

How to retrieve students from the clutches of casteism



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Recently a Plus-Two student was arrested allegedly for having smeared human waste on a door in the government higher secondary school at Mathur near Tiruttani. The student had confessed that he had done so out of frustration over all teachers who, he said, had no liking for him and always blamed him for whoever has done anything wrong.

In a similar incident at a government school near Pudukottai, two boys mixed urine in the water bottle of a girl student. These two incidents have happened well before the Nanguneri incident of caste cruelty is out of public memory.

While the syndrome of students clashing with one another, trying to beat their teachers and behaving rudely in classrooms and at public places is highly disturbing, it is all the more disturbing that the spectre of caste has, of late, been rising its ugly head among the students too.

Disturbing incidents

Way back in 2008, watching on the TV channels the scenes of Dalit students and other sections of the students attacking each other in a terrifying scenario, we remained frozen in horror.

Last year a student was killed by another in the government higher secondary school at Pallakal Podhukudi near Ambasamudram in Tirunelveli district.

A rift over the practice of tying caste bands on the hands was said to be the trigger for the attack. In a few days thereafter, two groups of students clashed following a student's ill-mannered speech about a particular caste at the government higher secondary school at Periyakattupalayam near Vellakarai in Cuddalore district. In the incident, eight students were injured in the attack mounted also by some outsiders.

In a school near Tindivanam, a class six student of the Irular community was insulted by his classmates pouring scorn on the student's caste identity. After the boy complained to the headmaster on this count, he was later thrown into fire by the other students.

Who's responsible?

It is now common to use school and college students for the job of shouting slogans at the caste conferences and birthday celebrations of caste leaders. It is not known for sure whether the parents concerned were worried over their wards' education because of their caste connection.

It should not be forgotten that some students, who had been dismissed from schools and colleges in the wake of the Kodyankulam violence in the 1990s, had lost their future.

Though it is teachers' moral duty to instil in the minds of the students a sense of social harmony, the parents also have a responsibility in this regard.

It should be recalled that the headmaster of the government primary school at Palakkarai in the Perundurai union of Erode district was dismissed and arrested for having made the SC students clean up the toilet.

In 2019, the episode wherein the HM of the government primary school in the Karattumedu area in Coimbatore district insulted SC students and made them clean up the toilet made news.

It is also to be remembered that the HM of Thathai Manji Panchayat Union Middle School made the SC students sit separately in the classrooms and did not allow them to participate in the art events held at the school. Thus, the HM showed his caste discrimination.

In a school in Thoothukudi district, an election to the parent-teacher association was held. It was reported that the assistant headmaster of the school called up a student over the phone and said, "In our school, there is a majority of the people of your caste and my caste. So, the SC children should not be allowed to attend the school. You ask the people of your people to participate in the elections."

This telephonic talk went viral on the social media. The student concerned, to whom the teacher had spoken thus, had replied, "Teacher, are all not equal?" This repartee also elicited a favorable response on the social media with a sharp comment, "It is a good retort indeed!"

It's apace in colleges also. A professor, who had worked in the Tamil department in Pachaiappa's College in Chennai, had asked a student about the caste names of his classmates. This audio also went viral on social media, leading to the suspension of the professor.

Teachers' dilemma

When asked about this evil caste consciousness syndrome in schools and colleges, some teachers pleaded their helplessness, saying, "It is a trend now that students exhibit their caste identities through bands tied to their hands in schools. If we ask them about this, they simply say, 'it's a band to invoke God's blessings.' If we ask them repeatedly, they bring their parents and make scenes in the school. Some parents understand our viewpoint and pull up their wards. But several don't understand this and talk ill of the teachers' social background. Besides, they bring top people from their caste associations and caste-oriented political parties to the school and create problems for us. So, we remain silent spectators, not disturbing the status quo."

What's to be done

Meanwhile, Chief Minister M. K. Stalin has lamented, "The Nanguneri incident sends shivers down our spine. This shows how far the poison of casteism has penetrated into the minds of the young students."

Subsequently, a committee led by retired Judge K. Chandru has been set up to advise the government on the measures to be taken for ensuring an environment free from caste divisions and discriminations among the students.

The government should stand by the schools that take severe action against the students who threaten the teachers because it is only those students with caste and political influence indulge in such unwanted and indecent behaviour.

It is to be recalled that way back in 2005 the National Knowledge Commission was set up during the reign of the United Progressive Alliance. The Commission recommended measures to keep the students always vigilant against caste and gender discriminations

and to stall incidents of harassment and cruelty. But the Commission was dissolved in 2014.

But now opinions are doing the rounds that in view of the present situation, the Commission's recommendations should be implemented seriously by the Tamil Nadu government which can also bring in legislation on school education to rid the institutions of caste divisions. The law should have a provision that orders dismissal of students who indulge in caste violence on the school campus. It should also have a section that proscribes them from joining in any other school. That will be a deterrent to future trouble-makers and also a lesson to the parents too.

When crimes of caste violence happen, it will not do to simply take action against the teachers. They must be trained in and briefed about how caste consciousness should be eliminated and how the students should all be treated equally. Teachers should not be posted in places where the people of their castes live in a majority and should rather be posted in other areas. Events driving home powerfully the message of social harmony should be conducted at the schools in villages and towns.

It is a strong belief of most social activists that schools should be developed as model institutions of social harmony and the government should take steps to achieve the goal.

Students are, after all, our nation's future wealth and resource. So, it is our collective responsibility to refine, develop and uplift them in terms of ethics, social commitment and public service. When are we going to embark on this lofty mission that should not be deferred at any cost?

Translated by V. Mariappan.