

Of Education Politics And Ideology

This Interview elaborates on the evolving education and political scenario in a small town of Madhya Pradesh and reflects on issues that have influenced it over at least three generations. These reflections have been drawn from an interview with a family in which we get to speak to three generations . It gives a context of the change in people's access and perception of education in the town from the difficult times of the grandfather to the time where the educational options for the oldest and youngest grand daughters are being discussed.

We interviewed Prakash G (name changed) and his family because we had been told that he was one of the first Dalits in the town to get an education. Soni Bua had taught him and his older two sons in the mission school.

Prakash G had also been a Parshad of the Nagar Palika twice. "I've been involved in some political process or the other since I was a child. During the India movement, there was a big procession here, I joined in and that was my entry into politics. Since then I have been with the Congress."

Rajendra (name changed), the oldest son is also involved in politics but leans towards the BSP. "I am one with Ambedkar's teachings", he says. "Our party is not strong but it is strong enough to make a candidate lose even if we can't win. When I hear my father's story and the treatment he underwent for being of a particular caste, it makes me feel angry. It makes we want to do something about it. That is why I am with the BSP."

"Their party is too harsh". The father interjects. "Some of their slogans are too strong, they cause hurt. One must work to change things but always without violence even in words and thoughts. Joote, chappal marne ki baat kyon karni?" The son laughs "Arre tab woh slogan us samay ke liye theek tha."

Ajit (name changed), the youngest son says that he is away from politics. He was a part of a Kabir Manch, a group of kabir bhajan singers and musicians, which are a part of popular secular folk tradition in the Malwa region. But now along with his singing he is studying to clear the UPSC exam. He is planning to leave for Delhi with a group of friends to prepare for the tests. "I don't know what I can do here. I have studied in Indore and now I feel that going to Delhi will help. I like this place it is my home but one has to move out to grow." With regard to going to a bigger unfamiliar place he adds, "Since I have lived in Indore, I won't feel in awe of Delhi, I feel I will be able to manage there. I want to pass my exams this time."

Last time he had cleared the prelims of the state administrative exams, but couldn't make it in the finals. "Two of my papers didn't go very well", he says. "So I'll just have to work harder this time. I have heard Kota, Allahabad and Delhi are good for preparing for competitive exams. That is why I'm planning to go to Delhi. Delhi is the best."

Rajendra begins to tell us about his family. "My father got educated by an Englishman, who had in a sense adopted him as far as his education was concerned. Then he educated us - all his sons. We had two sisters after me. My father never educated them and they never went to school. They got married early. Why my father never educated them, I never asked him. Only he will be able to tell you that."

When Rajendra said he went to the mission school, I immediately asked him if he had to take a girl along. "Why?" he asks back. I told him that I had heard that there was a rule in the school, that boys got admission only if they were accompanied by a girl. "Was it so?" he asks. "I don't remember, but I do

know that there was a girl here of our neighbourhood who I went to school with... It may be possible that I got admission with her. I can't say. We will have to ask my father." He continues trying to remember, "I know that I started school with her and we used to go together. Now she is married. She left school after fourth or fifth class,"

Rajendra's father Prakash talks of his experiences of studying in the government school. "In the early 20's they never even allowed us to sit on the tatpatti", he states. "Pani bhi upar se pilate the. All our clothes used to get wet as the water dripped down our elbows and arms."

"I left school because I couldn't take the discrimination. Then I went to the mission school, but I couldn't adjust there too so I left it. Then this angrez person from the mission hospital whose house I used to go to do some small work began to teach me. That's how I learnt to read and write. Soon I started working in the mission hospital as a ward boy and worked there for the rest of my life. I retired a few years back."

"I sent my children to study in the mission school and then in the government school. I wanted that they get all that they could. They haven't seen the times that I saw." he continues as he talks of the discrimination. "They have not experienced the peeda that I went through. They know nothing of it. The times and this town have also changed so much since our times. First electricity came and then vehicles became common and now see what all has come", he says looking at his sons. They smile and shake their heads good naturedly at him.

I asked why his daughters didn't go to school. He smiles and says, "I know you will ask why, but in those times it wasn't so common and we didnt think about these things so much. The social outlook was different then. Even when I married my elder son, I got an uneducated daughter in law, thinking that educated women would have airs and would not be able to run the house. But now I know differently. My two other daughters in law are educated and I don't find any difference in their affection for us. You see we too are learning." He smiles.

His son adds, "But my elder sister's daughters are studying. One has done her B.Sc and is 20 years old now, but we are not pushing her into marriage. We will wait for a suitable match to come by, till then she can study and get her qualifications."

The eldest son has lots to say about his children's education. It is a topic, which is close to him as he launches into the details of the choice of schools, their marks, quality of education etc. Interestingly his children did not go to the mission school. "The standard of education in the mission school has gone down especially after the mission stopped supporting it and Soni bua left", he says. "I am interested in the quality of the education that the school gives. I keep checking on it and change my children's school every two years if I have to. If I find that it is not up to the mark or is not suiting their requirements. If I feel the quality is going down and there is a better school then I send my children there". The fact that there are so many schools in the town and many more are opening up providing different facilities, this is not difficult. "My daughter is in 12th now" he continues, "and has changed schools three times. First she was in a school that had good primary education. Then in 11th and 12th I realised that the Patidaar school students were getting better results, so I put her there after trying the Jain school. "Private school fees is high, but finally thats what all parents would want to put everything into, their children's education."

Rajendra tells us of an incident, "my daughter almost failed in her 8th maths exam. i went to the best tutor in in out town. he refused to take her on, even though i knew him, "i don't take weak students, if

she is scoring poorly in maths then she probably does not have the aptitude for maths." he said. My question was- but isn't it the weak that need for effort. but he still refused. Then I went and sought out his competitor. A teacher from his school. two years later in her boards this girl has got 90% marks. All these schools are getting very choosy, they want to take only the top students. they have cut offs for marks. so that they can get best results. The govt school results are not so good, they have to take every one."

"After this I will send her to college and make her do her BA in English literature. Now she has science with Maths. That way she will be proficient in the two subjects that have the most demand - English and Maths", he observes. "She can get a government job or even take tuitions. We have thought of all these things so that her future is secure", he concludes.

The discussion then turned to the religious and caste affiliations of various schools, in the town . Do these affiliations affected the profile of the students in any way?.

"No", said Rajendra. "When they started the communities felt that they would cater to the students of that community. But now they are identified as a community school only by name and that too after the trust which runs it rather than by the profile of the students who attended the school. The mission school had children from all castes. The higher castes sent their children there at that time because it gave good education. They allowed for their children to study with Dalit children there, because the standard was good. And now we too choose schools for our children on the same criteria."

"And I must say another thing about the mission school", he adds. "Even though it was run by the missionaries, Christian people and they had a Christian prayer, that was all that the religious influence amounted to. Other than that there was nothing about the environment that hinted at conversion. It was like any other school."

"The other important thing was that they stuck to keeping Dalit children even if there may have been pressure to do otherwise. They kept that as their focus and made the other caste children study with them", he states.

But such a stress or focus doesn't exist now does it? " No and it can be because stress on it may not be needed with the same intensity, considering that almost all families dalit and otherwise send their children to school."

His youngest son goes to Saraswati Sishu Mandir, a school associated with the RSS. "My son goes there, my daughter also used to go there, but now she is in the Paatidar school because as I mentioned earlier 11th and 12th are better there", he repeats. "I am very happy with my sons education in Sishu Mandir. I am interested in the quality of education and don't care about the ideology. That we will take care of at home", he says. "As long as they don't make him wear half pants and join rallies and shakha meetings, I am ok with the school. I know that they make them recite shlokas in school before eating. But he doesn't do that at home, nor does he show any other signs of indoctrination into their ideology", he states matter of factly. "I felt the same for the mission school. They make you sing Christian prayers in school. But there is no other pressure on the children to convert." He pauses a bit and says, "My problem with the RSS is that they start protesting about banning schools with any other religious affiliations. There is no need for them to politicise this. They use such things to target other religions and that is wrong", he asserts.

He points to his 3-year-old niece, his brother's daughter and continues, "I will always choose according

to what is good for the child. For her we will try the new school, St Johns. (being run by Roman Catholic Brothers). Now we will try the father logon ka school. If the standard is good then we will keep her there or change to a better school like we did for the others." "but i have to say one thing. There is a big difference between the way we were taught and now days." better or worse? " better, the basic education was so good, the reading or writing that i learned then, these children don't learn like that. What Soni Bua taught us, the way she and the others used aids to teach us. I don't see that in any of their schools now. "

The kind of calculated interest that he takes in his children's education stands out. He feels that at this stage there is not much difference in the kind of encouragement that his daughter gets for her education compared to his sons. He does agree that later in life girls do get restricted in their education according to the adjustments they have to make as per the norms of the family they marry into. But he sees it as an eventuality and says that they would have to manage the loss of freedom if any and adjust to the new environment. There is no choice in that , he admits, so they might be at a disadvantage.

He tells us proudly that his daughter who would be giving her 11th class exam shortly is the first girl of their caste to have studied this much.

I wonder if she feels a sense of pride. She shakes her head and says, "I feel glad I can study. Today all girls study." She doesn't see it as a big privilege. Her aunts who belong to Indore and have come into the house after marriage are also educated. "My mother hasn't studied," Malti (name changed) states. "But since her children and other sisters in law are all educated. She has picked up a lot." Says Rajendra. "Now our mother even though not educated at all understands English words also. We try to use English to keep things from here, but nowadays she catches us out," says Malti with a tinge of pride in her voice.

Through these conversations, it became apparent that the forms of discrimination in education may have changed in relation to gender and caste, but they continue to exist in forms more subtle. There is a certain blindness to the marginalisation of these groups that seems to have developed over time. Since discrimination was defined in more severe and visible forms (as untouchability or restricted access to spaces) in memory, its subtler but equally restrictive forms are missed. The reality, which encompassed these forms of discrimination, is seen as a historical occurrence, which may have carried over as muted anger, which needs to be dealt with in political expression rather than in everyday living.

The sons, who have not faced extreme discrimination, still feel strongly about the oppression of the father and look to more vocal and radical ideas and expression against it, while the father himself talks of softer methods of fighting discrimination. Separate organizing also points towards the growth of dalit mobilising in the town.

There has also been a co-option of ideology – political and social in the stands that are taken by the institutions we have begun to explore in these discussion. Saraswati Shishu Mandir, provides a good example. Looking at the profile of their students and teachers, one finds that they include Dalits and people of different religions, though they may have started out with a more exclusive agenda. However, though these seem contradictory to its ideology, they exist as parallels imparting to it a complex character that allows them to blend into their environments and gain from it but also retaining the potential to revert back to its original form when required. As Rajendra rightly pointed out, they (the RSS) would actively call for the banning of schools with other religious affiliation when the need arose. The school infrastructure is used for RSS meetings and activities,. But if it is done with out interfering with the school timings and teaching, the parents have no complaints.

For the parents, education and the institution to which they send the children is largely governed by two factors- affordability and the quality of education ("results" was often used interchangeably). This is brought out well by Rajendra " i will do what is best for my children, our aim is to see that they get a base from which to reach as far as they can." I don't agree with the RSS ideology but if their school gives good education, then i will send my children there. As long as the school doesn't discriminate against them actively." Such institutions on one hand talk about reviving the Hindu culture but on the other hand can not escape from the effects of wider influences. They have to give importance to English as a language , because most parents want their children to learn that language.

When the Saraswati Shishu Mandir had started, they would not take people of lower castes, now even their teachers are all Dalits. This is because they are not able to pay good salaries. They also make the teachers work very hard. This kind of compromise or split in ideology brings out clearly how education is mainly looked as a profession with clear parameters for quality and purpose, namely results and the opportunities that it gives to children. This works both ways for parents as well as institutions. But institutions will always as mentioned above, will always have the choice of reverting back to a stand when they choose, or soften their stand.

None of the private schools, focused specifically on education for dalit or girl children, not even the mission school. Though it had started out with that vision six decades ago. While it was mentioned in the above interview as well as several times in other conversations that we had with various people, that a special focus is not needed in these times, the fact that Malti is the first girl of the neighborhood to have studied till 11th, hints otherwise. It is only in government schools, that there are schemes that encourage girls and dalit children to come to school. Where teachers have a target in getting children to school. And it is here that one has to see their importance of policy. The only two exclusively girls schools are government schools. All the private schools are co-educational, and for them the need would be to have more children enrolled in their school, dalit or girls. As long as they bring in their fees. The schools interest in getting them into their schools and not governed by an ideology.