consider it the most normal thing in the world to extract their pound of flesh from it. They would, for instance, obstruct or delay the work and would have to be approached through networks of men of their caste or other affiliations. It was ordinary for a cut of 20-30 percent to be deducted at various levels before the hand pump was installed.

The conflict between these two kinds of cultures acted at many levels. *Eklavya's* social studies programme had textbooks that passionately taught about rights for all that had been guaranteed by the Constitution and what we could do to protect our rights. The teachers of the government schools with who this programme worked were deeply moved by those textbooks. And yet, some of them said, 'If we teach these textbooks as they are, the next day the *sarpanch's* lathi-bearers will come to our school.' They ended up glossing over the contents of the textbook at places where they feared repercussions.

Community love

Between the rational equality and justice of the Constitution and the local ways of life in the public realm, there was a vast gulf. But there were other voices too in the local ways of public life. Asking around for why people did things in public spaces and whom they were trying to appease led me to several exceptions. One of them was a man from the OBC category who had led the construction of steps (a *ghat*) along the river Narmada. The river has a special place in the cultural life of people of all religions who live here. They enjoy telling and re-telling the local belief that the Narmada is so sacred and so pure that just seeing it is enough to absolve one of one's sins. They point out that you have to actually go and dip into the Ganga to achieve the same.

Ghats have been made at some places along the river with donations from the rich or because of the influence of politicians trying to show how noble they are, while still taking their 20 percent cut from the construction materials. But the *ghat* I want to write about was constructed under the leadership of an ex-junkie, never-do-well. The story he told me was that he and his friends used to sit and smoke drugs by a cut on the river's bank that had many boulders scattered along the water. One day they saw a Dalit woman being scolded for having come in the way of an upper-caste woman who had come there to bathe. The Dalit woman had a difficult time stepping over the rocks to find another place for herself. So, the drug-addicts decided to tidy up the rocks a little one day. They cleared them up a little more the next day and then the day after that and so on. Slowly people began to get to know about their work and started coming to help. Someone gave a bag of cement, someone else came to mix and apply it. Some Muslims joined in too. There was no profit to be had by helping these men, they could not harm anyone either. And yet that *ghat* got built and they left their drugs behind as they worked on it.

A sense of common good was at work here. People were inspired by a selfless action and joined in to take it forward, again in a selfless way. This was

possible because it was a small community, word spread quickly through it and everyone could come and see what was being done. At the core of this public work was what they called *prem* or love. The workers and the contributors said they were doing this out of love for the river, for the idea of building a *ghat* and for the devotion that could be seen at play here. This is not the same as the rational equality of the Constitution, but it is not the hierarchical power structure of the caste and class system either. The culture of community love is another side of the divides around the kind of citizenship we want to teach children.

Conclusion

The kind of citizenship we want to teach to our children never speaks to a vacuum. Children do not come as a blank slate to school. They are part of a complex culture with many threads interwoven together. Alex M. George's study (2004) of children's knowledge about civic affairs tells how elementary school children knew quite well that money power was being used for the upcoming elections and who was taking how much as a bribe in the *panchayat*. So, which of the three threads in their culture do we want to promote as the model of citizenship – universalist equality, tactics of survival in a patriarchal class-caste system, or the love of goodness in the community? Others may choose other options, but I would promote the culture of our Constitution, combining it with the ability to see and bond with the selfless goodness that exists around us.

How to teach this is a long and separate story. Here, I stop by only saying that it cannot be taught by ignoring the realities of students' own life experiences. If we ignore these, they will simply say that yes, this is what one does in the classroom, but that is what one does outside it. Instead, schools need to start talking about what is actually happening in our world and why we should be concerned about it. Most schools and textbooks find that embarrassing and even dangerous to talk about. Yet, it is when we start talking directly about casteism, class inequality and patriarchy that students will begin to see why the culture of the Constitution gives us a way of dealing with these. Schools need to start discussing the way oppression actually occurs. That is the first step to creating a counter-culture that will transform it. The freedom struggle saw independence as only the beginning of a social transformation. It is the responsibility of schools to enact that social transformation.

References

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