Curriculum Reform, School Culture, Change: Reflections from Caste-Ridden India

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F OR NELSON MANDELA, education is the "most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." His assertion echoes the sentiment towards education across societies. While education is an important institution of socialization that strives to re-produce a society, it also carries a crusader image that can usher a desired change. This pertains to its potential to influence mindsets and guide action. This image and potential draw different interest groups, among which an important one is the modern nation-state.

Among the significant tasks taken up by the modern nation-states has been the formalization of education. Gellner (1983) links the need for formalization of education with the origin of nations and nationalism. He, like several others including Durkheim (1961), Green (1990), Hobsbawm (2000), Levinson (2011) and Smith (1991), delve into the role of schools and the education system to create a national identity and a "we" feeling among people irrespective of their other, and conflicting, identities.

The post-colonial, modern Indian nation-state is not an exception. On the contrary, it has been proactive in recognizing this potential of education. The Indian state, as Advani (2009) argues, has seen education as a fundamental instrument for change, progress and nation-building (Advani, 2009, 56). The various education commissions and policies governing the education system reflect this perception as they strived to spread literacy as well as to impart an education that would embed faith in the constitutional ideals and in a united national community. The latter goal entailed efforts to eradicate social exclusion and discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, gender and other social differences. This article focuses on one such educational initiative to address marginalization and inequality on the basis of caste.

Caste divides the Indian society into a large number of social groups that are based on hereditary membership and delineate specific social and

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economic conduct to each group. These groups are arranged in a hierar-chy (Dumont, 1999, 21). The groups are broadly categorized into the *varna* or four-fold classification system with *Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas* and *Shudras*. A fifth category which falls outside the caste system is that of the *Panchamas* or people of the fifth order. A notion of purity and pollution underlies this stratification and places *Brahmans* at the top of the hierarchy and *Panchamas* at the lowest who are prejudiced as being "untouchables" (Karve, 2014; Dumont, 1999). The first three castes are considered to be "up-per caste" and the next two are the so-called "lower caste." While the caste system derives legacy in the form of a divine sanction from the Hindu reli-gious order, the notion of caste and caste-based prejudice prevails in the so-cial practices of other religious communities in India as well (Ahmad, 1962; Dumont, 1999; Kannabiran and Kannabiran, 1991; Puri, 2003).

Caste inequality and prejudice continues to be the defining reality of contemporary India. Contrary to the assumption, it has not lost its impor-tance in the face of the new economic forces. This is illustrated by Jodhka's work in the corporate sector highlighting the importance of caste identity that continues even in a market based on "merit" (Jodhka, 2008). There is, however, a denial of this reality. The so-called upper caste believes that caste-based prejudice and discrimination is a practice of the past. To alter this un-derstanding and to eradicate casteism, the National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF 2005) was drafted to re-structure textbooks published by the National Educational Research and Training Organisation (NCERT).

This study examines the effectiveness of the curriculum reform. For this, the study places the textbooks in relation to the school culture. While schools have an institutional structure consisting of a state-mandated or private curriculum and school's objectives, values and norms, there are in-stitutional restraints and staff and students interact, negotiate, and contest the structure, its norms and values with their own ethnic cultures and hab-its of mind (Giroux 1997; Kaplan and Owings 2013, 27). This interaction in the form of restraints, negotiations and contestations constitute the "school culture."

The current study is based on an ethnographic research of a school cul-ture in Delhi. The school will be referred to as *Azad Bharat Vidyalaya* (ABV). The study spanned over a period of ten months in 2015 and 2016 and strived to unpack the school and deliberate on the formal and informal culture of the school through the study of the curriculum, official school discourse and

its circulation through its spatial culture, school events and routines. The informal culture constituted by, as Gordon et al (2000) conceptualize, the teacher culture, student culture, peer groups was accessed through classroom observations, questionnaire, group discussions, personal interviews, informal and unstructured conversations with students and teachers.

This article begins with an introduction and a glance at the everyday life of ABV in terms of its engagement with caste. It then moves on to discuss the content of the NCERT/NCF 2005 books. Following this, the paper returns to focus on the school culture by examining the pedagogy, reflecting on teachers as the bridge between the text and students and in this situation, as part of the effort to address casteism in the society. In the subsequent section, the paper looks at the ways in which students interact with these textbooks.

Caste and Everyday Life at ABV

Azad Bharat Vidyalaya (ABV) is an English-medium, co-educational school located in the southern part of Delhi. While it was founded in 1970s, the school's institutional history takes it back to the years before the independence from British rule and to Lala Lajpat Rai, a popular leader of the Indian freedom struggle. Lala Lajpat Rai had established an organization that strived to "train citizens to work for the political, social and economic advancement of the country." Post-independence, the organization continued and even furthered the objective, with founding a school as one of the methods. The school views itself as the carrier of the legacy of Lala Lajpat Rai and in its official school discourse circulated through school events and spatial culture, seeks to socialize the students to recognize each other as an "Indian," as a fellow patriot who should be entitled to equal rights.

There are everyday contestations to the school's project. In terms of community and caste make-up of the school, since ABV is located close to neighborhoods having both mixed population as well as a considerable population of Jat, Gujjar, Punjabi and Rajput communities, it draws students from diverse socio-economic communities and different caste groups. The students are also very conscious and assertive about their identity. The students have notions about the self and the "other" communities which also often guide both peer bonding and clashes.

The teachers and school non-teaching staff are well-aware of this diversity among the students. When asked about the students, they would

compare them with students of other schools and consider them to be undisciplined and uninterested and which they attributed to their background. "They come from families where there is no interest to pursue studies but only to fight," said a teacher. While it was not always clear whether they ascribed this to the class or the community background, one teacher specifically talked about the Jat and the Gujjar communities, the clash and how it also shapes the mindsets of the students. The Jat and Gujjar are stereotyped to be rustic, aggressive and conservative. They are also known to be competing communities. Their caste position is not fixed but both communities strive and even compete to be recognized as "backward castes/communities" so that they can access reservation in the education and job sector (Singh, 2011; Datta, 1999).

The teachers understand and address this diversity in different ways. As I accompany Kartik, a social science teacher, to his classroom, he says, "During B.ed (Bachelor of Education degree), we are taught how to teach in a class, how to avoid punishing students, inspire them to take interest but when we actually come to school to practice, all these teachings goes for a toss…we soon realize the difference between the ideal and reality."

There is a lot of noise emanating from the classroom but as we enter, there falls a relative silence. The teacher shouts, "Attention everyone!" and the students stand and wish "Good Afternoon sir." They then cast a look at me. The teacher introduce me as a new teacher and says, "she has come to see how you behave so be good." As I take one of the vacant seats at the back of the class, the students turn to me and ask my name. When I tell them my name, a student asks me to give out my full name. This request to know someone's full name is surprising as it is neither a common practice nor desirable as surname/family name in the Indian context is indicative of one's caste and community identity. It is, however, not considered to be extraordinary here in this school as Kartik had once shared during a conversation that some students do try to acquaint themselves with the background, caste and community identity of teachers.

As I share my full name, a student (Gaurav) shares that he also has the same surname. He further inquires where I am from and then says, "We are related. Now will you give me an additional five marks?" I reply, "No, why should I?" His friend says, "OK, not five but at least two marks?" He ignores as I refuse the request. This instance is a reflection of the everyday world of the students both in and beyond school, where it is not uncommon or un-

usual to be aware of someone's community and caste identity and to bond with them over it. On another day, as I am about to enter the school building, Gaurav calls out to me. He is with some of his friends. He introduces me to them, "She is our new teacher. She is also a Mittal (reference to my surname)." Hearing this, two of his friends smile. He informs me that while his friends are from different sections and grade levels, they all hail from the same community. He then says, "Ma'am, welcome to the Mittal *parivar* (family)." It is evident from Gaurav's assertion that he is socialized to bond over one's caste community, to consider it to be a network of loyalty and even favoritism. Caste is not just about a sense of identity here but exists in a form of exclusion and discrimination.

Beginning the class, the teacher scribbles the subject "Geography" and the topic "Climate" on the board. The teacher initiates by stating the outline of the chapter and then asks, "What is climate?" Several hands go up. The teacher points towards two male students, referring them by their surnames which as we noted previously, often gives out the caste and community of a person and in this case, it did.

None of them is able to give a satisfactory response. The teacher then tries again, "Is there a difference between weather and climate?" As there are fewer hands this time, the teacher says, "At least try. Trying is good."

The teacher scans the classroom to select a student. He then looks at one of the students who was talking with his friend and says, "What happened?" but the student does not respond so Kartik remarks, *"Hamare Jat ke 12 baj gaye hain."* Here, while referring to him as a "Jat" (his community identity), his statement also refers to a community-based slur associated with the Sikh community that stereotypes them to be impulsive and aggressive. The students laugh on hearing this. The student who is remarked upon also laughs. Humor has a social function. Under the garb of fun or mere entertainment, humor works in a powerful way to embed popular notions. Here, through humor, students are being socialized into fixed and derogatory notions about the two communities.

The pedagogical strategy of Kartik seems to be drawing on the everyday worlds of these students where community identity is of much eminence. Kartik is trying to respond to an ethnically diverse classroom. His classes are more interactive than that of other teachers. Students are more attentive in his classes and try to participate in the discussions. He believes that the students are conscious and proud of their caste and community-based

identity and so in order to bond with them and seek conformity, he finds a solution within these contours. Through his practice, however, he himself is contributing to the casteist culture prevailing in the school.

Addressing Caste Discrimination through Textbooks

The NCERT textbooks guided by the NCF 2005 engage with caste in different grade levels. In grade 6 textbook *Social and Political Life I* (SP – I), the second chapter titled "Diversity and Discrimination" introduces the caste system as a division of labor that not only hierarchizes work but associates with the differing kinds of jobs, a differential degree of social esteem. To illustrate, the chapter gives examples of oppressive practices in the past. The chapter reads,

> Caste rules were set which did not allow the so-called 'untouchable' to take on work, other than what they were meant to do. For example, some groups were forced to pick garbage and remove dead animals from the village. However, they were not allowed to enter the homes of the upper castes or take water from the village well, or even temples. Their children could not sit next to children of other castes in school. (SP - I, 2006, page 19)

The chapter then goes on to trace the life and struggle of B.R. Ambedkar, an eminent anti-caste icon and a visionary of modern India. The chapter argues that the constitution of the modern, free India outlaws caste-based discrimination and guarantee equal rights, yet it also acknowledges that equality is still to be achieved (SP - I, 2006, 23).

The textbooks of grade 7 and 8 also continue the discussion on caste-based discrimination as an enduring challenge in post-independence India. The chapter I titled "Equality in Indian Democracy" of grade 7 textbook *Social and Political Life II* (SP – II) illustrates that caste remains to be an important social identity that one grows up with. It notes this to be the case for both rural and urban areas. It states,

> If you live in urban India, some of you might think that people no longer believe in caste. However, just look at the matrimonials shown from a leading English newspaper, and you

will see how important the issue of caste continues to be in the minds of higher educated urban Indians. (SP - II, 2006, 7)

Similarly, the grade 8 *Social and Political Life III* (SP – III) textbook also brings together stories and experiences of Dalit exploitation, especially in terms of ritual impurity. There is also a special section on manual scavenging which points out that while it is banned, it is still practiced in different parts of the country. The textbook also introduces affirmative action in the form of the reservation system though it only talks about the reservation for the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) groups. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are the constitutional terms that refer to communities that are socially and economically disadvantaged. The Scheduled Castes includes caste communities which have been placed in the fifth category or the *panchamas* who are the most downtrodden in the caste hierarchy (Michael, 2007, 16). The textbook places affirmative action as an approach to equality, as positive discrimination. Resting it on the long history of marginalization and discrimination that prevented these communities to progress, the affirmative action in the form of the reservation is shown as a medium to ensure equality and social justice.

The grade 9 textbooks mention the reservation of Other Backward Classes (OBC). The constitutional category of other backward classes includes communities that have been socially and economically disadvantaged. While it includes communities that are listed as *shudras* or the fourth category in caste system, some communities which are listed as the so-called "upper-caste" are also there.

The grade 10 textbook titled *Democratic Politics II* (DP-II) introduces some other aspects of the caste issue, including the overlapping of caste and class. The text makes use of the statistics to make the point:

> The caste groups that had access to education under the old system have done very well in acquiring modern education as well. Those groups that did not have access to education or were prohibited from acquiring it have naturally lagged behind. That is why there is a disproportionately large presence of 'upper caste' among the urban middle classes in our country. Caste continues to be closely linked to economic status. (DP-II, 2006, 13)

This caste-class confluence is an important aspect to discuss as it counters the argument by opponents of the reservation policy who suggest that reservation should be on class, and not on caste. Further, the chapter also discusses another aspect of the contemporary situation that of the caste-based political assertions and caste-based vote bank politics. While caste is also discussed in the curriculum of grades 11 and 12, since the school under study does not offer humanities, this study is limited to what is taught in the school.

The curriculum, as we see, strives to not just educate but to sensitize students about caste as a social evil. Besides the text, through in-text questions, photo essays and reflective activities, the curriculum designers sought to seek empathy and inspire students to stand against caste. The curriculum, however, does not produce knowledge by itself. It is imperative to understand how the text is transmitted and received. For this, we shall return back to the school under study.

Transacting Knowledge: Anxieties and Dilemmas of Teachers

Kartik, a social science teacher, finds these textbooks to be critical and significant yet he also shares a dilemma. "While the books are good as they are talking about issues which are important, they also create problems as they make students become aware about their and other's caste identity," argues Kartik. He elaborates by sharing instances from his classroom situations wherein when students read about practices of another community or even about the discrimination meted out to a particular community, they call out to their classmates who belong to those communities and pass derogatory comments. "Look, what this says about you!" or "See they are writing about you people!" are common comments that Kartik says he hears in his classroom. So according to him, this visibility to caste through the curriculum has unintended implications. These textbooks can reproduce stereotypes and can victimize students who belong to the marginalized group. This especially holds true, he argues, for "schools like ours where students are already very assertive and opinionated about caste and community identities." His concern reflects a pedagogical dilemma around how to teach these textbooks.

It is also important to recall the classroom observation of one of his classes wherein we had noted that to seek conformity, he also ends up reit-

erating caste and community-based notions. Kartik's dilemma reflected in his views and practice reiterates the significance of the pedagogue. The importance of the teacher has also been emphasized by Batra (2005), Mehrotra (2007), George and Madan (2009), among several others. While Mehrotra (2007) regards the NCF 2005 textbooks to be well-equipped to initiate critical thinking in students, she emphasizes on the need for teachers' training. This is also echoed by Alex M. George and Amman Madan (2009, 14) who are of the opinion that "it is not enough for teachers to possess lots of information," but they must think actively on these topics (George and Madan, 2009, 14). The teachers are required to understand the importance and to encourage the students to engage with the text. In her work, Thapan (2014) shows the importance of the same. She cites an example wherein a teacher is teaching students about secularism, but when a student questions her about the "privileged" status given to the minorities, the teacher does not clear the misconceptions of the student in an adequate manner (Thapan, 2014, 167).

With curriculum change, it is thus imperative to have teacher trainings but ones which are "not just formality," as argued by several teachers at ABV. The teachers' concerns and dilemmas that spring from both the text and classroom situation with students who are active learners need to be addressed. This idea of students being active, however, is yet to gain currency. A glance over the *Formative Assessment: Manual for Teachers* published by Central Board of School Education (CBSE) guiding teachers on teaching and assessment methods for the social science books does not view students as active and agential beings capable of rejecting the school knowledge. While the manual does stress and direct the teacher to be creative and initiate discussions, it does not devote any space to talk about the possible tensions, contradictions that these discussions may generate in diverse classrooms. So in reality, the teachers are at their own.

Further discussing these new textbooks, while Kartik holds a critical view towards these textbooks, another social science teacher, Kriti (name changed) finds the books interesting and from which she herself gets to learn a lot. She asserts,

> These new books generate much discussion in class. Students have many questions and even share their own experiences. It does make the class very lively. I myself get to learn so much.

> She acknowledges that students also surface many stereotypes but then,
> I explain, give examples, try to convince, even if on some issues [she says this for the reservation], I myself may disagree with the book. The teacher has to address these issues himself/herself.

While Kriti confirms Kartik's assertion of teachers being at their own, unlike him, she does not share a pedagogical dilemma. This difference in the views of the two teachers seems to draw from their social positionings. Kartik is from Gujjar community which has engaged in the caste-based political mobilization and is classified in the Other Backwaard Class (OBC) community in some states. Kriti is from an upper-caste background. While both Kartik and Kriti acknowledge the challenges in the form of stereotypes that students may exhibit, Kartik is more conscious and gives the disagreements and the behavior of the student more weightage. This consciousness may have emerged from his caste experience.

The teachers, as we note, are not a homogeneous group, their social identities, motivations and intentions have a varying influence on them. These orientations affect the nature and content of their teaching processes which, in turn, may contribute to the shaping of knowledge and notions of the students. Though there is no data available for the classroom discussion by Kriti around the topic of caste and reservation policy, a teacher's disagreement with textbook knowledge can take the shape of a direct contestation or insufficient discussion that may not clarify students' doubts. Thus, besides the curriculum, the teacher's role in educating for change is of much significance.

Engaging with Textbooks and their Everyday Worlds: Students' Understanding of "Caste"

As we move to understand the relationship between the text and the environment in which the former speaks, the first thing to note is that there exists a hierarchy of subjects. Neha and Preeti (names changed) of grade 7 are not fond of civics/political science. Talking about their interests, they express their passion for watching Hindi films. They, however, make it clear that they do not like "serious" or issue-based movies. When asked about caste-based discrimination, Neha remarks,

> Yes in earlier times, people used to discriminate on the basis of caste. People of Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes were badly treated.

When asked if the discrimination still persists, they both state that there is no caste-based discrimination in the contemporary society. They attribute their knowledge to the textbooks which is surprising as the textbooks of grade 6 and 7 clearly mention the persistence of caste in post-independence India.

They, however, are not alone in doing so. Table 1 is a demonstration of the evidence. Table 1 is based on a questionnaire that was circulated among grade 9 students. The data gives an insight into the student's reception of the textbooks and their understanding of caste-based inequalities.

Table 1: Students' Opinion about Caste-Based Discrimination		
Opinion about Caste-based Discrimination	**Number**	**Percentage**
Caste-based discrimination does not exist in contemporary society	38	44.19%
Caste-based discrimination still exists	20	23.26%
Mixed caste with religion-based discrimination	15	17.44%
Equated caste with class-based discrimination	5	5.81%
Talked about gender-based discrimination	4	4.65%
No response	4	4.65%
Total	**86**	**100%**
Source: From the Field Study		

As we note from Table 1, in the sample of eighty-six students, thirty-eight students or 44.19 percent deny the prevalence of caste-based discrimination in society. This stands in contradiction with textbook knowledge. A student writes about caste as a practice of the past and denies witnessing it in contemporary society, at least in urban cities like Delhi. Another student reiterates the notion of caste being abstract and distant reality,

> Yes, there is caste-based discrimination. Earlier, there was much discrimination against Dalits, but now it has reduced. Today, it is practised mostly in villages.

In doing so, they not just contrast with the textbooks that establishes the persistence of caste-based inequalities and discrimination in contemporary urban India but also reflects the normalization of casteism which, as we had previously noted, is even prevalent in the everyday culture of their school. The students do not reflect on how their own conduct in terms of peer bonding, holding casteist notions which they express through their talks and also jokes, keeps caste-based prejudice and inequality alive.

Some students deny caste discrimination and instead talk about caste-based reservations. According to a student,

> In the 19th Century, there was caste discrimination but not today in the 21st Century. There is no caste system now. Nevertheless, we have a reservation system. Why do we need it (reservation policy) now?

Some also oppose reservation by upholding the argument of "merit." In doing so, they oppose the understanding that the textbooks offer. They do not take into account the argument offered by grade 8 textbook for affirmative action, that of being a step towards equality and social justice. While this data is from students of grade 9 who at the time of the questionnaire had interacted with chapters till grade 8, students of higher grade levels who have studied the chapters on caste that show the correlation of caste and class, also object to a caste-based reservation, seeing it as a "new form of caste system."

Twenty students are of the opinion that there is caste discrimination in contemporary society. Some even regard it to be their everyday, lived reality. A student remarks,

> Yes, there is caste discrimination in India. In the past, there is vast discrimination against Dalits, but today this has reduced. Today this has ended in some places, but in some places, discrimination still exists. Like in schools, societies (housing) or other places, if there is any person from Gujjar caste, then there is definitely discrimination. Gujjars scare other people and create difficulties for them, especially for students.

As we can see, the student is referring to his own school and his everyday reality that he/she encounters in and beyond the school. The student's

assertion as well as the disagreements with the textbook knowledge that we noted point to the significance of the overall school culture in educating for change.

Conclusion

This study strived to understand education as a means of social change. By studying the challenges to a curriculum reform, the article highlights the complexities and nuances that shape educational institutions and processes of learning.

This study focused on a curriculum reform to eradicate caste-based prejudice and inequalities. Placing curriculum in the larger school environment, the article reflects on the relationship between school culture and official curriculum or textbooks.

While curriculum reform for critical textbooks is significant, it is not sufficient. This is a point that has been driven by this and other studies on schooling. Schools are lively spaces. They constitute a culture made of the interaction of official or formal structures and of the agential world of students and staff. In this culture, the official structure including the curriculum is accepted, negotiated and even subverted.

This is what we have noted in ABV where despite the formal or official culture trying to imbibe a sense of patriotism that would dilute other social differences, the students were conscious and assertive of their caste and community identity. They also maintained stereotypical and even derogatory notions about other communities. The intervention through textbooks did not seem to alter these tendencies. The students' knowledge largely stood in contrast to the textbook knowledge. While they maintained caste prejudice, they dismissed the claim that caste continues to be a menace in contemporary society. This failure to self-introspect and to reflect on the everyday life of school can be attributed to the school culture. The school culture has normalized caste-based bonding and even prejudice. The lack of active intervention by teachers also contributes to this culture.

In view of this, the article concludes that for education to be a driver of social change, the different components and stakeholders in the process of schooling needs to be focused upon. While the curriculum reform is significant, it is far from being sufficient. For change through education, not just the curriculum but the whole school culture would require an overhaul.

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