

## State of Doubt, Reasoning and Reproduction of Socio-cultural Values in a Hindi Classroom

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### Abstract

This article is based on the observations done in a rural, co-education senior secondary school where during a Hindi period minute class-observations were done. The objective of these observations was to analyse the perception that all educational documents are the medium of change in the society; they try to inculcate the modern values of love towards one's nation, scientific temper, equity and fraternity among fellow citizens and thus become the foundation of a better nation. However, the issue is how this would materialise in classrooms. Is any class capable of building a future nation or does it reproduce the existing societal values? What is the role of school, textbooks, teachers, and student-teacher relationships in this process? What role can they potentially play is the essence of this article.

**Keywords:** Modernity, rural classrooms, education

### Introduction

Since Independence, 'Education' is believed to be a medium of modernisation and social reformation. Every educational document published after this carried its own understanding about India. It became clear with the very 'first educational commission' after Independence that the central role of education is 'nation building' and that is why the aims of education were defined within the patterns of national development' (Batra, 2015, p. 38).

The core of these documents contained India's present and an equal urge to create its future. In one sense it is an attempt to create a modern nation and citizens which includes values such as scientific consciousness,

brotherhood, equality, and parity. Learners will be able to acquire these values through the medium of education.

How and how much of this has been achieved is a matter to be examined critically which I have done by looking at the interaction of education within a school in a rural context. To achieve this objective, I observed a private co-educational school of Uttar Pradesh for eight months as a non-participant observer. Class XI was selected to understand the educational interaction within a classroom. During this period, observations were made and field notes were prepared from morning assembly till the time learners went back home in the afternoon.

### **Hindi Classroom Observation**

This article presents a very small part of the research where extensive observations were made during the Hindi period of class XI. Through these observations, an attempt has been made to understand how teachers and students interact within the mediation of the textbook during the process of language teaching. The article also tries to understand what values, beliefs and urges are operating in this Hindi classroom where knowledge is being created. What is the role of a teacher in this process? How is a student being groomed, shaped, and molded as an individual, and what sort of a society this small group is seen to be becoming? To this end, some of the processes of the classroom will be analysed to understand whether language classrooms have space for conflict, logical reasoning or does it perpetuate the same social and cultural values?

### **Birth-based Gender Role and the State of Doubt**

During one of the class-observations, the Hindi teacher is teaching the third lesson from the Stories Section of the textbook (Upadhyaya & Panday, 2018). The story is Bhagawatcharan Verma's 'Praayashchit' (Atonement). In this story, a cat dies at the hands of Ramu's wife. As penance, Pandit Paramsukh asks for meals to be arranged immediately for Brahmins along with hefty gifts including a golden cat weighing as much as the cat in question. The news of the cat's death spreads like wildfire in the entire neighborhood, and everyone begins to talk about bad omen and the fear of misfortunes befalling them. Further on in the story, while a discussion ensues about the ceremonial rites and rituals to be observed, suddenly the cook of the house comes out panting, only to reveal that the cat has run away.

The teacher describes this as a story about the refutation of superstitions, customs, and traditions that pervade our society. He looks at an inattentive girl-student sitting on one of the front benches and says:

**Teacher:** Don't just sit there in a state of rest. This is not about a feast being served for which you sit and wait...Everyone, pay attention here.... There was Ramu's wife, in a family.

[A girl-student repeated what the teacher had said – There was Ramu's wife.]

**Teacher:** She had to go through lots of troubles. In her house lived a speckled cat. ... What do I stand to gain from you if you read?

[Saying this, the teacher went back to the story]. '..... and if there was someone the cat loved, it was Ramu's wife ...'

**Girl-student:** '.... if there was someone the cat loved, it was Ramu's wife ...'

[A girl-student repeated this sentence after the teacher.]

**Teacher:** She had come back to her in-laws' after two months. Do you know what in-laws are?

**A girl-student:** Don't know.

**Teacher:** The home of the father-in-law.

**A boy-student:** Father's home.

**Second girl-student:** Someone's house.

**Teacher:** All pay attention here... 'at home, *pati ki pyaari* (the one loved by her husband), *saas ki dulari* (her mother-in-law's darling...)

[Midway, the girls begin to laugh.]

**Teacher:** What is there to laugh at?

**A girl-student:** '*Patit pati sir ji?*'

**Teacher:** 'Not *patit* but *pati*. Now listen carefully.... She was a 14-year-old girl but she would do all the household work.'

**The second girl-student:** 'She was younger than us all.'

**Teacher:** '... because she was of little age, she would not be very alert. The speckled cat would take advantage of her being neglectful, and daily devour all the milk, butter, *ghee*...'

**Second girl-student:** 'Consumed it all, Sir ji?'

**Teacher:** Of course!

This is a conversation between the teacher and the students during a

story reading session. During this conversation, the students are also looking for moments of laughter, whereas in reality it is not the case. While reading a part of the story during the reading session, a girl (in the above conversation) is filled with compassion for another younger girl. For this girl in the classroom, the 14-year-old girl that appears in the story seems much younger who carries the responsibility of running the household. It seems that she is able to relate to Ramu's wife in the story through her personal experiences. Even though it is just a story, still she has to manage so much at such a young age. And if any shortcoming is found in her work, then she has to face everyone's rebuke.

From a research point of view, this point becomes more important because in one such observation it comes to light that there are six to seven girls in this class, who have been married at a very young age by their families. It is quite possible that this student remembered this while reading the story. Along with this, the point to be noted here is that it seems, the student is trying to take the given lesson to a different level. However, no such opportunity is being given by the teacher.

As for the teacher's role, the observations show that he doesn't provide opportunities for any discussion or questions. He remains disinterested, and goes ahead with the story. While doing this, the teacher strengthens gendered social roles assigned at birth. The learners thus, are left to look at their roles within the norms laid by the society. The teacher doesn't create any context or reference which could be used as a medium to develop this kind of thinking. His discussions perpetuate and strengthen pre-existing stereotypes. This not only reveals the teacher's own stereotypical values, but he also makes sure not to give rise to any situation which disturbs these existing stereotypes. Why is he doing this?

One probable reason could be that the Hindi teacher is not interested in creating any conflict or question in the learners' minds. That is why he found it appropriate to not provide any such opportunity in the classroom. This will not give rise to any uneasy situation in the classroom where the teacher has to take a stand against societal norms. His disinterest should also be looked at from the prism of the role of a teacher in a traditional, rural society, is sending their children to school. While teachers are socially accepted as a guardian inside the school where the parents can't be physically present, they are often invited for religious and familial programmes in the community.

While doing my field work, I too was invited to a few such (ritual) programmes. In this scenario, where the teacher is marking his presence at students' homes, outside the school premises, his image may be hurt if he publicly denies his faith in those (social) values and norms as a teacher. In informal conversations, teachers have often accepted unofficially that they may have to bear financial losses if they dare to go against the traditional values. The number of students coming to them for tuition may decrease.

### **Observation 2: Astronomical Event and Scientific Consciousness**

It is a winter morning and in tune with the weather, the room is cold. Some students request the teacher to take their class outside, under the sun on the grassy lawns. The teacher agrees to this and a student brings a chair from the room for the teacher to sit on. Sitting around his chair on the grass are boys on one side, and girls on the other. Two-three girl students wish to ask the teacher, a Brahmin, something about the lunar eclipse. The moment they ask him about this, he responds by saying, "The almanac will have to be consulted. Had you asked earlier, I would have consulted it before coming."

These girl-students are from Class XI. Even if they had not chosen Science as a subject, yet, it is expected of them to be aware of the solar system and phenomena related to it. It is quite evident that even though they are studying Physics, Chemistry, Biology, etc., it does not necessarily follow that the subjects of Science become the carriers of scientific consciousness. Choosing 'Science' as a subject is not enough; scientific thought and reflection will have to become a part of their thinking and practice. The teacher, who could have helped them in this regard, not only nurtures the superstition of abstaining from food and water during an eclipse of the moon but also gives precedence to his social position (he is not just a teacher but a Brahmin too). As a teacher, he agrees with what the Brahmins say, "Absolutely correct. Food should be abstained from. It should not be had." Here the girl-students are not hesitant to ask a high caste teacher about the caution to be practiced on the day of the lunar eclipse. They themselves say that even if this astronomical event is not taking place in India, it is still very important to know about the caution to be taken in relation to it.

Setting aside, for a moment, the question of how a teacher will be able to expand the 'consciousness', we find that the specific 'caste' and 'gender' one belongs to by birth, determines the definition of 'knowledge'; not

just this, the value of the knowledge attained therewith, other than what is taught in the classroom, is much more. Here, the teacher is a 'male' and a 'Brahmin'; the students are 'girls' and the future 'wives' and 'daughters-in-law' of some household. In coming years, these girl-students will take the 'Inter' examination in the Science stream but the expansion of scientific consciousness that the sub-topics of Science should have affected in them by now, is still in a dormant state. It is doubtful if their way of thinking will change in the future.

We have to realise that in school a teacher is a 'teacher' but the 'caste' to which she belongs by birth, begins to determine the behavior/ interaction between her and students at some time or the other. In the present instance the teacher could have told the students that even if the phenomenon were to be witnessed here, there would still be no possibility of their being influenced by it. But he does not utilise the opportunity to take up such a discussion.

### **Observation 3: The Poet Bihari's Eight Planets**

Many such incidents that made clear the role of the teacher detailed above came to the fore in the course of observing this class. For instance, in the course of a Hindi class, while teaching the couplets of Bihari (the poet of the *Reetikaal*, the Medieval period), the teacher asked the students:

- What is the number of planets?  
(The class is absolutely silent.)
- Gone silent as if a snake has bitten you all! Planets are 27. Now halve them. Hurry up...hurry up...
- Thirteen and a half, Sir.
- Okay, the four Vedas? Halve them and it comes to two. Thirteen and a half plus two equals fifteen and a half. And the planets are nine.
- Planets are eight, Sir.

That the student is enumerating the number of planets as eight is not important for the teacher. He is driven by the possibility of the counting in the couplet of Bihari going wrong—and so, is very displeased at the student giving the number of planets to be 'eight'. He asks the student to set her general knowledge right and concentrate while studying science in the class. In this conversation, the student wishes to repeat the fact of Pluto not being considered a planet but the teacher pays no attention to it. He comes back to the couplet.

- Halve it, and it comes to four and a half. The total comes to *bees*-twenty (thirteen and a half plus two plus four and a half equals twenty). When you add them all, it adds up to *bees* – twenty. And if you give me the same *vis* (poison), I'll die. She takes the meaning of *bees* (twenty) to be *vish* (poison). In her memory, she wants to drink *vish*. She shouldn't have loved Krishna. This, then, is the sentiment of love.

For teachers to 'ignore' or 'not pay attention to' something said by a student may seem to be very common. Actually, the habit of doing this is a conscious attempt on their part.

These are the biggest hurdles in the way of creating opportunities in the future where a student will feel comfortable in saying what he or she wishes to say. Conversely, teachers do not want a student to think differently from them and ask questions. Because of this very facility of students' voices remaining 'unheard' that the possibility of a classroom becoming a space for exploration of 'knowledge' is lost.

When, even in the classroom, a 'doubt' is not created about a situation or no 'dilemma' surfaces in the mind of students, then how can we hope them to raise questions about the given structures and forms of society outside the classroom? These students would rather make attempts to adapt themselves in tune with the already existing structures of society.

The conversation about the eclipse of the moon during the observation recorded above negates the possibility of questioning and doubt even as it reinforces the social and cultural beliefs of society. This conversation could have become an opportunity for widening and expanding the scope of 'scientific consciousness' which could have made an individual 'enlightened' and 'rational'. In the second observation, in spite of the latest information about astronomy being there, the fact that the teacher first leaves the student's submission unheard about the number of planets and then scolds her, would take us in the direction of believing what is written in the literary texts of a bygone era to be the sole truth, as a result of which it would not be possible to construct new knowledge and lay the foundation of a modern society.

### Long Way to Walk

During the classroom observations, the idea of the modern individual has appeared many times. According to Parsons (1902-79) any individual

who is in a 'dilemma' is moving towards modernity. When the person is unable to decide whether he should behave within the privileges he got from birth or the ones that he earned, then he is on his way to modernity. On the other hand, a person who follows what has been said earlier without questioning, has a bent towards enjoying privileges attained at birth, and ignores personal achievements, he may well be using modern instruments and tools, but that person is not 'modern' (Gupta, 2000).

The classroom observations reveal that in reality this matter cannot be divided into black or white as such. There is a possibility for development of a 'dilemma' among learners during interactions of teacher and learners. Learners can be seen emerging as individuals who raise questions against the already existing social structures. However, the classroom proceedings indicate that with the help of what 'education' can do, we can visualise the dream of restructuring modern society. And the teachers' role is very significant here. It is important to look at the role of a teacher inside school (and classroom) very carefully. As the descriptive observations show, the control of the class seems to be with the teacher. Plus, it is evident that the way education is seen as a medium of recreating society in our educational documents, its role is not that simple and easy outside of these policies and committees and within the premises of schools.

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