

# Social Interaction in Schools Post-COVID

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School, for me, was the most reassuring, dynamic place for developing effortless relationships. It was where friendships are built over planning a trick on a strict teacher, doing project work together, eating lunch and sharing one's bizarre, imaginative ideas. For a lot of people, these friendships stay for a lifetime. However, school-going children today are experiencing unexpected isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This article is written keeping in mind these isolated times, the gaps they have created, and the importance schools would play in post-COVID times, or whenever schools reopen, as an active space for interaction and learning after such a long gap.

The closest engagement with a school set-up for me, after five years of my own schooling, happened in a small government primary school in Barmer, Rajasthan. As part of the compulsory school practice of the Associate Programme at the Azim Premji Foundation, I had been engaging with a limited number of children in the school for about four months. Through this engagement, I have been able to develop a strong understanding of the social dynamics at play in a school. Barmer is a caste-dominated district, by which I mean that people are actively conscious about this factor and the locals make sure they know your caste in the first meeting itself.

Added to this is the fact that Barmer is a sparsely populated district, especially in its rural parts and people live in small clusters called *dhanis* situated at vast distances. How the caste and *dhani* setup came into being becomes clear when one looks at the social dynamics more closely – each *dhani* comprises only one caste. In such a social setup, the sense of community pride and all the thoughts and culture that run within, are grasped by a child very strongly. Whatever they see and hear is what they ultimately learn about society.

The school, breaking the containment of the community pattern, is the first place a child steps into outside their *dhani*. It becomes the platform for the exposure of a child to the existing diversities in the larger society and for learning to exist in such

a space. At the same time, schools are also the place where a child's behaviour reflects the conventions that they have learnt towards people of other castes or religions. Therefore, it is the school that must consciously intervene to quell any kind of separatism/ discrimination amongst children.

## How is this going to be post-COVID?

Breaking the socio-cultural practices inside a school is a compulsory if difficult task. For example, the practice of upper-caste children of bringing their own utensils for the midday meal (MDM) can only be broken if the school bans such a practice and allows this new learning for children. Unfortunately, a long break of more than a year now has kept children not only isolated inside their homes but also absorbed in every narrative being discussed inside the house. The contagious nature of this pandemic, sadly, has also seeped into people's perspectives in multiple stereotypical ways against certain communities. In such a situation, when regular school begins, the behaviour of children while interacting with other children is going to be unpredictable. It may be positive, given the excitement they will have on meeting their friends after a long time and enjoying school memories together during games, lunch or while copying from each other's notebooks. On the other hand, it may also be negative in terms of the fears children might come to the school with. This can be with regard to catching the virus, or about social distancing from people of a particular community. The latter apprehension is drawn from my field experience during community classes when a child (who needs a lot of reminders for putting on a mask inside the class) warned her peers to wear the mask when a person from a particular community was passing by.

I had a long discussion with this child to understand her bias. She explained that a particular community was responsible for the spread of the coronavirus in our country, and we must be cautious of them. She had heard her parents discussing this. This is one of the problems that may arise post-COVID. This is not only going to be about keeping a distance from a community due to the possibility of transmitting

the disease but can also deepen the discriminatory justifications within communities against a caste or religion.

There is a brighter side to this issue. While primary schools cater to a limited diversity of the population, middle and high schools have greater diversity of caste and religion. Now with class promotions during the pandemic, the children are two classes ahead, that is, a child who was in class IV will be in class VI now. This means that whenever the schools resume, this child would be attending a higher class and a more diverse school. In such a scenario, the school's preparation needs to be ideated in a dynamic manner. To begin with, the stakeholders responsible for the school would have to begin with a sensitive, patient understanding that children may behave in an unpredictable manner, especially the younger ones, for they have been staying in a paranoid, confusing period for a long time now.

Second, the school would need to actively intervene in any kind of socially discriminatory attitude some children may express either verbally or in action, to make sure that mandatory physical distancing does not turn into actual social distancing. Intervention in such matters cannot be something like a scolding, but a morally binding dialogue or conclusions drawn from activities, stories, drama and discussions which would welcome children's fresh perspectives

and learnings. Lastly, the school's interaction with community members needs to be enhanced and structured with the motive of breaking any kind of unscientific myths that they might have developed during the pandemic against a community or a practice. These tasks can be challenging because it would not be easy to break all the conventions developed over the period of almost two years now, but schools could play a crucial role in not letting caste and religious discrimination perpetuate to future generations.

The highlighted problem and its solution might look like a situational concern, but this is how narratives against and for are built and passed on from generation to generation. Any form of hate-mongering and misleading ideas must be dealt with. Especially for children who will be entering the school as the first public space post the outbreak, this is where all their learnings of two years could be played out, putting the responsibility of proper guidance on the teachers. In fact, the nature of social interaction can be used as a blessing to correct children's misconceptions against anyone. In the end, the reopening of schools can only be seen as a hopeful space for restoring socially harmonious practices by communicating correct messages to both the children and the community.



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