

Impact of discrimination on children at formative age

The New Indian Express - 15th April 2018

Discrimination can begin with ‘Chee! chicken’ at a child’s dabba

By [Dia Rekhi](#) | Express News Service | Published: 15th April 2018 05:37 AM |



Representative photo of children having a meal at a city school

CHENNAI: Ashraf Baig* dreaded the lunch break at school. Not because he didn't have food to eat or because he didn't enjoy his mother's cooking, but rather because the moment he opened his lunch box, most of his friends would make a fuss. Some would crinkle their noses, others would say, 'Yuck' or 'Chee' while still others would desert him and move to the other end of the classroom complaining of the 'smell', leaving him to eat all alone. After this happened repeatedly, he went home one day and told his mother to stop sending non-vegetarian food and to pack only vegetarian fare, in a bid to be one among the group.

Luckily for Ashraf, his teacher at the well-known Chennai school he attends realised something was amiss. "I noticed Ashraf had gotten very quiet and was extremely hesitant to do anything in class," said Shreya Kannan*. "One day I brought up food habits and asked how many children were vegetarian and nearly all the hands went up. When I asked



who all were non-vegetarian, I noticed Ashraf was looking around nervously and didn't raise his hand.

Then one of the children pointed at him and said he ate chicken and mutton and made a disgusted face. It was at this point that I tried to diffuse the situation by saying I eat chicken and mutton too and that it is neither unclean nor something to be ashamed of." Kannan's was the right move. Experts believe that teachers play an important role in ensuring that children from minorities or marginalised sections are not discriminated against. Further, teachers themselves should not reinforce stereotypes and create a divide among children based on community or linguistic lines.

"If the majority of the class eats vegetarian, then there is a chance of those who eat non-vegetarian food being made fun of or teased," said the principal of a well-known private school in the city. "We had one instance like that and it was immediately addressed. The counsellor spoke to the children and made them realise that they need to respect and accept difference and ever since then, we have had no trouble again."

However, certain city schools discourage parents from sending non-vegetarian food to school. While it may not be explicitly stated, it is often understood as an unspoken rule among parents. This kind of discrimination could also stem from groupism. City teachers say the groups are not always formed on the basis of community or religion but could also be on the basis of language. "Language is a very underestimated differentiator," said another principal of a private school, on the condition of anonymity.

"There is often a very clear North-South divide. You will notice that those speaking Tamil will be one group, others speaking Malayalam will be another group, and those speaking Hindi will stick together. And while this may or may not lead to discrimination of any kind, it only darkens the line of difference where they tend to cling to their groups and are averse to interacting with others. It is the teacher who needs to step in and make sure there is inter-mingling within groups."

"Children are merely imitating what they see at home," said J Sasitha, Head of the Department of Sociology at Stella Maris College. "They do not understand the intention behind these actions but will adopt those mannerisms without questioning as they are at an impressionable age. They are capitalising on cultural capital available to them in terms of better resources and opportunity. As an adult the discrimination is done more to gain affinity to the group. This becomes a prejudiced attitude that stems from what a child sees at home."

Unsurprisingly, this kind of discrimination spills over into college too, teachers said. "At the college level, this becomes extremely visible as there is a clear divide between the 'smart' and 'dull' students," Sasitha said. "If one studies these groups, it is clear that those from marginalised communities are often isolated as they do not have access to the same kind of school or neighbourhood that the privileged ones gain access to. Knowing or not knowing English is also a major factor of discrimination."

In 2014, the group Human Rights Watch published a report, "They Say We're Dirty — Denying an Education to India's Marginalized". It examined the obstacles preventing children from certain backgrounds from attending school and the government's failure to



address the problem. The report established that discrimination remains a major factor affecting access to education for children from marginalised communities, including Dalits, tribal groups, and Muslims.

The report stated that while nearly all primary school children are enrolled in school, many millions do not actually attend classes. They said this is often because their caste, ethnicity, economic condition, religion, or gender acts as a barrier to education. The report went on to find that discrimination takes various forms. These included teachers asking Dalit children to sit separately, making insulting remarks about Muslim and tribal students, and village authorities not responding when girls are kept from the classroom.

“Teachers and other students often address these children using derogatory terms for their caste, community, tribe, or religion,” the report said. “In some schools, children from vulnerable communities are not ever considered for leadership roles such as class monitor because of their caste or community. Many are expected to perform unpleasant jobs such as cleaning toilets. Schools in marginalised neighborhoods often have the poorest infrastructure and least well-trained teachers; many have fewer teachers than required.”

While the degree of the discrimination in private city schools may not be as blatant as what is faced in villages, it is hard to deny its existence. Parents, have an important role to play in order to ensure that their children stop looking at those with different religious and cultural beliefs as the ‘other’ but rather embrace the difference and revel in the opportunity of knowing someone with a different belief system.

“I don’t see much religious discrimination among children but if a certain idea is ingrained in their mind at a young age, it tends to stay with them even as adults,” said psychological counsellor Sneha Hindocha. “The differences come out more as an adult, especially among people who are very rigid about their beliefs and consider others with a different belief system as impure. Parents need to strike a balance between educating their child about their cultural and religious beliefs while also teaching them not to insult or demean another person’s beliefs and values.”

Discrimination works both ways though, said psychologist Nirali Bhatia. She explained that many Jain children are teased for being vegetarian and end up eating non-vegetarian food on the sly. Thus, dealing with the baggage of guilt sometimes of having gone against the religious sentiments of their family.

“Children are at a formative age, they are in the process of developing an identity,” said Bhatia. “When they are made fun of for their habits or attitude, it is an immediate reaction of non-acceptance which hurts them very deeply. It takes a toll on them as they question their self confidence and self worth. Many children give into peer pressure just to fit in and be accepted. They subscribe to the views of the larger group, even though they may not be in complete agreement with those views.” She added that social media today was another huge influencer and played a very important role in children forming their opinions about the ‘other.’

NOTE: *Names changed on request.

Not all children face such discrimination

Not all children are discriminated against. “I could have put my daughter in a Muslim-majority school,” said Abbas Khan,* a parent of a 14-year-old girl who studies in one of



the city's convent schools. "I did not because I wanted her to gain exposure of interacting with people from different communities. She wears a hijab but the school and teachers have been very kind and understanding. Her friends are all Hindus and Christians and so far I have not heard of her facing any discrimination based on her religion," she said.

<http://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2018/apr/15/discrimination-can-begin-with-chee-chicken-at-a-childs-dabba-1801741.html>

