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Class and Caste in the Classroom

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Since the education system spends vast quantities of time debating syllabi and course content, it is necessary to examine the results of all these deliberations. What are the values being promoted for the vast numbers of rural youth, many of whom are first-generation learners? What role are they going to play in their society after undergoing years of formal education?

The attitudes being promoted through the educational system can be dramatically illustrated by English Course Reader. English is seen as important for two reasons. First, it is seen as a language of the rulers, past and present. Therefore those who learn English want to imbibe the cultural values of the ruling classes. Second, it opens up job opportunities. Comprehension levels are low, which makes it necessary to use simplistic language and statements. The language is consequently more indicative of genuine attitudes.

R.P. Bhatnagar who has compiled the textbook in English (Course Reader) for the 11th and 12th classes, Rajasthan Board, has thought it a matter of pride to mention that it will foster both linguistic and cultural values of the students. He states:

Section A is intended to instil confidence in the students and therefore contains relatively easier textual material, well within the reach of an average student, both linguistically and culturally.

The first lesson is called "Picnic Cancelled". surely 'picnic' is a concept which is both urban and associated with a class which enjoys leisure and sharply divides work from enjoyment. The lesson begins with a description of the Sharmas and the Bhatias. Mrs. Sharma is watering the garden—yet another urban symbol of feudal or modern wealth. There are no gardens in rural areas. Even the rural rich do not have gardens. While teaching this lesson to some students who lived in the neighbourhood, it became clear that the concept of a garden was totally alien to them. For those who have not travelled far it is difficult even to visualise it.

When Mrs Sharma informs her husband about the intended picnic, he promptly says, "In that case I'll

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get the gardener to water the trees.

It is alien enough to have a garden, but the concept of the gardener is totally urban and upper-class. Land in rural areas is used for productive purposes. This garden has chairs and tables, which are again symbols of the urban rich.

Mr Sharma shows some concern for their belongings when he says:

We had better remove the chairs and the table from the garden in case it rains.

However, Mrs Sharma has adopted the Western model of throwing out the old when she replies:

The chairs are broken and old. I would rather let them stay here.

She fortunately cares about the table. But the necessity of servants for any manual work is immediately revealed.

The table must certainly be removed. It's too heavy for us. I'll get the servant to help us remove it.

Literate rural youth of course can at best aspire only to be in a Class IV Government job, or work as guards and peons in similar private-sector jobs!

As if the lesson were not enough to mould attitudes, the exercises at the end of the lesson are used to comprehensively drive home the point. In his short note to the students at the beginning of the book Mr Bhatnagar says:

The manner of equipping the student for the various demands life will make on them is revealed in exercises at the end of lesson one on structures and usage.

It is worth reproducing the whole section.

Structures and Usage

1. To get someone to do something
 - a. I shall get the gardener to water the trees.
 - b. I shall get the servant to help us remove the table.
 - c. I got some villagers to push the car.
 - d. Did you get a dhobi to wash the linen?
 - e. She does not like to get anyone to help her finish her homework.
 - f. Will you get the tailor to make me a dress?

While 'a' and 'b' only re-emphasise ideas in the lesson, 'c' shows us exactly what our educators think villagers should be doing. Obviously something constructive like pushing other peoples' cars!

However, in 'd' it seems there is something to learn from the village after all. The usefulness of the categories of caste, even to urban people, is revealed when we are told exactly what we must get *dhobies* to do. In 'e' we finally have someone who doesn't

want help. The urban, upper-class parent reveals the ultimate dream of a child who will finish her own homework! In 'f' we are back to dependencies, this time on the tailor.

The author explains:

In all the sentences given above the verb 'get' has been used as a causative, i.e. to express the fact that one person or thing causes another person or thing to perform some action.

The description of the causative verb 'make' reveals the true nature of these relationships.

Make denotes the use of force or pressure, either physical or social: She *made* the servant clean the floor. (Emphasis in the original.)

THE whole picture is revealed in an exercise in tabular form:

1. Make as many sentences as possible using the following table:

Subject	Verb	(Pro)noun	to-infinitive etc
The boy		the servant	to wash the veranda
The girl		the young boy	to lift the heavy box
Mohan	got		to ride ten miles
My father		the old man	to push the truck
They			to keep the stray dogs away

Looking at the exercise one wonders what combinations are being encouraged. In the pronoun section, the servant will obviously have to perform all the tasks. The young boy, depending on what his class background is, may have to do everything except lift the heavy box. But for the old man, unless we want to teach children to be patently cruel, his task must obviously be "to keep the stray dogs away." An interesting task for a society which prides itself on its respect to the aged!!

Thankfully the first lesson ends soon after, but unfortunately the book does not. Lesson Seven called 'Too many Mishaps' tells us how we must rise on the social ladder.

The author relaxes with an "uncomplaining" supply of hot tea, on a winter evening, when his friend Sharad informs him that their new Director is arriving by train at eight p.m. Naturally, he cannot do without the servant.

I called Govind, my new servant and asked him to take my scooter out in the porch. I began dressing myself.

Mercifully he did not ask the servant to dress him!

However, the servant, poor chap, can do no right:

At quarter to eight Govind came running and told me that the scooter had a flat tyre. I felt greatly disturbed. Had he informed me of it soon after I had asked him to take out the

scooter, I would have gone to the station on my bicycle and still reached there in time to receive the Director. Now it was too late to do it.

He even complains to his friend Sharad of the low intelligence level of the servant:

When I reached the platform I found Sharad pacing up and down in front of the railway bookstall. I told him how I got late because of the foolishness of my servant. Sharad was sorry to learn that I had to ride a bicycle all the way from my house to the station. Had he suspected such a mishap, he would have brought me to the station on his motor-cycle.

Cycling to the station is seen as a calamity. Many children who come to school and read this chapter walk miles. Even cycles are mainly owned by the rural middle-class.

However, the Director, as we are to see, is much higher in the official hierarchy. He travels in great style:

The train steamed into the station at thirty-three minutes past eight. We walked up to the air-conditioned coach. The only passenger to come out of it was our Director.

But the ultimate lesson on how to succeed lies ... the presentation of the bouquet, when Sharad steals the thunder.

Sharad had brought a bouquet which he presented to the boss and thus got all his attention. Had I been not in hurry, I too would have bought one on the way to the station.

The author recognises Sharad's cleverness and bemoans the fact that he too should have had the time buy a bouquet. When Sharad drives off with the Director, the author feels

lonely and neglected. Had I brought my scooter, things would have been different, I said to myself.

A lesson in "How to get on with your boss," not a lesson on mishaps at all!

This would read like something out of a farce and make us laugh, if it were not for the deliberateness with which young minds are sought to be conditioned. It is not surprising therefore that there is a low value for rural life in general and manual labour in particular, and aspirations for the life of a 'Babu'.

Andreas Fuglesang has rightly said in *About Understanding—ideas and Observations on Cross-cultural Communication*:

The formal education system is primarily concerned with instructing the next generation in the techniques and values of the dominant social system, thereby preserving and perpetuating a power structure.

If Sharad is the role-model on whom youth are going to pin their aspirations, then obviously it shapes a society where boot-licking and social-climbing will be the values inculcated. The lesson reveals a curious combination of a consumer-oriented society with caste hierarchies conveniently accommodated within it. For those in rural areas, especially the poor, it represents the worst of both worlds.