

Confronting stereotypes

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CHILDREN usually begin the formal school process of literacy acquisition at the age of six in India. By this age, the average child already has well-developed language ability. She/he can communicate complex thoughts to adults and peers, even to strangers, and can play games involving words. She also has well-developed conceptual skills and perceptual ability, can recognize and copy patterns, diagrams, and so on, as part of play, and is able to symbolize thoughts in the form of pictures or abstract shapes. Even a child from a fairly deprived economic background, given normal intelligence and reasonable health, is able to do these things. Middle class children from educated families are able to quickly apply and extend these skills to reading and writing, adding these to their resources for communication, learning and entertainment.

Over the years, I have been disturbed to find that this does not seem to be happening for a large number of children from poor families attending government schools. The skills of reading and writing seem to become quite divorced from the natural skills of communication, symbolization and play. In fact, children from poor backgrounds with even high levels of oral communicative skills are often seen to be deficient in reading and writing. Obviously something is going wrong in the early years of learning to read, in classes one and two, where children's reading and writing skills do not seem to keep pace with their normal intelligent conversation and interaction.

Another aspect especially relevant in urban government schools is the widely differing home languages of the children. In Pune, where I did the study, this difference is most marked in the outskirts, where communities of migrant labourers, initially arriving on large construction projects, have now settled down, and send their children to the local government school.

The particular school in which the study was conducted is on the outskirts of a fast growing part of Pune. A large proportion of the children (more than 30%) come from one large Laman *tanda* or temporary settlement nearby. The Laman (also known as Lamani, or Banjari) community has a long history of marginalization.

As part of the undertaking of bringing the 'rule of law' to the 'natives' in the 19th century, the colonial government decided to categorize the pastoral nomads, itinerant traders and other disbanded groups that include members of the defeated native armies and other wandering communities, as different from settled agriculturists. They were branded 'criminal tribes', and various acts made this categorization official, beginning with the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. The Lamans belong to a nomadic tribe that still suffers from this stigma, sixty years after the 'denotification' of their tribe.

The *tanda* of Lamans from where the children I was observing came has been here for over 50 years, and most of the members are from the same part of Andhra Pradesh, and are interrelated by blood or marriage. Most of the adult men are daily labourers on construction sites, and some are small contractors for building related activities like waterproofing. Many are literate. Most of the women are illiterate. They work either on construction sites as labourers, or as domestic help in nearby apartment complexes. Most of them also make wall hangings and *torans* with the traditional Laman embroidery with mirrors and cowries, and sell them as decorations to an agent who comes to pick them up every month.

No teacher from the school has ever visited the *tanda* in the memory of anyone I met there, despite the school being about two kilometres away. Adults and older children I interviewed spoke with some

resentment about the fact that no teacher in the school bothered to understand the language of the younger children.

The school that I selected for my observations is an average PMC school on the outskirts of Pune. Around 30 per cent of the children are Laman. From the beginning, the headmistress and the other teachers told me in no uncertain terms that the biggest ‘problem’ they faced was the Laman children. In their perception, the Laman children were wild and undisciplined, with no interest in studies. They spoke a kind of impure and rough language, which did not have any polite form of address and had many ‘bad’ words that the children used regularly. They are fond of dressing up, and love festivals and marriages. For this they regularly miss school, making it even more difficult to teach them. Their parents are uneducated and not interested in the children’s education. They often drink heavily, and fight. They never help the children with homework, or even supervise it. The teachers said they had to spend a lot of time teaching the girls to speak properly. Even though they had picked up Marathi, they spoke it in a rough way, without using the respectful plural when talking with elders, and often pronounced words all wrong. Only a few of them had the intelligence or ability for school work.

At the same time the teachers were kindly inclined to the girls. They pitied them, and accepted that they had to somehow try to teach them and civilize them, but without much hope of success. ‘If we don’t give them *sanskaar* (culture, civilized behaviour), there is no one else who will,’ was how one of the teachers put it. They rarely hit the girls, and were usually found to be conducting their classes sincerely.

I had many discussions with the teachers about their perceptions of the process of teaching children to read and write. The teachers’ understanding was that in the first year of school, they were supposed to teach children the alphabet and *matras* and to read simple words, and to copy these words, as given in the prescribed textbook. This is the syllabus for Marathi. This can be achieved by plenty of repetition and practice.

The methodology on which the Maharashtra government textbook for Marathi for class one is based, makes it necessary for the teacher to read out long lessons or poems, and students are expected to learn only two or three words from it. Care has been taken to make the themes and pictures in the book largely rural, avoiding the sofa sets and fashionable urban mothers that were common in earlier books. However, it is an idyllic rural world of a wealthy farmer family in the previous century, bearing no resemblance to the slum or *basti* or *tanda* that all children I was observing come from.

In *Other People’s Words*, Victoria Purcell-Gates¹ reminds us that children from literate homes already come with the conventions of written forms. For example, she observes a pre-literate child from a home who is regularly read to while playing with her doll. She is pretending to read to her doll, and uses phrases like: ‘“Oh no!” said the princess.’ This puts her at an advantage when she actually encounters the written form in school. In case of the school I was observing, most of the children would not have had this sort of exposure to the written form of the language, and so have difficulty with sentences that are not part of usual oral interactions. The Laman girls have the dual disadvantage of being both unfamiliar with the written form of the language as also with the language itself.

A series of observations of reading lessons in class one confirmed what I suspected – that children get by without understanding what they are reading. All they are required is to shout out answers to questions, and decode aloud what is written in the textbook – or at least move their lips so that the teacher thinks they are doing so!

The writing lesson was a similar exercise in meaningless activity. Of course, none of this will come as a surprise to anyone involved with elementary education. But how does it specifically affect the children from marginalized communities?

By the time I began my observations, the Laman girls had settled into a group at the back and slightly to the right of the class. I therefore made the back left of the class my place of observation, so that I could see my target group but at the same time not draw attention to them. The girls spoke a lot, and very fast, with each other, in their own language. If they needed to interact with other girls, they could speak a few words of Marathi which they had picked up, but this was a sort of hybrid Marathi, rather difficult for me to understand. As since this interaction was mostly for borrowing pencils or erasers, they managed to communicate. But of the teacher's speech and instructions they seemed to understand nothing. If asked to stand up and read or answer a question, they generally stood tongue tied, and the teacher would look at me pointedly and smile, as if she had proved a point.

Being an extremely close-knit as also gregarious and voluble community, the Laman girls have a rather active social life going on in their quarter of the class. This mainly consists of helping each other to cope with the somewhat incomprehensible demands of the teacher, with those who have 'cracked the code' helping those who are still floundering by whispering answers, allowing the friend to copy from one's book or doing the work for her. None of these activities actually help the others to learn; they just help her to stay out of trouble by completing the task set by the teacher.

This social support was apparent with the Laman girls, as they understood each others commands and requests, and could quickly respond. Also, since most of the girls are related to each other, there is a feeling of kinship in the way they talk with each other, share lunch and care for the little ones. Older siblings in the school always came across to share lunch, and the whole group would walk home together.

By the second term, most of them had picked up a fair amount of Marathi. Significantly, this was the Marathi spoken by the other Dalit and Maratha children in the school with a fair sprinkling of Lamani words, and not the formal Marathi spoken by teachers and used in textbooks. Clearly this learning of Marathi resulted from social interactions, and supported their social life, and not from classroom teaching. Nor was this form of the language of much use for making better sense of the classroom teaching.

On the day after the Holi festival, I was sitting with the Laman girls in the corridor outside the class, asking them what they had eaten during the festival the previous day, and writing down the words for them to read. Most of them mentioned *boti*, and I was trying to understand what they meant when one of the teachers stopped to watch. Immediately she tapped the child who was speaking and said, 'Boti? No! Yesterday was Holi! Your mother must have made *puran poli* (a typically Maharashtrian dish made for Holi).' The children laughed sheepishly and told me to write *puran poli*. But when the teacher had gone, and I probed a bit further, it transpired that they had never eaten it.

This interaction actually encompasses all the main aspects of the experience of the Laman girls: a rich social and cultural life at home, a teacher who does not consider that world a valid one, a language that is different, and the overpowering demand for conformity to some 'school standard' set by the teacher.

What constitutes knowledge is decided by the school and the system represented by the teacher, argues Krishna Kumar.² He describes the experience of a child from an adivasi community in a situation where the teacher is telling the class about the backwardness of the community. When the teacher questions a student to check his learning, he (the student) is in a 'lose-lose' situation. If he gives the 'correct' answer, which is that the tribal communities are superstitious and backward, then he confirms the stereotype. If he cannot give the 'correct' answer, he is dubbed backward anyway. I found a similar situation here. In this case, what constitutes 'language' is also decided by this system, and the Laman girls are then dubbed failures, not trying hard enough.

Obviously, the problem the girls face is much deeper than just lack of 'trying'. For a start, they are picking up Marathi fast in the first year of school, but this is the Marathi of the playground, not of the textbook. On the playground, what is needed is communication, not correctness. So they pick up just enough Marathi words to get by – usually nouns and verbs. So a child shouting out to another, '*dabba khatam, ma pani peeyaala jau*', communicates her intention to go and drink water, without using a single 'proper' Marathi phrase. Now this task comes easily, as spoken language among friends is the easiest for young children to pick up.

The teachers, however, interpreted this usage of Laman speech conventions with Marathi words as a gross roughness inherent in the girls, in their language and culture. I was frequently told that the girls had no polite forms of speech, which was taken to mean that they do not respect anyone. Of course, whenever I visited the *tanda*, I was treated with great hospitality, warmth and respect, even though I was addressed in the singular *tu!*

William Labov³ analyzes the generally accepted viewpoint at the time of the 'verbal deprivation' of Black children in the US. The 'deficit theory', which claims that Black children receive little verbal stimulation, and as a result are impoverished in their verbal expression, is based on the work of educational psychologists who had not actually interacted with the children in their own settings for any length of time. Rather, the children had been subjected to artificial test situations and interviews. They were asked, for example, if they had dinner time conversation with their parents, and if their parents took them to museums. From these tests and interviews, the conclusion drawn was that the children suffered from this deficit, another version of which was Basil Bernstein's 'restricted code'. A similar situation seems to obtain in the minds of the teachers in the school I observed. They truly believe that the Lamani language is rough and unsophisticated, and that the children who speak it are incapable of sophisticated thought or civilized behaviour.

Lisa Delpit⁴ looks at the use of language among Black children and families, and how it is different from that used by White middle class children. For example, she found that Black children, when describing events in their lives, tended to use more episodic and longer narratives than White children who were more specific in their descriptions. She describes how this affects the way they learn in school, and why teachers need to understand these differences and also why there need to be more Black teachers who have grown up in similar language cultures. In my observations, I found the Laman girls too tended to speak at length about their families, digressing into episodes of quarrels and other excitements. I felt that the teachers lacked the perspective to see this as a valuable language resource.

Initially, I was surprised by the depth of the disdain that teachers had for their students' home background and culture. Though sincere and kind, they often used the many harsh forms of verbal

violence when talking about the children, often in their hearing. Words used for Lamani language were 'impure', 'impolite', 'rough', 'uncivilized'. When I asked if there were any books or literature in the Lamani language, I was met with pitying laughter. 'They don't have writers and literary figures,' I was told.

When I visited the community, I found many of the young mothers at home, doing household tasks, as in any middle or lower middle class community. Many of the fathers were ambitious young men with small businesses of painting, waterproofing and so on. However, the teachers' perception of the children's homes is of a place where both parents go out to work on construction sites all day, come home and drink hard, and fall asleep. Unless we are able to change teacher perceptions, the likelihood is that the marginalized communities will remain on the margins in schools.

The second insight that has tremendous pedagogic possibilities is the immense cooperative spirit amongst the Laman girls. The common language and the tightly knit *tanda*, far from other habitations, as well as the family relationships between the girls, make them a very united and supportive group within the classroom. The potential of this community spirit to engender communal learning is not recognized or exploited by the teacher, and neither her training or the system in general allows her to do so.

The third and most disturbing observation relates to what happens to the girls after class seven. It is apparent that in the case of Laman girls, in addition to the community pressure for early marriage, there is also the fact that they are not particularly motivated to study further, barring a few exceptions. All the class seven girls speak Marathi quite fluently. The teacher, however, told me that the Laman girls are among the lowest achievers academically. Could this lack of interest in continuing their education be due to the alienation and lack of success they face in the early years? If so, it is a matter of serious concern.

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1. Victoria Purcell-Gates, *Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low literacy*. Harvard University Press, 1995.
2. Krishna Kumar, *The Social Character of Learning*. Sage, 1989.
3. William Labov, *The Logic of Nonstandard English*. Georgetown University, 1969.
4. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children*. New Press, 2006.