

Let us think about ourselves. Which generation of learners in our family line are we? The answer to this question is one way to locate our social privileges. This hierarchical social order of caste has historically marginalised several communities who are in nominal numbers when it comes to the power structure. Communities and their social privileges can also be seen through their representation in different institutions of the state. At the same time, the roots of this huge gap should be traced and treated at the educational institutions itself.

In this article, I am trying to reflect on some of the incidents that I witnessed from my school engagements between 2019-2020 and how these are reflective of the life of students from socially marginalised communities. The incident that follows happened during one of my school visits.

The teacher was discussing different occupations in the classroom. He asked students what their fathers' and brothers' occupations were.

'Sir, *mere papa khethi kartha hein.*' (My father is a farmer.)

'Sir, *mere bhai tractor chaltha hein*' (My brother drives a tractor.)

Shop keeper, construction worker, painter, rice mill worker – answers showered from different parts of the classroom.

'So, this is how it works. Men in the house do different jobs to support the house' added the teacher.

One child said, 'Sir, *mere papa machli pakadthen hein*' (My father catches fish.)

Now came the most unpredicted response from this teacher. 'Yes, there are people like this, who do these kind of jobs. But your people do this job, not others'.

Witnessing a public servant comment on social hierarchy to primary school children was shocking. I do not think the teacher was unaware of what he had said.

I worked as an associate in another school for a year. The area is surrounded by paddy fields and a canal flows through the centre of the village. This canal separates *Theli-Chandrakar* (OBC community) settlements from the *Sathnami-basti* (most of them belong to the SC community). Even though the people I talked to rejected the presence of caste practices and separation in the village, the geographical settlements of the communities itself substantiates its existence.

There are two primary schools in this village. One in the north part (near *Sathnami basti*) of the canal and one on its southern part (where most of the OBC communities lived). I worked in the latter. Students from all parts of the village came to the school but the number of students from the *Sathnami basti* was very low and the pattern of how students sat in the class was very revealing.

There were two boys and a girl in classes I and II who usually sat together. They were shy and refused to mingle, sat in a corner of the class, not making eye-contact. They were neighbours who came from the same part of the village. This is what happened one day.

Rani came to the class a bit late and sat down in the second row. Most of the students had settled down. The boy who was sitting next to her protested. He did not want her to sit there and told her to sit in the back row where she usually sat. It is a question that we all should ask, why are children from marginalised backgrounds always found sitting in the classroom corner? Rani may not have expected this reaction. I do not know what made her change her seat then. I kept quiet and observed; I wanted to know what would happen next. The boy's words were not a request, they were a threat. She did not protest and got up to move. That is when I intervened as a classroom facilitator. I asked her to not move anywhere. He protested with me too. I asked him why she should move from there and he did not have an answer.

Then came the worst part. He had made up his mind not to sit beside her. He asked the boy who usually sat next to her to exchange places with him. Rani comes from an extremely deprived background, from a broken home with many children, she is the last but one among them. The previous year, she was enrolled in class I, but hardly came to school six or seven days in the whole year, her teachers told me. This year her sister, who wanted her to get educated, insisted that she come to school. The elder sister takes care of all the siblings and is herself a class VII dropout.

NEP 2020 says 'According to U-DISE 2016-17 data, about 19.6% of students belong to Scheduled Castes at the primary level, but this fraction falls to 17.3% at the higher secondary level. These enrolment drop-offs are more severe for Scheduled Tribes students (10.6% to 6.8%), and differently abled children (1.1% to 0.25%), with even greater declines for female students within each of these categories. The decline in enrolment in higher education is even steeper.' (Ministry, 2020)

Students in this school, like many other schools in India, come from different social and family backgrounds. The way they grasp things, learn, do homework, sleep in the classroom, dress, smell talk etc, depends upon their immediate living conditions and the way they are being conditioned to live. What better could a little girl in her early childhood do, other than coming to school every day? If she is far behind in learning levels compared to her peers, we can let that be because as one teacher said, 'She is coming to school, sir, that itself is great.'

There may have different reasons for this exclusion. The students of her class had become close to each other in the last year that she was mostly absent. Their houses are near each other's and they see each other even after school. They celebrate different festivals together. But her case is different. She comes from the other side of the village. No one else in the class comes from that side except the two other boys from the same community as hers. I leave it to you: how to understand caste, the most structured and functional inequality in the world, but is a deep-rooted practice.

Then, on Children's Day, 14th November, this happened:

The day was full of fun and happiness. The boys were divided into four groups to play *kabbadi*. The

teacher said, 'We will conduct a *rumsal* (kerchief) picking game for the girls.' The girls were also divided into four teams. The game is played thus: a kerchief is placed in the centre and each member of the team is given a number. The players in the other team also have the same numbers. As the referee calls out a number, the girl with that number from both the teams has to run and pick the kerchief. Whoever gets it, wins a point for their team and the game is won over points.

She did not try to be a part of the game. We had to force her to join. The game went on and one team won. After that, the teacher played a song through the speaker. It was a very familiar and popular Chhattisgarhi song. The girls had to dance to it in pairs. Rani was finding it difficult to follow the song and moves. Then I witnessed the moment when her classmate, Lali took her hand and moved along with her to the beat of the song. I saw a special kind of smile on Rani's face. It was beautiful moment – to catch her smile. This was my best Children's Day ever.

As the days went on, I observed how these students became more active in classroom engagements. Along with that, I also noticed the changed concern and empathy of teachers. We used to have long conversations about each child, their learning levels, how their backgrounds were affecting their learning and what we could do to help.

Keeping this mixed group in mind I always tried to make my lesson plans more integrated, inclusive, and enjoyable. We did different activities with names of the students for a week. It was full of fun, on the last day, we planned a puzzle game. The puzzle was drawn on one side of the room and letter cards were kept on the other side.

The teacher blew the whistle, 1... 2... 3...

Ayan, Manu, Vasu, Nimmi, Hema and Krish rushed to collect the letters and run back to place them in their puzzle. But Manu could not find the letters, he kept searching, while his friends were running back and forth. After completing the puzzle Krish started screaming: '*Mein jeet gaya, mei jeet gaya!*' (I have won).

The others did the same. Then, they saw Manu sitting sadly in the corner. Krish and Vasu searched for the letters in his puzzle and completed it as well. And they screamed '*Manu jeet gaya Manu jeet gaya!*' (Manu has won).

I was myself learning more and more from them every day by deconstructing and unlearning old ideas. They taught me that *inclusion starts with*

interaction, especially in the case of children. Inclusion is a thin layer of being together and helping each other.



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Awareness of gender identities start early, so we must be mindful that gender is not binary but a spectrum. Do not set gendered role and behaviour expectations from children in your classrooms. Rather, challenge gender roles in stories and help your students examine their own assumptions and ideas.

Priya Krishnamurthy, Creating Junior Citizens - Five Common Pathways, p 82.