

# Casteism in school food: Here's a way-out



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The syndrome of students boycotting on the pressures of their parents the food cooked by Scheduled Caste women in schools has, of late, been increasing. This problem, which used to erupt sporadically, has become omnipresent in Tamil Nadu after the free breakfast scheme has been launched, going by the reports pouring in now.

Usually the SCs are harassed, subjected to economic setbacks and, and attacked physically. Now the age-old discrimination of SCs has spread to food served in schools too, causing concern among social activists because this syndrome is unlike other problems facing the oppressed sections. This latest issue is linked to cultural psychology. If we do not fix it and instead if we look the other way, we will end up making a great mistake. In fact, this is a great challenge to Tamil Nadu hailed proudly as the Soil of Social Justice. How are we going to solve this problem in a state which is reputed to be ahead of other states in several respects?

## **Food and culture**

In the Indian culture, 'food' is an important component in strengthening human relations. There are several messages about food in literature: "Those providing food are tantamount to those who provide life," "Share food and preserve several lives," and "Eat after sharing food with the needy." The underlying message is that one can cultivate a close kinship with others by providing food to them. The moment of living gets joyful when the close relationship with others through food is woven into the life. The non-Vedic literature calls it 'narkathi' (salvation). The proverbs used in day-to-day life such as "Don't forget those who provide food," "Should the household providing food be betrayed?" and so on drive home the sublimity of those who provide food to others. That is to say, in the Indian literary and oral traditions, 'food' is used as a conceptual initiative to link all humans emotionally, demolishing divisions that cause discriminations. This applies to the whole mankind. This explains why all religions have a philosophical framework revolving around food. Neither religion nor caste can dispense with the concept of food.

But today's trend of bringing in caste discrimination in the matter of school food raises doubts if the 'social harmony' that is supposed to be created through food has become obsolete and outdated. Why is the school food linked with caste? No conscientious people can ignore the question of what is the need for caste to be mixed with food.

## **Closure of door through food**

"There is a sort of door closure through endogamy. It is the door that protects caste," says Ambedkar. Now the door is closed through food too. The curbs on the SCs setting up hotels beyond the vicinities of their dwellings, which were in vogue till a few

decades ago, have considerably reduced. The impression that the restaurants run by the SCs in big cities will not record good sales has started getting blown to pieces. Such hotels now run successfully, catering for the unorganized and migrant workers. This is an important social change centered around food in the past 10 years and also a politico-cultural shift.

The caste system, once preserved through the methods of cooking in households and through the types of food, has now been challenged by the YouTube videos and books on cooking recipes.

Till a few decades ago, land and commerce played an important role in preserving caste. After the agriculture declined, the power through land has become a question mark. The advent of corporates and the entry of the SCs have demolished the once powerful domination of a few castes in commerce. The SCs have made an entry not only into running hotels but also into allied industries of masala manufacture, parcel distribution and hotel management. The commercial market and relations for them have also started expanding. Using these opportunities, the oppressed communities have established themselves overseas too. The environment wherein they were denied progress on the ground of caste is no more now. The remaining roadblocks to their further development can soon be removed.

Those, who have shut the doors in food business, are no longer able to do so and hence, they jump into schools and try to create problems in the matter of serving food. In case they fail in this endeavor too, they may try to find out other avenues for preserving caste discrimination. For them, the phrase, 'All are equal,' is in itself and of itself an anathema.

**Attack on the psychology of an egalitarian society**

Of course, action can be taken against boycott of school food under the anti-harassment law. But that will not be a permanent solution. Law alone cannot resolve this socio-psycho issue. That is why peace talks are held by the government in order to hammer out a good understanding. But the catch is that the dominant casteist forces may exploit the government's democratic approach to strengthen themselves. So, apart from peace talks, legal action too must be mulled.

The belligerent voice that cries, "We will not allow our children to eat the food cooked by the SCs," should not be regarded as a mere voice of a day-to-day social incongruity but as an attack mounted by the dominant casteist forces on the psychology of an egalitarian society. To resolve this imbroglio, proper solutions must be defined. Otherwise, this kind of attack on SCs will increase down the line and the government's power will also be watered down. To boycott food on the ground of food is not only against the SCs but also human rights and the Constitution.

As the caste is the underlying force of culture here, it is not easy to create a clear perspective on this count. But that must somehow be created. The parents must do some introspection over

what kind of education they can provide to their children when they indulge in caste discrimination in the matter of food. They must understand that their children are competent enough to adapt themselves to the changing times. Then they will see all as equal and see food as food alone.

**A way-out**

Even after several years of Independence and at a time when the Dravidian parties are crying aloud the slogan of social justice, the voices boycotting school food on the ground of caste should be seen as a challenge to the government. If there are issues in suppressing such casteist voices with the help of law, all members of the ruling party should plunge into action. The MPs and MLAs must visit the schools in their areas and eat with all students the food served by the SCs. The ruling party can ensure that its members belonging to all castes follow suit in the schools in their areas.

It is a good opportunity for the ruling party to prove that they can walk the talk and ensure social justice. Will they do it? Let's wait and watch.

**Translated by V. Mariappan.**