

# Teaching Dalit Bahujan Utopias: Notes from the Classroom

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## Abstract

The production of knowledge in India operates within a rarefied domain enclosed within the structures of caste, class, ethnicity and gender. This has enabled the unabashed peddling of one-dimensional epistemology of glorifying the past, justifying the prevalent social hierarchies and manufacturing consent for the existing social order. Periodically, the status quo was interrogated and the resultant debates are secreted within the pages of history. Rarely if ever, these contestations become a part of the pedagogy thereby igniting a quest for a more emancipatory social apparatus. This is not surprising as the reproduction of the symbolic power needs to be closely guarded. The ancient world considered land as the paramount resource and wars were waged to capture more territories. For the industrialized societies, capital was the source of sustenance but in the modern era, privilege and power based on knowledge is the magic mantra, the currency of socio-economic relations. This article revolves around the attempts made by the researcher to introduce a full-fledged course on *Dalit Bahujan Political Thought*<sup>1</sup> at the Masters level in Delhi University. This intervention was opposed by the entrenched academia hailing from the privileged castes who wished to perpetuate their Brahmanicalweltanschauung. The texts/readings prescribed for the course were sought to be banned by the higher authorities. The pantheon of thinkers who advocated an Indian version of liberation theology was never engaged with at an ideological level. The everyday engagements with the students who joined the course and their interactions in the classrooms provide a multi-layered understanding of negotiating utopias. This article is based on discussions with various stakeholders—academic committees who decide on pedagogy, feedback from students and classroom engagements for more than five years.

## Keywords

Pedagogy, Dalit Bahujan epistemology, classroom, knowledge production

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<sup>1</sup>Two years back, the university's higher academic bodies removed the term 'Political' from the title.

## Pedagogy and Knowledge Construction

As pointed out by John Fiske, knowledge is never neutral; it never exists in an empiricist, objective relationship to the real. Knowledge is power, and the circulation of knowledge is part of the social distribution of power. The discursive power to construct a commonsense reality that can be inserted into cultural and political life is central in the social relationship of power. The power of knowledge has to struggle to exert itself in two dimensions. The first is to control the “real,” to reduce reality to the knowable, which entails producing it as a discursive construct whose arbitrariness and inadequacy are disguised as far as possible. The second struggle is to have this discursively (and therefore socio-politically) constructed reality accepted as truth by those whose interests may not necessarily be served by accepting it. Discursive power involves a struggle both to construct (a sense of) reality and to circulate that reality as widely and smoothly as possible throughout society.<sup>2</sup> One of the institutions through which this sense of reality is constructed and circulated is through schools. For some groups of people, schooling is seen as a vast engine of democracy: opening horizons, ensuring mobility, and so on. For others, the reality of schooling is strikingly different. It is seen as a form of social control, or, perhaps, as the embodiment of cultural dangers, institutions whose curricula and teaching practices threaten the moral universe of the students who attend them. While not all of us may agree with this diagnosis of what schools do, this latter position contains a very important insight. It recognizes that behind Spencer’s famous question about “What knowledge is of most worth?” there lies another even more contentious question, “Whose knowledge is of most worth?”<sup>3</sup>

## The University in India

Habermas considered universities as essential for society’s progress, but the fact that it contains within itself the seeds of the reproduction of social lifeworlds, meant that constant vigilance is required to unleash its transformative potential. Hence, education has always been viewed as a contested terrain especially in highly unequal societies. Heuristically speaking, education is perceived as serving one of two purposes in society. It either serves to ‘domesticate’ and strengthen the existing relations of power and therefore perpetuates the ills such as socio-economic, cultural and environmental, critiqued throughout its corpus of literature, rendering conditions of oppression as non-existent or else it serves to ‘liberate’ in contributing to the ushering in of a new world in which principles of social justice and ecological sustainability are upheld.

Reflecting on the lived realities of Dalit-Bahujan students in the university, P. Thirumal<sup>4</sup> argued that the reproduction of everyday institutional embodiment

<sup>2</sup>John Fiske (1989). *Reading the popular*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, pp. 149–50.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Apple (2000). *Cultural politics and the text: Official knowledge*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, London: Routledge, pp. 42–60.

<sup>4</sup>Thirumal P. (2020). Dominant bodies and their ethical performances: Violence of caste embodiment in higher educational institutions. *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 18, Vol.LV, No. 3, pp. 36–40.

that displays a direction and an intensity that allow dominant bodies to realise their unfinished being. Thirumal demonstrates this process of embodiment as revealed in the cultural world of the upper castes in three phases; the domains of cellular, intellectual and social reproduction. He refers to caste-plaining in everyday discourse. The universities are organized like elite clubs which need to be barricaded against the entry of the rustic/mofussil riffraff. It will undermine the cosmopolitan character of these institutions. “The backward as a servant, ‘subziwala’, dhobi’ or cobbler is all right, but god forbid if his children were to rub shoulders with you. Teaching agricultural economics is relevant but heaven forbid if you have to teach it to the lesser Devi Lals of the world. The biologist Garret Hardin used the picture of the lifeboat to convey a basic idea in sociobiology. Picture an ocean where a lifeboat full of rich people is floating. Swimming around them are the poor. The question is, should one go to the aid of the poor and backward or let them drown? Hardin argues that the poor are irredeemable and going to their aid may sink the boat. Only our elite do not use the language of sociobiology. We talk the language of merit as justice assuming that life is a race without handicaps”.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the National Education Policy (hereafter NEP) fails to provide a roadmap to create truly egalitarian institutions which would influence society.

The NEP document commences with a scientific axiom by pointing out that 85 per cent cumulative brain development is completed by age 6. The reality is that as of 2022, India would have had 46.6 million children who are stunted, and 25.5 million children with low weight for height.<sup>6</sup> The mid-day meal scheme is one of the largest nutrition programs in the world and various studies have shown its positive benefits on learning outcomes.<sup>7</sup> However, when food is spiritualized at the cost of nutrition, the nutrition levels get adversely affected. Such stunted children lose the race even before the starting gun has fired.<sup>8</sup>

The NEP aspires to restore the ‘*Indianness*’ of the education system and envisages that the curriculum and pedagogy should be “rooted in the Indian and local context and ethos in terms of culture, traditions, heritage, customs, language, philosophy, geography, ancient and contemporary knowledge, societal and scientific needs, indigenous and traditional ways of learning etc”.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, there is a lot of talk on dismantling rote learning, making the students think creatively and innovatively.

<sup>5</sup>Vishwanathan Shiv (2000). Democracy, plurality and Indian university. *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 30, p. 3604.

<sup>6</sup><https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-has-one-third-of-worlds-stunted-children-global-nutrition-report/articleshow/66865016.cms?from=mdr>, Accessed January 12, 2021.

<sup>7</sup>Shreya Roy Chowdhury, The correlation between midday meals and learning outcomes. Available at: <https://idronline.org/the-correlation-between-midday-meals-and-learning-outcomes/> Accessed March 19, 2019.

<sup>8</sup>N. Sukumar and Shailaja Menon, <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/storming-libraries-achhe-din-and-the-new-education-policy/> Accessed August 4, 2020.

<sup>9</sup>National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, p. 16.

How is it possible when the template of what constitutes ‘*Indianness*’ and who is identified as an ‘*Indian*’ is already laid out by the state? Will the pedagogy be comfortable discussing North East cultures and cuisines or Dalit food habits/festivals? The story of the Breast Tax in Kerala mysteriously vanished from NCERT textbooks. In the name of rationalizing school syllabus after the pandemic, chapters on the Mughals were deleted from the high school history syllabus. Chapters on democracy and diversity, popular struggles and movements and challenges to democracy have been deleted from Class 10 textbooks. The NCERT had rationalised the CBSE syllabus for Classes 6 to 12 during the pandemic, where chapters were temporarily excluded from the curriculum.<sup>10</sup> The emergence of religious obscurantism and its glorification in the academic domain has only promoted half myths and spurious science. Even during the pandemic when quacks were peddling cow urine as a medicine or the public ritual of beating utensils and lighting candles to banish the disease, any official policy which states its objective of promoting scientific temperament is laughable. When the powers that be frown on any expression of dissent and scholars/artists have been jailed on flimsy excuses, how will critical pedagogy be encouraged? “To make it easier for both governments as well as non-governmental philanthropic organizations to build schools, to encourage local variations on account of culture, geography, and demographics, and to allow alternative models of education, the requirements for schools will be made less restrictive”.<sup>11</sup> The fine print makes it clear that *Saraswathi Shishu Vihars* and *Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams* will be legitimized under the garb of philanthropic organizations and there will be fewer bottlenecks to set them up. Since the party in power finds terms like *secularism*, *socialism*, *republic* to be problematic, the NEP document is silent on them.

In the Indian context, the production and circulation of knowledge operates in a rarefied domain under an aura of sacrality. Only ritually pure and sacred teachers can impart knowledge and similarly, the students need to be in a state of ritual purity while accessing this knowledge. Indian academia thrives in a self-contained cocoon. To illustrate: In his obituary on the celebrated social scientist Ranajit Guha who passed away recently, Ramachandra Guha makes an interesting observation, “A more serious weakness is Ranajit Guha’s Bengal-centred-ness. Guha often refers to himself as “Indian”, but it appears that the one province of India he has any real interest in is his own. Bengali ideas and individuals are often compared and contrasted to ideas and individuals in the West. However, the name of [BR] Ambedkar does not, so far as I can tell, appear in the book (there is no index), nor that of [anti-caste icon Jyotirao] Phule or EV Ramaswami [also known as Periyar] either. Surely they (and other thinkers) would have made an interesting counterpoint to the likes of Bankim and Rabindranath”.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/story/ncert-syllabus-rationalisation-political-parties-challenges-democracy-chapters-deleted-2387531-2023-06-01>, Accessed June 11, 2023.

<sup>11</sup>NEP 2020, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>12</sup>Ramachandra Guha, <https://scroll.in/article/1049508/from-one-historian-to-another-remembering-ranajit-guha-who-redefined-indian-historiography>, May 23, 2023.

Similarly, an edited work-‘An Intellectual History for India’,<sup>13</sup> addresses the power of ideas in the making of Indian political modernity. The ideologues range from Rammohan Roy, Maulana Azad, B.G. Tilak, Mohammad Iqbal and Mahatma Gandhi. There is virtually no discussion on any other oppositional intellectual tradition. This brings to mind the pertinent observation, “Introspection about their own location in society has not been too common among Indian historians....What is neglected is the whole question of the conditions of production and reception of academic knowledge, its relationships with different kinds of common sense. We lack, in other words, a social history of historiography”.<sup>14</sup> Many communities are not privileged enough to possess histories which also reflects their precarious position in the socio-cultural hierarchy. As Trouillot observed, “History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis become superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility, the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.”<sup>15</sup> Thus the possession of history scripted or otherwise, is a privilege seldom granted equally. There are myriad examples of many Dalit intellectuals who languish due to lack of academic attention. G. Aloysius points out that “social crises in subaltern life had begun to throw up organized activities as early as the middle of the 19th century,” though such actors “still await the historiographers and social scientists to unearth and install them in their legitimate niches of history”.<sup>16</sup> Till the 1990s, scholarly works on B.R. Ambedkar or Jyotiba Phule were rarely seen in the market or libraries. A notable shift since the 1990s has been the recognition of Dalits as actors in India’s history. New attention has been devoted to the contributions of Dalits to the shaping of modern India, both in terms of their political struggle and in the recognition of their key leaders. This is in marked contrast to the absence of attention to Dalit struggles and intellectual agendas in English-language publications and mainstream academic writings in the long twentieth century.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the trajectory of knowledge production in India continues to reflect the paradigms of the socially dominant communities. Through various modes of discourse, this scholarship continues to valorise traditional caste practices. To illustrate, Ashis Nandy wrote an essay reprimanding and mocking the Indian feminists who were protesting the Rup Kanwar sati incident in 1987, saying that they were unable to understand the value systems of India and were enthralled by the West.<sup>18</sup> Along

<sup>13</sup>Shruti Kapila (Ed.) (2012). *An intellectual history for India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>14</sup>Sumit Sarkar (1998). *Writing social history*, Delhi: OUP, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup>Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*, Boston: Beacon Press, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup>G. Aloysius (1998). *Religion as emancipatory identity: A Buddhist movement among the Tamils under colonialism*, Chennai: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup>Ramnarayan S. Rawat, K. Satyanarayana (Eds.) (2016). *Dalit studies*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup>Divya Dwivedi, Shaj Mohan and J. Reghu, The Hindu hoax: How Upper Castes invented a Hindu majority, <https://Caravanmagazine.in/Religion/How-Upper-Castes-Invented-Hindu-Majority> Mohan, January 1, 2021, 49 and J Reghudivya Dwivedi, Shaj Mohan and J Reghu

similar lines, Dipesh Chakrabarty has claimed that nature is ‘coeval’ with supernatural powers. He dismisses all monotheisms to claim a peculiar superiority for ‘polytheism’, easily recognisable as Hinduism. ‘I take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with being human’, he writes in his book *Provincialising Europe*. Chakrabarty states that different cultures and places determine their own forms of thought, and such forms cannot be tested against other standards. An obvious implication of this position is that Newton’s Laws of Motion would hold only in the United Kingdom and particles will conform to ‘the standard model’ only in the United States. He also argues that India was already a republic before colonial rule, referring to upper-caste rule through panchayats. Nandy, in a 1979 essay, went so far as to consider traditional cultural practices as an alternative to modern technology. The self-assertion of the upper castes and the justification for their continuing social dominance in these texts often take place through semantic contortions and theoreticised language. Rajeev Bhargava uses the term ‘vertical diversity’ to refer to the caste order, masking its exploitative character by giving it the positive connotation of diversity. He goes on to contrast this vertical diversity with ‘horizontal diversity’, by which he refers to many religions existing in the subcontinent. The implicit injunction in such verbal acrobatics is to celebrate and foster diversity of both kinds—an upper-caste dream since the nineteenth century—rather than challenge the oppression wrought by this ‘vertical diversity’.<sup>19</sup> A similar case is evident in the discipline of philosophy in Delhi University which provides a paper on gender but does not include any topic or reading on caste even in the section on Indian philosophy. Focus on ‘Hindu’ philosophers alone gives a misleading impression that Hindu philosophers are the only important figures in Indian philosophy debates. In a similar manner, Brooks criticized the absence of mention of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in A. Raghuramaraju’s book, *Debates in Indian Philosophy: Classical, Colonial and Contemporary* (2007).<sup>20</sup> As argued by Umesh Bagade, Ambedkar evolved new conceptual methodological tools to write the social history of India. He argued that caste operates as economic system of surplus appropriation based on the principle of graded inequality and exploitation. He used caste-class as a category of social analysis. He explained the linkages between caste and patriarchy and explained the nature of caste consciousness. His exploration and interpretation of India’s history and culture have immensely contributed to the evolution of the philosophy and methodology of non-Brahmin historiography.<sup>21</sup>

## Unraveling the Epistemicide

The formulation of the syllabus in any institution is a pedagogical exercise tinted with ideology. Unless the knowledge-power nexus is deconstructed, the hierarchy of power

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>20</sup>Damni Kain (2022). How the absence of caste in curriculum aids the presence of caste in pedagogy. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, Sage Publications, DOI: 10.1177/2455328X211066185, pp. 1–12.

<sup>21</sup>Umesh Bagade, Ambedkar’s historical method: A Non-Brahmanic critique of positivist history, <https://www.jnu.ac.in/sites/default/files/9th%20Dr.%20Ambedkar%20Memorial%20Lecture.pdf> Accessed on December 25, 2021.

will persist in the struggle for cultural capital. Any discipline in this respect, is like an enclosed space with its own set of ascriptive norms and hierarchies. Such academic politics are made invisible by communicating ideas and researches in a specialist language that serve the dual function of warding off the non-specialists and concealing the hierarchical power politics of its practitioners.<sup>22</sup> The brahmanical pedagogy seeks to produce docile subjects. Thus it is essential to democratize the *pedagogy and social relationships* in the university spaces.

Michel Foucault coined a term, 'regimes of truth' while referring to a discourse that holds certain things to be 'truths'. He interrogated the power structures of society which produced knowledge and truth. Critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, and anti-racist pedagogy are responses to education, which has often been exclusionary and functioned to assimilate students by normalizing dominant knowledge and values through the hidden curriculum.<sup>23</sup> Education continues to maintain the dominant system through the recent corporatization of higher education, where education becomes a commodity/service, provided by faculty/staff, and consumed by students.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, education can be a site for resisting dominant ideologies, for example, through courses that foster critical analytical skills. These critical pedagogies challenge the hidden curriculum and critique the banking system of education. In addition, these pedagogies critique the positivist assumptions of knowledge, of an objective and universal truth, which fails to acknowledge the embedded Eurocentrism and male privilege. These approaches critique the power relations in knowledge production, which can be oppressive as well as oppositional and transformative. As Freire stated, '[t]he solution is not to "integrate" them [the oppressed] into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become "beings for themselves"'.<sup>25</sup>

One of the first critical epistemic engagements was ushered in by Jyotiba Phule, who in his Marathi play 'Trutiya Ratna' drew complex linkages between religious-cultural and educational authority and re-imagines education therefore as the Trutiya Ratna (third eye) that has the possibilities to enable the oppressed to understand and transforms the relation between power and knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Ambedkar believed that acquisition of fresh knowledge is a necessary precursor of every step in social progress. Doubt is a precondition of inquiry and inquiry leads towards knowledge. Painstaking efforts and sacrifices are needed to produce new knowledge. The Brahmin, being self-contented, cannot labour or make any sacrifices for the acquisition of new knowledge.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Bourdieu Pierre (1988). *Homo Academicus*. Trans. Peter Collier. Cambridge: Polity.

<sup>23</sup>Darder, Antonia, Marta P. Baltodano, and Rodolfo D. Torres (2009). Critical pedagogy: An introduction. In *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*. (Eds.) Antonia Darder, Marta P. Baltodano and Rodolfo D. Torres, New York: Routledge, pp. 1–20.

<sup>24</sup>Mohanty, Chandra Tapalde (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

<sup>25</sup>Kyoko Kishimoto (2018). Anti-racist pedagogy: From faculty's self-reflection to organizing within and beyond the classroom. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 540–554.

<sup>26</sup>Sharmila Rege (2010). Education as *Trutiya Ratna*: Towards Phule-Ambedkarite feminist pedagogical practice. *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 30, Vol. xlv, No. 44, pp. 80–98.

<sup>27</sup>B.R. Ambedkar (1987). *Writings and speeches*, Government of Maharashtra, Vol. 4, p. 8.

According to him, ‘Brahmin subjectivity was so conditioned that it could not critically engage with Sanskrit scriptures and therefore was incapable of ascertaining historical truth’. He stated: ‘Brahmins, as learned men, are class-conscious; they are not intellectuals who are emancipated from class conditioning. They are severely limited by the anxiety to preserve their interests. The subjective position of the Brahmin does not allow his intellect full play with honesty and integrity. The Brahmin scholar’s search is not for accomplishing historical truth but is intended to maintain sanctity of Sanskrit scriptures. He defends the scriptures with the view of defending Brahminic-privileges. His concern for upholding the prestige of the social system built by his forefathers prevents him from searching for the historical truth. As a result, Brahmin scholar engages himself with fixing dates and tracing genealogies’.<sup>28</sup> A similar logic can be applied to the dominant non-brahmin castes too. Hence, it is not surprising that there exists what Gopal Guru would term as the epistemological isolation of the Dalit. The strict observance of a language code, protocols, body language and ground rules effectively converts seminar halls into a hostile space that very often inflict humiliation on the Dalits who then feel nervous or intimidated to enter such structures. Ultimately, Dalits are denied access to knowledge and its articulation. They are also denied the critical faculty to interrogate the dominant mode of thinking.<sup>29</sup>

## Pedagogy and Social Identities

I joined the Department of Political Science (Delhi University) as a faculty in 2001. I belong to an untouchable<sup>30</sup> community, availed the provisions of affirmative action as promised by the Indian Constitution, and was fortunate enough to get formal education in institutions which had socially progressive teachers. In addition, I was also nurtured by various political groups on the campuses which influenced my social consciousness. For more than two decades, I was the only teacher representing the marginalized communities in my department. Officially, I was recruited to teach Indian Political Thought and gradually started paying close attention to the syllabi. My research areas were on Ambedkarite ideology and caste conflicts. I was asked to teach *Gandhian Thought and Action* (subsequently the paper was dropped). Along with this, I also taught *Themes in Indian Political Thought*. In the process, I realized that a teacher can cherry pick the thinkers/themes he/she chooses and exclude the rest. To exemplify, one can teach only Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda, etc., as part of Indian Reformation and ignore any critique or new ideas proposed by Phule or Pandita Ramabai. I insisted that there should be a paper revolving only around thinkers and included Ambedkar,

<sup>28</sup>B.R. Ambedkar (1990). *Writings and speeches*, Government of Maharashtra, Vol. 17, pp. 240–241.

<sup>29</sup>Gopal Guru (2002). How egalitarian are the social sciences in India?. *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 14, p. 5006.

<sup>30</sup>According to brahmanical scriptures, untouchables were the outcastes of the Hindu social order and were historically denied education and other economic, political and socio-cultural resources. Even if they overcome this stigma, they are considered as extremely low in the social order.



Mohammad Iqbal<sup>31</sup> and M.N. Roy, among others as part of *Modern Indian Political Thinkers*. Additionally, from 2008 till date I offered various papers on similar themes such as *Dalit Politics in India*, *Ideating Dignity* and *Texts and Marginality* for the MPhil Program. A colleague of mine from a socially dominant community expressed astonishment that I am offering courses based on political theory. This prompted me to reflect as to whether they were questioning my teaching abilities, because after all, I am a 'quota appointee'. At a subterranean level, they might also have been threatened that gradually their hold over pedagogy is being encroached upon and challenged.<sup>32</sup> Such epistemological imperialism is a sad reality of knowledge production and works to safeguard the rituals and protocols of academia.<sup>33</sup>

This reflects the skewed nature of the prevailing knowledge system. The germination of an idea, the drafting of a course, seeking approval by the department council and committee of courses, to the larger university bodies is a journey fraught with contestations. To illustrate, when the course, *Understanding Ambedkar* was proposed in Delhi University for undergraduates, the counter questions were: Why devote a course only on Ambedkar? Why not Gandhi and Ambedkar and why not Ambedkar with other social thinkers? For the established academia, the idea of Ambedkar is indelibly associated with caste and his ideas on nationhood, gender, economy, etc., are of no consequence. Though this course is very popular amongst undergraduate students, many colleges do not encourage students to opt for this elective course. The irony is that very few teachers are familiar with Ambedkar's work to deliver the course. These courses frame the idea of caste as a socio-cultural construct, within a historical and political context. Further, such hierarchies are not based on individual prejudices solely but a system of graded inequalities maintained and strengthened through the unequal distribution of power and material resources, backed by statist authority. Unlike other forms of discrimination, caste inequities are sanctioned by religious scriptures. An intersectional approach is extremely essential (caste, gendered identities, sexualities, cultural habitus and race) to unravel the idea of exclusion and discrimination. It is also particularly important that these marginalized communities are not portrayed as 'victims' of an unequal social order but are agential beings bearing certain inalienable rights and capable of speaking a counter narrative. These courses are based on the original writings of thinkers/ideologues that challenged the dominant brahmanical 'regimes of truth' and democratized the idea of freedom, justice and human dignity. As the course commences with the challenge posed by the Buddha to brahmanism, there is a historical trajectory interwoven with the social and political changes in the sub-continent. Kabir and Ravidas are usually taught as Bhakti

<sup>31</sup>This particular thinker has been dropped from the undergraduate syllabi in 2023.

<sup>32</sup>N. Sukumar (2021). Embodied memories: A journey with Ambedkar, *Social Scientist*. *South Asia: Personal narratives, social forces and negotiations*. (Ed.) Achla Tandon, Gopi Tripathy and Rashi Bhargava, NY: Routledge, p. 144.

<sup>33</sup>For an in-depth discussion on caste and the Indian academia, refer Chapter 1 in *Caste Discrimination and Exclusion in Indian Universities: A Critical Reflection*, London: Routledge, 2022.

poets, but the course seeks to analyse their poetry from a critical political lens—the idea of an utopia embedded in Ravidas’s ‘Begumpura’ (A City Without Sorrow) Similarly, Jyotiba Phule’s ‘Ghulamgiri’ was dedicated to the Black people of the United States, reflecting a universal concern for the dignity of the oppressed everywhere. Tarabai Shinde’s seminal work, ‘A Comparison between Men and Women’ is seldom used in the classroom as it critiques patriarchy and caste. Ambedkar’s ‘Prabuddha Bharat’ or Periyar’s ‘Dravida Nadu’ discussed utopias both in intellectual and spatial terms. It also exposes the student to the notion that the idea of ‘caste’ has been continuously challenged in Indian history and there are multiple narratives which contest the assumed linearity of political ideologies. Even the titles of the texts used as references create a sense of unease amongst the entrenched ideologies. To discuss caste and patriarchy, Ambedkar’s text/readings, ‘Rise and Fall of Hindu Women’ and ‘Critique of Caste and the Hindu Social Order’ are discussed in the classroom. The Standing Committee on Academic Affairs of Delhi University<sup>34</sup> found the term ‘Hindu’ problematic while revising the courses for the Four Year Undergraduate Program. These readings revolve around a specific social category and its related issues, removal of the specified term would make the texts pedagogically redundant. Similarly, a course dealing with Ambedkar’s philosophy was sought to be removed from the syllabi for undergraduate students. In a strategic move, a course on ‘Veer’ Savarkar (a prominent Hindutva ideologue) was introduced for undergraduates and the constituent colleges of Delhi University who wish to seek political favours will choose to only teach Savarkar’s thought and discourage Marxist, feminist, liberal and anti-caste perspectives.

## Classroom Composition

My entire academic journey has been in public institutions, from government schools, college to the university where now I teach. Increasingly, public schools/colleges/universities are patronized by the marginalized social groups, female students and those who are linguistically challenged in the neo-liberal socio-political order. In the past three decades, South India has leap-frogged into technical and professional education with the help of hefty private investment. Comparatively, in the Hindi heartland (North India) investment in education has taken a back seat. Hence, there is an increasing migration to Delhi by students seeking admission to various arts and humanities courses. One needs to keep in mind that the majority of the students who opt for Political Science in Delhi University (the intake is abnormally high—at least 600 students join the regular Masters programme), apart from the students who join the Open Learning programme, are from the Hindi medium, financially weak and socially marginalized. This is also fuelled by the demand to enter government service at various levels. For girl students, having a continuity of education till marriage is useful. In South India, the felicity of English (the language of the market)

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<sup>34</sup>Nishu Malik, Delhi University recommends dropping the word “Hindu” from the titles of two chapters, <https://www.duupdates.in/delhi-university-recommends-dropping-the-word-hindu-from-the-titles-of-two-chapters/> Accessed May 25, 2023.

meant that other job opportunities are available and students are not dependent only on government service. Interestingly, more girls (majorly 'upper caste'), Dalit and Other Backward Caste students opt for these courses. Many students who opted for the courses on *Social Exclusion: Theory and Praxis, Democracy and Human Rights in India, Dalit-Bahujan Political Thought and Ambedkar in Contemporary India* gave the feedback that such courses democratized the academic space. They became curious about the alternate epistemologies and their contemporary relevance. While transacting the course, training students about their writing skills, sensitizing them on gender and caste issues is very challenging. As Social Darwinism is being confronted in the classroom, Hindutva groups in the university are deeply rattled.

For the purpose of this article, only the feedback from the course—Dalit Bahujan Political Thought is being discussed. The feedback was divided into four broad themes: 1) How is this course different from other 'dominant' political thinkers? 2) Pedagogical relevance of the course 3) Why are such courses required? 4) Personal experiences shared by the students 5) Quality of teaching and reading materials provided and, 6) Suggestions to further improve the course.

To the feedback for the query as to how this course is different from the usual political thinkers that are part of the syllabus, the students responded that ideas of Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, Tarabai Shinde, etc., ran counter to what they had believed and it was more radical especially around caste and gender. Referring to the pedagogical relevance of such courses, the students commented that such ideas should be introduced at the secondary school levels to familiarize students with critical thinking. They further observed that science students should be made aware of such ideas. For many girl students, the classroom space provided an opportunity to discuss themes around gender, caste and sexuality which is difficult within the family space. Many girl students shared that it is for the first time they have debated ideas around marriage, chastity, biological determination, etc., about which Periyar spoke about so eloquently. The text, 'Women Enslaved' by Periyar was much discussed by students and as one female student opined, "I realized that there is nothing wrong in asking questions as many social customs can be traced back to religious scriptures." Tarabai Shinde's 'Stri-Purush Tulana' also made an impact on many students. According to a female student, "During my Post Graduate course, I was introduced to radical social thinkers like Ambedkar and Periyar which helped me to understand our society better. I realized how patriarchy worked as I experienced and witnessed emotional and physical violence in my family. My dream was to educate myself and be capable enough to escape from these hurdles". Another student pointed out the course helped them to critique the prevalent knowledge production where only the political ideologies of Gandhi or Nehru are taught in the classroom. A few students gave a very emotional feedback. "After reading the anti-caste debates, I have become more sensitive and more aware about social problems. I wish 'to be the change' and fight social injustices." "We got to know about the marginalized social groups, the reasons for their oppression and how these narratives need to be countered". Debates on nationalism, gendered reforms

and freedom livened up the class. Many socially marginalized students found their life-worlds reflected in the readings as in their opinion, ‘upper-caste teachers’ would often glorify caste and patriarchy in the classroom. The course proved to be socially engaging and sensitized many students. The major problem was the lack of adequate reading materials in the Hindi language. Only very few original writings of the anti-caste thinkers are available in Hindi.

For the question as to why such courses are required, many students shared their personal experiences of discrimination and how they gradually gained courage to speak about their experiences because of the readings which challenged the preconceived social ideas. It reflected the perspectives of the subaltern people. The readings forced many students to reflect critically about their social location and entitlements. The deep-seated prejudices and everyday practices around food choices/clothing/language were questioned and gradually deconstructed. Some students pointed out that they wished they had such courses at the school level to answer questions on discrimination and marginality.

## Conclusion

The courses discussed above also reflect a work in progress as new themes and readings are added based on the students’ feedback. There is also continuous tension to negotiate with the various academic bodies which find such courses disrupting their social dominance. In the past decade, the teaching community and classrooms are becoming polarized on political ideologies and debates often turn nasty. Earlier too there were political differences but the discussions were conducted in a civil manner. The scope for dissent has grown narrow. Apart from classroom pedagogy, even the research agenda is sought to be ‘nationalised’ and themes around caste, social exclusion, marginality, human rights, gender and sexuality studies are considered ‘unfit’ for research. They challenge the idea of a homogenous cultural universe so essential for the majoritarian worldview.

*The students of the universities of Cambridge and Bouremouth had launched a campaign a few years ago, ‘Why is my curriculum White’. Whiteness is powerful because it’s unmarked and normalised. Whiteness is the dominant framing position, hiding itself behind concepts of universality, rationality or commonsense. Whiteness reproduces itself by appearing natural and unquestionable. To dismantle the white curriculum, the unmarked nature of whiteness must be exposed. The white curriculum (re)produces hierarchies of knowledge, but never in isolation from other structures of power. Whiteness is intrinsically linked to, and therefore reproduces, power and thought which is racialised as white, psychologically/physically fit, wealth-rich and heteropatriarchally/cisgenderly male. The curriculum is white because it reflects the underlying logic of colonialism, which believes the colonised do not own anything—not even their own experiences.<sup>35</sup> On similar lines, in the Indian context if we were*

<sup>35</sup>8 Reasons the Curriculum is White by the ‘Why is my Curriculum White?’ collective, UCL March 23, 2015, <https://novamedia.com/2015/03/23/8-reasons-the-curriculum-is->

to pose the question—*why is my curriculum brahmanical?* It would lead to a seismic shift in academia. Similar to ‘whiteness’, Brahmanism is the default paradigm to make sense of the socio-cultural habitus of our society. Brahmanical knowledge produces hierarchies which justifies the regimes of truth and elevates it to the supernatural dimension. These regimes can never be dismantled through human endeavour but only if one is privileged enough to take birth in a particular social order. For aeons, the lived experiences of the Dalit-Bahujans were mediated through their social superiors and were never a part of the classroom. The subversion of knowledge is essential to liberate the mind. Braj Ranjan Mani quotes Savitribai Phule, the first Indian woman teacher and poet, “Arise, awake, educate – smash traditions, liberate”. Savitribai further notes, ‘Freedom comes from a mental fight, an intense personal struggle as well as a collective one for transformational change. An ignited consciousness—and a freedom struggle based on it—is known by many names; Emancipatory education is one of them. Such education opens our eyes, enables us to understand the world as it is and dream about the one we want to live and work in. It enables us with voice and choice, and paves the way for freedom and reconstruction. A movement from darkness to light, the promise of education is nothing less than remaking the world where justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an overflowing stream’. It is heartwarming to note that gradually Dalit scholars in various institutions have introduced courses dealing with Dalit culture, politics and histories, social systems, the political economy of caste, social exclusion, specialized courses on the intellectual contributions of Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, etc.

In order to end the epistemic isolation of the Dalit-Bahujans, we need to follow John Dewey’s ideas. According to Dewey, education stands for the “transmission” of beliefs and language, “expectations” and “occupations,” “standards” and “aims,” and “habits of doing, thinking, and feeling.” Furthermore, education enables the adaptation of social life to changing circumstances: It stands for the “transformation” of beliefs, standards, habits, etc. Hence, for Dewey, social life and education are two sides of the same coin. That is, “Life is a self-renewing process. What nutrition and reproduction are to physiological life, education is to social life”.<sup>36</sup> The interrogation of received wisdom is essential for citizenship education. Years ago, Jyotiba Phule while addressing the Education Commission in 1882 at Poona, made a pertinent observation, that state intervention is essential for the middle and lower classes so as to ensure not only monetary investment but also to preserve neutrality as India has multiple creeds and sects.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, the present ideology is to privatize education to the detriment of the marginalized communities.

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white/#:~:text=The%20curriculum%20is%20white%20because,not%20even%20their%20own%20experiences.

<sup>36</sup>John Dewey 1916 (1980). Democracy and education. In J.A. Boydston (Ed.), *John Dewey. The Middle Works, 1899–1922*, Vol. 9. Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

<sup>37</sup>Rohini Mokashi-Punekar (2023). *The third eye and other works: Mahatma Phule’s writings on education*. Orient Blackswan, p. 200.