

## **Food Culture and Inclusive Education**

Mohammad Umar

The idea of giving each child equal respect within the school system is not a new one. The ideals of our constitution such as those of equality, freedom prove that since the time of independence it has been agreed by the majority that such ideals are indeed precious to the nation. The NCF 2005 has also reiterated the same in its assertions. The irony however of this entire matter has been that these noble ideas cherished in our constitution have so far remained only 'ideals' and have not been implemented to their fullest strengths. It is true, that all documents and policies related to the field of education have clearly mentioned the need for these ideals. In the process of curriculum designing or writing of texts if some empathetic minds have been involved then in the very manner in which the texts are written or the illustrations are made, this sentiment is reflected. The condition of many classes within the social structure has not changed much, there are several reasons for this but there are a few on which we shall not avoid an open discussion. Here, I am going to give you a few examples ranging from curriculum development, teacher-training to the status of various sections within the larger society. After having looked at the various dimensions of the problem we will then try to grapple with a fundamental question.

Two years ago, in a Hindi speaking state of India the work of writing new books for children had begun. I was also part of this endeavor. The books are indeed much better than what they had been earlier. The basis of the curriculum was of course the NCF 2005 itself and this meant that the community of writers had a larger consensus over the ideals propagated in the document. Some of my friends and me were involved in writing for different subjects. The task of writing the books would go on for days at an end. Educationists from across the country, teachers, and representatives of self-help groups were all part of this project. Some of us would gather together every day after the day's work and share our experiences and ideas. We would also have discussions on the inter-connectedness of disciplines and how a multi-disciplinary approach was indeed important.

### **THE PREDOMINANCE OF CULTURAL FOOD**

One day as I returned from work, my colleagues from the language committee seemed very disturbed and agitated. They were perhaps having a heated argument amongst themselves. One of them told me that in the book a picture of a dog was there in front of whom there was a bowl in which a bone was drawn. Some of those who belonged to the writer's committee were not happy with this particular illustration. They were arguing that the bowl full of bones in the illustration was unacceptable and in its place the dog shall be shown as having something vegetarian. But the problem was that the illustration was there only to supplement a story in the book according to which the dog was rightly shown to be sitting in front of a bowl containing bones.

Likewise a book on environmental studies also contained a chapter on food. The chapter had a detailed description of the varieties of food and the nutritional value that each of them supplied to the human body. Therefore, a description about eggs, meat, and fish along with suitable illustrations was also a fundamental need of the chapter. The committee involved here also was uncomfortable with this idea, and there was lack of any consensus between the members. There were many individuals here as well who did not want illustrations of non-vegetarian items to be a part of the textbook. A similar kind of incidence also took place in a village area where the teacher-training program was being undertaken. This was a block level program. In a government school's four large rooms this training program was being done. In each room two trainers were assigned the duty of carrying on the program. A very senior Sanskrit teacher was made the overall in-charge of the entire program. Despite the fact that in none of the rooms training of teachers for the Sanskrit language was taking place he had been put at the helm of affairs. He had been somebody who spoke extremely undiluted Hindi and often tended to use Sanskrit words here and there. He was known in the village as an extremely learned person and thus accorded with a great degree of reverence. During the training sessions very few teachers would come between 9-10 in the morning. During this time, participants who were ordinarily trained in the four separate rooms would be seated in a single room and would collectively do their motivational songs, poetry recitations etc. He was indeed an expert in organizing events of such kind. He used to carry with himself a thick diary in which were noted many devotional songs, prayer speeches etc. Although he remembered many of these by heart, he would always carry this diary along with himself in case he forgot a word here or there. Even ordinarily, whenever he would speak he would often quote passages from the *Vedas* and *Puranas*. If someone were to hear him speak like that, they would possibly believe that he is preaching or delivering some sort of religious sermon. But on paying closer attention one would come to realize that much of what he said was indeed based on false dogma and superstition.

One day he walked into my room. After the prayer had been done, he began his own discourse. He said that in the ancient times, the friendship between the great Indian sage Siddhartha and Arabian king Hassan was extremely strong. One day, the Arabian king decided to travel to his friend on his flying carpet and meet him. King Hassan flew over deserts and seas and finally reached to where his friend sage Siddhartha was. He saw from above, that sage Siddhartha was seated and near his feet a lot of birds and animals were also seated, and the king loved them. Seeing this pious scene, King Hassan felt extremely happy. As soon as he reached near Siddhartha, all the animals and birds that were till now sitting so peacefully near the sage ran off in different directions. Looking at all this, the king felt extremely surprised. He asked his friend with great astonishment that till now they were seated so comfortably, why did they all disperse when I came close?

The sage replied, "The food that you consume determines how others shall treat you, these animals ran away because your presence scares them, the smell of your perspiration told them that you were a meat-eater." By the end of the story, the old man had very strongly established

that thoughts were indeed shaped by what one consumed. Sitting in front of him was an audience composed of jats, gujjars, minas, bhills, gametis, Brahmins, kayasts, Muslims etc. It cannot be ascertained that all of those sitting there were in agreement to what was being said but one thing was quite certain and this was that all of them were listening to him with utter patience. There hardly seemed to be any voice of dissent, his status of being a learned man seemed to be enough!

### **QUESTIONING THE BASIS OF SUCH AN EDUCATION?**

The message that was being given out of this story woven out of fantasy was indeed problematic, but there was hardly anybody who could question what was being said. Over the past many decades our education system has been iconizing vegetarianism and portraying those who eat non-vegetarian foods as demonic or lacking in virtue. This is perhaps the reason why many of those teachers whose dietary habits were not necessarily vegetarian preferred to remain quiet and bear the ridicule. This is a recurrent phenomenon, in our discussions on environmentalism, protection of animal rights or preservation of ecological system, those who consume meat are targeted and seen as doing some sort of a crime. As a result of this, in the innocent minds of young children prejudices of such sort become ingrained. Here, I would recall from my own childhood days at school that whenever the festival of Bakrid would be approaching, my teachers would ask from me a very detailed description of what was going to be cooked for the festival in front of all the other kids. If I would just mention the name of some sweetmeats and deserts they would on their own accord remind me in front of the others that a goat was also going to be slaughtered for the feast. On having heard this, some of my friends would laugh while others would show expressions of disgust. Repeated experiences of such kind within the school structure had taught me a hard fact quite early, that some of the food items that were consumed by people of my culture were not acceptable by many others. At first, I just could not understand how it was possible that a food item that was such an integral part of my dietary habits could so utterly disgust the other students and teachers. To avoid this feeling of embarrassment and awkwardness, gradually as I grew up I began to often tell lies at social gatherings that we were a family of vegetarians and that we never consumed meat or fish.

Today, it's been about fifteen years since I have been working in the field of education and this has given me the opportunity to meet many new individuals, and understand many social institutions very intimately. To be speaking the truth, I would have to confess that there is not much that has changed since the time I was a child and went to school. There are many institutions that have the reputation of being radical or progressive but often when one looks at them from an insider's perspective one discovers that this could be a mere perception. The proponents of a brahminical ideology of intolerance are freely moving both within the wider social ethos as well as in institutions whether private or public.

## A DEBATED UNDERSTANDING

Let us now come back to the teacher's training program. Any individual, who is even vaguely familiar with the disciplines of Geography or History would agree that the story of the sage and the king is nothing but a story woven out of fantasy and the proponents of a certain ideology are trying to forcefully convert it into a historical fact for greater legitimacy. However, presently the debate is not so much about whether this story is a fact or a fiction but more about how this story is sending across a wrong message into the society. The need therefore is to challenge the wrong notions propagated here, otherwise they tend to spread from one social setting to another.

I primarily work in the domain of Mathematics but I also take keen interest in the discipline of History.

I asked them a question, "Do you all believe that whether a human being is good or bad is determined by the food that he/she consumes?" The senior most committee member spoke "yes, did you not hear how even the animals and birds ran away from King Hassan because of his food habits?"

I asked them another question, "Could you please tell me that in the Indian history who is the most important messenger of peace?" One of the teachers answered" yes, it's Lord Buddha".

I asked them yet another question, "In the world history, who do you think was the cruelest of individuals?"

Another teacher spoke the name of Adolf Hitler.

With another question, I sought to place before them my own argument, I said" do you people know the dietary habits of Lord Buddha and Adolf Hitler?"

Hitler was a vegetarian and Lord Buddha was a non-vegetarian, I told them. If food determined our consciousness then how was it possible for each of them to be the persons that they were? Despite being a strict vegetarian one became a dictator while the other despite being a non-vegetarian spread the message of love and peace.

There was nobody there who could have anticipated this question. The silence of the room was broken by a lady teacher who had a veil over her face when she asked" sir, what did Ravan eat?"

I confessed that I did not have any clue whatsoever about Ravan's food habits. Hearing this, the senior member of the committee informed everybody that Ravana was a strict vegetarian and a very learned Brahmin too. Some of the people in the room argued that despite being vegetarian or learned he was spreading untruth and violence.

After a vibrant discussion, it became clear to those present in the room that food had no role to play in either one's virtuous behavior or even in one's sins.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING INCLUSIVE

The debate that arose during the book writing session about the illustration of the dog with a bowl of bones and the heated discussion amongst the teacher community about the linkage between food and consciousness, need to be understood deeply. If we wish to really make the education system inclusive, then we have to fight the wrong prejudices that people hold with concrete arguments. India is a land of diversities, there is such an elongated coastline stretching over hundreds of miles, the population that lives in these areas primarily consumes various types of fishes. On islands such as Andaman and Nicobar people have to primarily depend on the ocean for food. There are innumerable communities who use either the sea or the forest for obtaining their food. There are also many diverse religious groups who differ from each other starkly. If we wish to move with all of them towards the path of development and growth then we have to respect their diverse cultures, faiths and beliefs, customs and rituals, language-dialects and food habits. Only when we learn to respect these differences, will it be possible for us to be truly inclusive and incorporate the ideals of mutual acceptance in the society.

---

**Mohammad Umar:** Presently working with the Azim Premji Foundation, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan

**Illustrations: Nargis Sheikh:** She has done her engineering from KK Sahib Wagh College, Nasik. She is an independent photographer.

**Translated from Hindi by Ananya Pathak,** JNU, Delhi