



PEDAGOGIC PRACTICES AND THE PERPETUATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST DALIT STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract: This paper talks about the schooling experience of Dalit children and how their experience affects their performance in school. The author tries to explain it in two ways. By one way, the author says that Indian Education thinks of itself to be secular and thus it is universal, which is a myth. Most of the narratives taught in educational institutions revolves around the culture of a dominant caste, which is usually upper caste. It hardly deals with the understanding of culture, history, ethics, morality, politics, anxieties, concerns, hatred and tradition of Dalits. A dominant caste framework works as a foundation to the Indian Education system, therefore-in its ideas, culture and concerns-it functions to uphold and reinforce the ideas of the ruling class at all the levels of its operation, under the mask of universal principles. According to Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron's book titled, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, 'every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those power relations. Not only are "the ruling ideas, in every age, the ideas of the ruling class", but that the ruling ideas themselves reinforce the rule of that class, and that they succeed in doing so by establishing themselves as "legitimate", by concealing their basis in the (economic and political) power of the ruling class.'

Keywords: Indian Education, pedagogic practice, dominant caste, school curriculum and Dalit children

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INTRODUCTION

Reinforcing the culture of the dominant group takes the form of using certain characters or events from Hindu Mythology, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These mythologies do not address the issues faced by oppressed communities. It mainly deals with issues such as war, power, and property ownership that concern the ruling class. War was the means to acquire power and property. Even when they refer to or mourn the issues of poverty, it is not about the poverty of oppressed communities. For example, in the Mahabharata, the poverty of Dronacharya and the Pandavas during their exile has been emphasised. Both stories address concerns about the poverty of the ruling elite.

The various events from these epics have been included in the school syllabi to explain the relationships between men and women, poverty and hunger, and so on. These experiences have been presented from the dominant caste point of view. Nothing is mentioned about Dalits in the Mahabharata. The power relation in schools works in such a way that neither students are aware of their ignorance of the school curriculum nor do they ask their teachers questions about it. When a Dalit student dares to ask a question about it, which naturally challenges the point of view of the dominant caste, then teachers punish them. An example can be found in Om Prakash's *Jhoothan*, where he narrates his own classroom experience. When he asked his teacher about his own poverty, his teacher screamed at him and beat him for comparing himself with Dronacharya.

There was nothing wrong with asking that question, but still, he got punished for asking that question because of his caste. Asking questions and expressing doubt are considered part of a pedagogical exercise. This exercise is considered to be desirable, and those who ask questions are generally regarded as intelligent students and as a result are appreciated by all. But the question that arises is: if asking questions is considered a good exercise for students, then how come in *Jhoothan*, Valmiki got punished for asking the most relevant question? The answer to this question lies in one of the incidents from the Mahabharata. Dronacharya was a Brahmin who taught archery to Arjuna, a Pandava king. To make him an undefeatable hero in archery, Dronacharya asked Ekalavya for his thumb as *gurudakshina*. Out of respect, Ekalavya followed his order and gave his thumb to him, even though Dronacharya did not teach Ekalavya the skill of archery (Krishna, 2004: 56). Like Ekalavya, Valmiki in *Jhoothan* was

also punished by his teacher for asking the question. From the above incidents, we learn that the dominant caste's point of view not only makes it difficult to understand the oppressive social reality but also aggressively silences the attempt to acknowledge the Hindu caste oppression in the society.

Murali Krishna argues that his analysis and understanding of the experiences of Dalit school children will not only help the concerned stakeholders, such as teachers, syllabus designers, teacher trainers and educational theorists, in improving the existing education system, but it will also help in making it more sensitive and accountable to the large number of Dalits and other marginalised children who come to school with great hopes and struggles to survive in the schooling environment (ibid.). According to Krishna, this process should help make education more favourable to Dalit children and their needs (ibid.).

The study used by Krishna in his methodology is different from many other studies, which deal with education, because of the facts that are being used in it (ibid: 57). The facts used are subjective, as autobiographical materials—memories, experiences, and narrative recounting are used against the 'objective' empirical information. The author believes that, for a variety of reasons, be it conceptual and political, educational theory in India has not been able to formulate its questions in a powerful way.

There are a bunch of new Dalit autobiographies which provide subjective material that draws our attention towards the contradictions in educational theory and practice. These questions are directly related to the social and economic profile of the students for whom the schooling system is structured. For example, over 75 per cent of the oppressed students, whether they are from rural or urban areas, have no choice but to work for long hours to help out their family in domestic chores and to take on wage labour while they are at school (ibid.). The teachers, without trying to understand their situation, assume that they are free outside school hours, or in case they are not, then they should be free (ibid.). The involvement of a child from a poor family, either through work at home or any economic contribution, is regarded as undesirable and something which has no significance (ibid.). Krishna argues that these experiences should be considered as a potential strength since a child is gaining experience, intellectual maturity, social and personal responsibility, meaningful and productive discipline and so on. The school timetable and the school curriculum ignore the situation of Dalit children, which puts a tremendous

amount of pressure on working Dalit children. It makes them unable to cope with schoolwork and unhappy about themselves and their lives. Due to this, Dalit working children often feel embarrassed by their situation, as they work as labourers from a very early age to survive in life. They fail to imbibe the cultural capital within themselves like the children from the upper caste and class.

The irony is that these 'working children' largely comprise Dalit lower-class children. These children prefer to discontinue schooling in the early years because they are too young and poor to work. Along with this, 'lack of interest in education' is another factor which contributes to their drop-out rate. This 'lack of interest' is an outcome of a 'negative reference group'¹ since the success rate in attaining education and securing jobs is minimal among the Scheduled Castes. When the members see the low success rate within their community, they lose their faith in the ways of getting freedom through empowerment, which is by getting quality education and high-paying jobs. They don't feel the need to invest on education.

The experiences of Dalit autobiographies show *why* these mythological references matter: they function as ideological tools that define which histories are "worthy" of pedagogical attention. By punishing Dalit students who question these narratives, teachers reinforce the idea that only upper-caste experiences are intellectually valid. This dynamic echo the pedagogic authority Bourdieu discusses, where questioning is selectively permitted based on caste location. The introduction thus sets up the paper's central analytical claim: schooling is not merely a site of learning but a space where caste power is enacted, negotiated, and violently upheld.

CASTE AS A CATEGORY OF CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Though the special constitutional provisions, policies and programmes were made for the economic and educational development of Dalits and Adivasis, the situation of these communities remains backward. The way the school curriculum and pedagogy are designed cater to the needs of Hindu upper-caste students, as we saw in Valmiki's narrative. The norm, the curriculum, the overall school culture, teachers, and 'desirable' students altogether form the apparatus of the school. In this way, the dominant caste influences the curriculum, pedagogical practices, and the culture of a school, which later reproduces an unjust and unequal society (Giroux, 1989: p. 8).

Emphasising the unjust and unequal society, Geetha Nambissan² argues that there is complete silence on the issue of caste inequality in the school curriculum, and that teachers and students do not discuss it. School joins with the society in thinking that caste is a metaphysical issue, and it is the destiny or the fate of the Dalits that they are born as untouchables, so nothing can be done to alter the situation in the society. This leads to the social exclusion and inequality of Dalits.

The Right to Education is a fundamental right for Dalits. Dalits do not find a place in either school content or college curricula. In this sense, Gopal Guru (2002: p. 5004) argues that the egalitarian principle promises to undermine the dominant epistemological practices which are not only exclusionary but also authoritarian in their intention and tend to become a force that seeks to discipline, denigrate and even deny epistemic status to certain concepts and categories that do not fall in line with the intellectual discourse which feeds on cultural hierarchy as a hegemonic necessity. Dalits remain in the margins of educational institutions due to the correspondence of dominant educational perception with the dominant caste point of view, which is that Dalits and other lower castes are 'failures', who lack language skills even in their 'mother' tongues, with a low Intelligence Quotient (IQ) (Krishna, 2004: 60). The curriculum and pedagogy of a school make the students, as well as parents from Dalit, Tribal and socially marginalised people, believe that it is their fault that they can't cope with the schooling system (ibid.). This kind of perception leads to self-accusation and feelings of worthlessness (ibid.). This leads to suicide, also.

The education system highlights the structural bias embedded in curriculum design and pedagogical practices. This suggests that caste operates not only as a social identity but as an epistemic filter determining what counts as legitimate knowledge. Schools treat caste as a metaphysical or private issue, thereby preventing discussions that could challenge structural inequalities. This ideological silence becomes a reproduction mechanism, pushing Dalit students into internalised inferiority and self-blame. It suggests that educational exclusion is not accidental; it is a systemic outcome of aligning school culture with upper-caste expectations of language, behaviour, intelligence, and morality, which reproduces the hegemonic knowledge production.

GAP BETWEEN DALIT CHILDREN'S EVERYDAY LIVED EXPERIENCES AND SCHOOLING SPACES

According to Manusmriti, Dalits are supposed to live outside the main village (ibid.: 64). Therefore, Indian villages are structured so that untouchables live separately from the main village where the upper castes reside (ibid.). The food habits of the Dalit are different from those of the Hindu upper castes. Dalits and lower-class Muslims eat beef (ibid.). Beef-eating is part of Dalit food culture because it is considered cheap and regarded as a good source of protein for them (ibid.). Dalits are associated with dead cattle (ibid.). Traditionally, it was part of Dalits' caste occupation to take the dead cattle away from the village premises (ibid.). Dalits used to take the cattle to a barren area on the village outskirts, skin them, cut them into pieces, and share the meat among Dalit families (ibid.). Only Dalits eat the meat of dead cattle (ibid.). In India, eating beef is seen as a non-Hindu practice (ibid.). Due to this, upper caste students and teachers often make rude comments on Dalit students for eating beef due to the notion of purity and pollution. As eating beef is considered to be a part of pollution, Dalit children often hide their dietary practices in the school space.

In small towns, neither do upper castes sell land plots to Dalits for the construction of their homes, nor do they buy one if these plots are near Dalits' houses (ibid.). Upper-caste people do not allow Dalits into their homes out of fear of being polluted (ibid.: 65). This suggests that caste is a matter of moral consciousness rather than a sociological one. Therefore, the question of educational exclusion among Scheduled Caste students cannot be understood merely through the historical denial of access to Vedic learning; it must also be situated within the modern structures that continue to reproduce inequality. These modern structures go beyond the ritual purity. These modern structures are built on the cultural capital exhibited by the dominant class. Those who fail to assimilate into this culture are often excluded from mainstream society.

Here, the paper identifies a fundamental sociological contradiction: schools assume a universal childhood, but Dalit childhoods are shaped by caste-specific labour, spatial segregation, and cultural practices. The experiences of Dalit students tell how Manusmriti-based settlement patterns (Dalit hamlets outside village boundaries) manifest in modern inequalities, including stigma surrounding food practices (e.g., beef consumption). These cultural gaps are

not superficial differences; they lead to pedagogical misrecognition, in which teachers misinterpret structural constraints as personal failures. By analysing these divergences through the lens of cultural capital (Bourdieu), we see that Dalit children are structurally prevented from acquiring the symbolic resources that schools reward. This shows how the educational system penalises Dalit life worlds instead of recognising them as legitimate forms of knowledge

DISCONTINUITIES BETWEEN HOME EXPERIENCES AND SCHOOL EXPECTATIONS

The gap between the school and home world remains a constant problem for Dalit students (ibid.). The schools remain uninterested in understanding the conditions, culture, and strengths of Dalits (ibid.). They are made to feel inferior for having a culture different from the majoritarian class. Like the Blacks of America, Dalits are always punished for the unintended mistakes. Most of the government school teachers, for historical reasons, are generally from the 'higher' castes (ibid.). They are neither aware nor do they care to learn about the living conditions of Dalits (ibid.). So, it becomes difficult for them to understand why these children fail to follow their instructions, why they always fail to reach school on time, why they can't finish their homework on time, why they can't purchase notebooks, textbooks, pens, logarithm books, record books, compass boxes and so on. They do not understand why these Dalit children are silent and unresponsive in the class.

These teachers rarely bother to find out the reasons behind their discomfort in and out of class. Another reason a teacher is unable to understand their issue is their lack of training in understanding and sensitivity to the difficulties of students from disadvantaged sections. They never visit their houses or examine the circumstances in which Dalit students struggle to make their presence in school, and the work they do in the context of the curriculum.

Most Dalit Sociologists, in their autobiographies, have mentioned how the alien school culture makes them quiet in the classroom. As a result, even the teachers remain inattentive to their queries. Murali Krishna (2004: 66) mentions that the brother of one of his classmates, a non-Dalit named Narender, was a first-rank holder in their batch. Once, he gave a speech in which he pointed out the teachers' mistakes, whereas it was difficult for Krishna to stand before all the teachers and students and speak (ibid.).

Reflecting on his childhood, Krishna says he was not silent by choice and did not like being silent (ibid:66). He says that the school forced him to be silent. He felt inferior to the children that the teachers liked and interacted with. As a result, he felt so inferior to the non-Dalit students that it became difficult for him to believe that he had any intellectual or other qualities (ibid.). The teachers always showed interest in non-Dalit students; they even had personal conversations with them, chatting about their families and lives outside school. As a result, non-Dalit students had the courage to pass comments on the teachers because they knew the teachers' addresses and had access to their homes (ibid.). The teachers even used to call upper-caste students by their surnames, such as 'Reddy', 'Chary', and so on. In contrast, they addressed lower-caste Shudra boys with derogatory terms, such as 'Tapi', which means one who works with a shovel and builds houses (ibid.). This shows the lack of sensitivity among teachers of the higher caste.

Krishna narrates another incident from his childhood, when he used to take private tuitions from a well-known mathematics teacher who was a Vaishya. The author's grandmother had previously worked as a servant in his tutor's house. The author struggled in the tuition class, while many others in it were good at maths, and he always wondered why these people unnecessarily came for tuition. Then he realised that they came to hone their shortcut methods and techniques to solve mathematical questions quickly in the competitive exams. The private school students used to talk to students who were bright in Maths, and being bright meant knowing the tricks to solve problems quickly. Grasping or understanding was not given any importance (ibid.).

These incidents suggest how the culture and knowledge of students coming from the dominant class are given importance over the students who come from the lower rung of society. As a result, Dalit students feel suffocated because they can't relate to the knowledge that is being discussed in the school classroom. This becomes their reason for not performing well in the studies, and they prefer to drop out of the education system that is not built for them but against them.

The Dalit autobiographies provide ethnographic depth to the claim that schools operate with an upper-caste normative model of the "ideal student." The analysis should elaborate that home-school discontinuity is not simply a socioeconomic gap but a caste-coded incompatibility: time, labour, language,

and behavioural expectations are designed around upper-class, upper-caste lifestyles. Teachers' inability to empathise with Dalit children's constraints—lack of notebooks, lateness, silence—reflects a pedagogical deficit model that pathologises Dalit culture. Dissecting their experiences reveals how emotional labour, psychological fear, and a lack of representational support deepen educational alienation. This demonstrates that school failure is produced institutionally, not individually, reinforcing the argument that drop-outs are system-generated push-outs.

REPRODUCTION OF SILENCE BEYOND CLASSROOM

Seldom are the interests, knowledge and world of the Dalit students different from those of the students who come from the upper caste. For example, Krishna (2004: 67) argues that the games that he used to play was *gillidanda* (a very popular game among village children in which one short stick is needed, of a ball-point pen size along with a longer stick which is about 20 inches or so), *marampitt* (game played with rubber ball), *dagudumuthalu* (hide and seek), *naluguruaallaata* (game played with four stones or pebbles), *dippaata* (another variant of hide and seek), whereas, the students from upper caste played chess and carom and other indoor games (ibid.). Even in school, the competitions that were held were those in which the upper caste students were good, and not the games which the author used to play in his home. Sports and games are considered to be crucial in the socialisation process among boys. Since the author didn't know how to play indoor games in which boys from the upper caste were good at, it became difficult for the author to strike a friendship with the boys from the upper caste. Most of his classmates came from educated families. They had access to magazines, radio, and television, which gave them general knowledge (ibid:68). The author, on the other hand, even after thoroughly studying the prescribed book for the test, received fewer marks in the test he appeared for at his school. On the other hand, the first rank holder, a non-Dalit, also studied from other books, apart from the prescribed book for the same examination. After this, the author realised that participation in a competition like this requires access to many other things, such as newspapers and magazines, which most Dalit students do not have (ibid).

Integrated schools are believed to play a vital role in bringing students from all sections and communities together by creating an open space for

a wide range of students from diverse cultures and backgrounds, including marginalised communities like Dalits and tribals, who were previously kept away from mainstream society (ibid: 69). Hence, it is believed that often this kind of school setting enables them to make contact with the privileged students and mingle with them. It helps them overcome their psychological fears of social, economic, and cultural inferiority, which can be erased, and it can help them become successful in their lives. But its opposite happens. Marginalised sections are openly insulted and humiliated in classrooms and within the school premises (ibid).

The corporal punishment meted out to Dalit students is rampant in schools. But when an upper caste child does something wrong or gets into trouble, the upper caste teachers protect them and rescue them from the headmaster's punishment. The upper-caste teachers have some empathy for them. They try to understand the problems of upper-caste children and extend their support and encouragement. They identify with these students and are interested in their success. But these same upper caste teachers are very harsh on Dalit students for even a small mistake (ibid:70).

For most of the Dalit children, deciding to continue with schooling is deciding to continue with the corporal and psychological punishment throughout. It becomes difficult for the Dalit students to meet out the expectations of schools. Hence, for them, the only way to get out of this harsh situation is to drop out. Dignity, honour and respect are as basic as food, money and a house for human existence. Their lives do not make any sense when they are deprived of these needs.

Due to these factors, Dalit children feel alienated and rejected in school. The Dalit Autobiographies, such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* and Bama's autobiographical narrative, *Karukku*, show how dominant caste teachers and students discriminate and alienate Dalit students (ibid: 72).

The autobiographical narratives reveal how caste operates subtly through everyday cultural distinctions such as games, hobbies, and access to media. On one hand, the cultural capital of the dominant caste (chess, magazines, English proficiency) is being rewarded, the cultural capital of Dalit students (village games, oral traditions) is devalued. This is a classic example of

symbolic domination, where the dominant group's cultural practices become synonymous with intelligence, discipline, and merit. The result is not merely social exclusion but epistemic exclusion, where Dalit children learn that their world is unworthy of academic attention. The integrated schools, assumed to be democratic spaces, instead serve as sites of intensified humiliation because proximity increases comparison, competition, and caste policing. Hence, in this backdrop, the theme of silence is linked with the structural reproduction of caste hierarchies within supposedly egalitarian institutions.

TEACHERS' NORMATIVE ACCEPTANCE OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

In Indian School Education system, the role of the teacher is seen as a state-authorised agent of caste discipline. Punishment becomes a tool through which caste hierarchies are normalised: Dalit children are punished not for academic lapses alone but for violating caste-coded expectations of behaviour, speech, and punctuality. The example given by Krishna (2004: 74), about his experience where the teacher asks him if he will die if he does not eat for just one day, of the teacher dismissing hunger as irrelevant, shows that the school demands Dalit children abandon their lived realities to fit an upper-caste notion of discipline. This aligns with Paulo Freire's idea of oppressive pedagogy, where authoritarian teaching suppresses critical consciousness. Furthermore, the absence of caste-sensitive teacher training demonstrates an institutional failure to address structural inequality. This shows that without reimagining teacher education, schools will continue functioning as caste-reinforcing apparatuses rather than transformative spaces.

In a country like India, it is caste that determines the punishment meted out to children in the school and outside the school. It was not like that, upper caste students didn't make mistakes, but they were not getting punished the way the Dalit students were getting punished in the same way or with the same hatred. The upper caste teachers had also close acquaintance with upper caste students and their parents. Dalit parents neither had any scope of some kind of relationship with teachers, nor did they dare to come to school and find the reasons that why their children were getting punished.

The reason behind this discrimination is that the teacher rarely cares about finding about the conditions in which the marginalized section of population

lives. For this, their curriculum of teacher training program is responsible. It lacks the understanding of pathetic social conditions of millions of people living in the society who comes from disprivileged section of the society. As a result, the teachers are unaware of the kinds of suffering the disadvantaged face based on their daily experiences. Therefore, teachers must be educated about the belief system, culture and consequences of the caste system. Teacher's education should comprise the recognition of diverse people and their lives. Along with this, the teachers should be guided to work towards transforming such inequalities in society without which it is impossible to realise an egalitarian, secular and democratic society that the Indian constitution, in its full spirit, promises to all its citizens.

In this section, the analysis must foreground the role of the teacher as a state-authorised agent of caste discipline. Punishment becomes a tool through which caste hierarchies are normalised: Dalit children are punished not for academic lapses alone but for violating caste-coded expectations of behaviour, speech, and punctuality. The example of the teacher dismissing hunger as irrelevant shows that the school demands Dalit children abandon their lived realities to fit an upper-caste notion of discipline. This analysis connects well with Paulo Freire's idea of oppressive pedagogy, where authoritarian teaching suppresses critical consciousness. Furthermore, the absence of caste-sensitive teacher training demonstrates an institutional failure to address structural inequality. Expanding this argument shows that without reimagining teacher education, schools will continue functioning as caste-reinforcing apparatuses rather than transformative spaces.

CONCLUSION

Here, it can be concluded that dropouts are really pushed out, and the children do not leave because they are taken out to work. Dalit children and their families want education. However, the school system is designed to ensure they do not survive, or, if they do, it is with permanent scars. For example, Omprakash Valmiki has stated about the discrimination that he faced in his school and college days, in his book *Joothan*.

A Dalit child is not a child from the middle class who is protected from the economic, psychological and socio-political stresses of his or her family and community. This is one of the various factors that the school system and

educational theory in India did not bother to explore, to be aware of the lives and culture of Dalits who are made the scapegoats of the Indian Caste system.

The Indian school system, as it is conceptualised and designed, does not point towards redressing the larger social scenario, without which establishing a secular and democratic society can't be fully realised. The present mode of school system deliberately ignores the presence of marginalised sections of society which comprises the majority of Indian population. Pluralism and democracy cannot be achieved without the active participation of citizens of a nation in totality.

Thus, there is an urgent need to democratise the institutional spaces. It becomes essential to take the necessary steps towards its actualisation at the school level. In this context, it might be possible if the curriculum and pedagogical practices are made Dalit-centred or oppressed-centred. Thus, evolving suitable and effective methodologies towards its realization must become a vital concern of the Indian Education System.

Notes

1. See 'Reference Group Theory' by Robert K. Merton, wherein he talks about the impact of 'positive reference group' and 'negative reference group'. To understand the role of factors that influence the success of a 'positive reference group', it would be better to examine Clarence Perry's Neighbourhood Unit Model.
2. See Caste and Politics of Early Schooling by Geetha Nambissan, Contemporary Education Dialogue Trust, 17(2) 126–154, 2020.

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