

Transcending caste in the classroom

David Rodwin

It is a pleasure to watch Mina read. Now 11-years-old and in sixth grade, Mina is the best English student in her class. Her brows furrow in concentration as she reads each line of an English storybook, and as understanding sets in, her face breaks into a smile. She excels in her other subjects as well, and states confidently that she will be a doctor. Though so many children say the same thing, with Mina it is as though nothing can stand in her way.

Mina is a student at one of the boarding primary schools operated by Navsarjan Trust, the largest Dalit organization in the Indian state of Gujarat. I recently spent several weeks at the schools in order to teach English to students like Mina and her classmates, and to interview the teachers.

In many government primary schools in rural Gujarat, Dalit children—children who are of the castes considered ‘untouchable’—are routinely discriminated against by their teachers and classmates in a variety of ways. Many are forced to sit at the back of their classrooms, to eat separately at lunchtime, and even to clean the school’s toilets while the rest of the children play.

Navsarjan began to solidify plans to establish its own primary schools around the year 2000. At that time, the organization was organizing foot-marches in villages to protest untouchability practices. In each village, Navsarjan fieldworkers arranged meetings with children to discuss the conditions at their village schools. It became clear that the schools themselves were instilling caste-based discrimination in the minds of the children by treating children of different castes in different ways, thereby strengthening the caste system. In some cases, Dalit children had committed suicide after being harassed by their upper-caste teachers.

The government curriculum itself was also found to be biased against the poor and so-called ‘backward classes’. And in any case, the education provided at these schools was often irrelevant, as Dalit children—especially of the Valmiki, or sweeper caste—often fell back on caste-based occupations.

A six-month training of potential teachers for Navsarjan’s primary schools began in 2004. This training was crucial, as teachers tend to follow the model they witnessed when they themselves were in school. The training challenged the teachers to fully discard that model, and to replace it with a new model that would emphasize student engagement and questioning, and embrace the notion that teachers can learn from their students as well as teach them.

The three Navsarjan schools opened in 2005 with the help of donations from the local Dalit community and with funding from Miserior, an international aid organization. In addition to providing a learning environment free of all kinds of discrimination, the schools train the next generation of Dalit leaders by instilling values of equality and insisting on the need to challenge injustice. The pedagogy teaches that literacy itself is not education. Instead, literacy is the means by which a value and belief system can be built to challenge the caste system.

The schools are for grades 5 through 7, and are coeducational. At Mina’s school, Navsarjan Vidhyalay Katariya, there are about 44 girls and 80 boys, which is a real success; it is very difficult to convince parents to invest in their daughters’ education, let alone send them to a boarding school. Everyone at the school is extremely enthusiastic about learning, and it shows. When they first enrolled, only a few of the students could write the English alphabet, a majority had trouble with Hindi and about half of the students had trouble reading and writing their native Gujarati. Now all the students are reading and writing all three languages, which is a testament to the school’s heavy schedule of classes and unstructured reading and study periods, and to the dedication of the teachers who provide extra tutoring in the evenings to students who need it.

Students and teachers sleep in the classrooms on thin mattresses that are stacked up in a corner during the day. Though the buildings are constructed out of concrete, the interior walls are coated with a mix of dried mud and buffalo dung common in the houses of rural India, with the point of making the children feel that the school is their home. Indeed, the teachers often refer to the ‘Navsarjan Vidhyalay Parivar’, or Navsarjan School Family.

The teaching staff is young, and each teacher works with a dedication motivated by an understanding of the underlying issues of inequality in their society, as well as from a love of the children. They are the backbone of their schools, determining its positive atmosphere and ensuring that students discard the caste mentality taught in the villages, replacing it with a new worldview based on a foundation of equality.

One thing that became clear in my interviews with the teachers is that most had to struggle against poverty and discrimination (both caste and gender) to reach their current level of education, and that these experiences feed their passion to educate and empower their students.

Mahendra Parmar is the Social Studies teacher at the Navsarjan Vidhyalay Sami in Patan District. At 31 years old, he is the oldest teacher at Sami School, but he interacts with the children as a big brother, playing and joking with them outside of class. His father died when he was three years old, leaving his illiterate mother with the responsibility of raising three daughters and two sons with the meager wages of an agricultural worker. Mahendra paid for his own education by starting to work from the age of ten, variously polishing shoes, doing construction labor, and picking up plastic garbage.

“I did not like primary school,” Mahendra told me. “The teachers beat us. And the Dalit students had to sit separately at lunch and use a separate water pot. I did not understand it then, except that it made me angry.” Despite these negative experiences at primary school, Mahendra excelled in his studies, and went on to obtain a Bachelors degree in Education and an MA in Economics. For Mahendra, education was a means of emancipation from poverty and, to some extent, from discrimination as well. Now knowledgeable about relevant laws designed to eliminate untouchability practices, Mahendra has changed the power dynamics in his village by ensuring that cases are filed with the police when Dalits are abused. Mahendra teaches the students about the legal system and relevant legislation so that they, too, can challenge prejudice and inequality.

Jagdish Rohit, the English teacher at Navsarjan Vidhyalay Katariya where Mina studies, is just 21 years old. During our interview, he told me that he bears all the financial responsibilities of his family now that his father passed away last year. His brother and sister are still studying, and he pays all their school fees. “What money do I need to spend for myself?” he asked me after I wondered out loud if those responsibilities weren’t making life difficult for him. “I eat here at school. I don’t like to wear expensive clothes. I buy what is necessary for me. I like to read, and all the books are here in the library.” The teachers serve as models for the students, and Jagdish passes on these values through his actions as well as his lectures.

One of Navsarjan’s central goals is to empower girls and boys to fight the gender discrimination that pervades Indian society. As a result, girls and boys share equally in all school activities, including both games and chores. Girls are encouraged to play cricket, a sport generally associated only with boys, while boys and girls have equal responsibility to make *chappati* for lunch and clean the classrooms at the end of the day.

The female teachers at the Navsarjan Vidhyalay schools are role models for both the girls and boys. Alka Rathod, currently the principal at Navsarjan Vidhyalay Rayka (teachers rotate service as principals on a yearly basis), told me that what she likes most about the school is the chance to educate Dalit girls. “Dalit girls in the villages are in a difficult situation,” she said in our interview. “They are discriminated against in their families because they are girls, and they are discriminated against in society because they are Dalit. Their brothers can go play cricket whenever they want, but the girls have to wash the clothes, make the food, and clean the floor. I want to fight this.”

On several of the evenings I spent at Navsarjan Vidhyalay Katariya, I went outside to sit on the grass and read with the children. Mina brought out a pile of English storybooks from the library, and picked out her favorites. "Start with this one," she said, "And then let's read those ones." I held the books while Mina or one of her friends did the reading, and then worked to translate each line into Gujarati. After one reading session, as I was bringing the books back inside, I commented to Jagdish, the English teacher, that I thought Mina would make a great doctor.

"Yes," Jagdish said, "she would. But I don't know if it will be possible."

Jagdish's apparent negativity surprised me, and I asked him to explain. "I mean," he said, "Mina is totally capable of becoming a doctor. She is brilliant, actually. But her parents have no money. Her family lives in a shack outside her village, on a field her parents work in but do not own. How can they pay for her education?"

The fees for the Navsarjan Vidhyalay schools are heavily subsidized by Navsarjan; other private schools cost substantially more, especially considering that the children eat and sleep at the Navsarjan schools. And if a child goes to a government school, the quality of education will almost surely not be good enough to get into a medical school.

That interaction with Jagdish made me think. The Navsarjan schools are oases of equality in a society where caste, class, and gender discrimination are still the norm. Students at Navsarjan learn to fully express themselves and their intelligence, as well as how to challenge inequality when at home. The feeling at the schools is so universally positive that it is easy to forget about the series of roadblocks that lie in the way of these children reaching their dreams.

Navsarjan is just an NGO, and does not have the resources to expand its schools through upper secondary, let alone enroll the hundreds of thousands of primary-age Dalit children across Gujarat. What will happen when the inevitable day arrives and Mina must leave Navsarjan Vidhyalay? Will her parents have enough money to pay for her to stay in a hostel if there is no high school in their village? And if she is able to keep studying, will the quality of education at her government school be good enough to allow her to succeed?

Even if a school does not overtly discriminate against Dalit students, the gap in quality between government and private schools amounts to a kind of caste discrimination in itself; most Indians wealthy enough to afford private schools come from 'forward' castes, while the poor are mostly Dalits, Tribals, and members of the Other Backward Castes (OBCs). Social power in India comes from caste, money, or both, and for the most part these groups possess neither. As a result, few government officials are receptive to complaints about absentee teachers, lack of drinking water and toilet facilities, corporal punishment, or any one of the other problems common at government schools.

Ultimately, it is the government's own responsibility to eliminate discrimination from its schools, and to ensure that those schools provide quality education. But until those responsibilities are taken more seriously, Mina, along with tens of millions of children just like her, will face an uphill battle.